

Abuses and Uses of Cultural Diversity:

African Past, Ethiopian Present

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We Africans rightly take pride in our matchless wealth of cultural diversity. Despite the luxuriant palette of Africa's cultural communities and identities, we cannot as yet claim that cultural pluralism is accorded pride of place in the political landscape across most of Africa. What explains the prevailing disposition in Africa to look askance at federative ideals, among them: recognition of cultural pluralism and identity; collective rights, including national self-determination. To register that the characteristic African stance is puzzling, and calls for explanation notice that even a universalist, Marxist philosopher, the late Lezek Kolakowski, writing in the heyday of European integration, affirms that "... diversity can only be assured by the preservation of distinctive national identities." (Modernity on Endless Trial, p59) A first straightforward explanation is to note that what federalism demands by way of limitation, division and dispersal of political authority draws upon fundamental values of democratic rule. Remember, too, E.M. Forster's slogan: "Two cheers for Democracy: One because it admits variety..." (Two Cheers for Democracy) Our own early attempt at Ethio-Eritrean federation withered chiefly for lack of a democratic breathing space. So federalism may not have flourished in Africa, in part, for want of a deep commitment to democracy.

Beyond this, there were historical circumstances, not of our own making, that furnished Africans compelling cause for skepticism about federative values and

institutions. These circumstances involve the political abuse of cultural pluralism to support racism and to legitimate regimes upholding racial supremacy. A glaring, familiar example is that of the United States, where slavery and racial segregation were protected by invoking federalism and state's rights - a position sometimes vindicated by federal government, including the Supreme Court. Closer to home, racial laws were imposed in Eritrea and, for a brief time, in Ethiopia to force territorial and social segregation of Italians and Africans as well as to dictate separate settlement of African cultural communities. Racial segregation and the complete subordination of colonized peoples to the white colonizers was commonplace throughout most colonial territories: India during the latter half of British rule is a striking example. Perhaps the worst abuse of cultural pluralism and identity here in Africa was apartheid in South Africa, where cultural values were explicitly and perversely put forward as the basis for legitimating racism and racial supremacy. The deep wrongs of the system are plain and well known. First, the denial of fundamental freedoms and rights as well as the extreme material deprivation of those who were not white on the ground that they are less human and therefore undeserving of equal concern. Second, forcing identities on persons and communities, identities not chosen or affirmed by Africans but rather arbitrarily imposed by the ruling whites. Perhaps the most telling case of capriciously inflicting identities is the fate of those designated "Coloured" under apartheid. J.M.Coetzee, the distinguished South African laureate novelist, describes their sad, strange fate well, ". . . if there was no "Coloured" community prepared to concede that it had preexisted its creation by apartheid, then, logically, there could be no community criterion of "Colourndness". Throughout the apartheid years the status "Coloured" was, across almost the entire range of people whom it implicated, accepted, so to speak, under protest, as an identity forced upon them. Insofar as there is or was a

“Coloured” community, it was created by the common fate of being forced to behave in the face of authority, as “Coloured”. (Stranger Shores,p.253)

There are other situations, beyond ongoing governing arrangements such as apartheid and indirect rule, where a cultural community is identified only to be targeted. For instance, in the Mao Mao uprising in Kenya, the Kikuyu were singled out and subjected to massive executions, massacres, incarceration and torture in concentration camps by colonial forces they could not possibly match.

The aspiration to recognize and preserve cultural diversity and distinctive identities was thus variously manipulated to rationalize what everyone would now agree are unjust systems of white supremacy such as slavery, segregation and apartheid, systems under which the lives of millions of Africans and others were doomed. Despite the horrors, it may be tempting to put aside the evil deployment of cultural diversity and identity as another aberrant manifestation of a ruthless will to dominate by those willfully or habitually blind to the humanity of others.

But it would be too easy to say that what we have been attending to is a mere aberrant lapse into inhumanity by occasional barbarity in western culture. A glance at the best of universalist liberalism, with robust aspirations to be inclusive of humanity, betrays a similar tendency to draw upon facts of culture and cultural difference in order to exclude the portion of humanity that is not white from the domain of freedom and equality. Thus, John Stuart Mill, a radical, eloquent voice of liberalism and a pioneer advocate of the emancipation of slaves and women, suggests that the principle of liberty is not suited to backward peoples. Mill explains the exclusion: “Liberty as a principle has no application to any state of things anterior to the time when mankind has become capable of

being improved by free and equal discussion. Until then, there is nothing for them but implicit obedience to an Akbar or a Charlamagne, if they are so fortunate as to find one". (On Liberty) And again in Representative Government Mill distinguishes between two kinds of colonies; first, those such as America and Australia with a civilization and culture similar to that of the ruling society, Britain; second, colonies whose language and culture differ from Britain's. Mill finds the former fit for representative government; the latter, on the other hand, should settle for what Mill describes as "a choice of despotisms." I am not here pointing to a lingering prejudice of the nineteenth century, a relic banished in the twentieth century. As protest voiced by the likes of W.E.B. DuBois shows, the United Nations Charter, drawn up in midcentury, makes no mention of the independence of peoples and territories under imperial rule.

I hope I have said enough to indicate a persistent resort to cultural diversity and identity both to deny Africans a title to liberty and equality and to assert white supremacy. Sadly, what Africans prized about themselves and perhaps the only thing of value left to hold on to amid unfreedom and destitution was mercilessly turned against them. It is therefore unsurprising that Africans would often be inclined to hold cultural diversity and distinctiveness at bay. What is more, the fight for liberation waged against great odds to be free of colonial rule necessitated wide mobilization and hence inclusive nationalism. Still, Africans distancing themselves from their dark memories did not altogether disavow cultural diversity and distinctiveness. Indeed, milestones of African collective self-expression such as negritude, African socialism and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights all manifest an attachment and commitment to the value of community and the value of particular cultures. Rather, the reaction to a

dark past largely came to a reluctance to give political recognition, authority and legitimacy to cultural diversity and distinctiveness.

The African reaction, born of bitter experience, is not unique. An analogous retreat from federalist ideals and institutions transpired in the United States in consequence of the abuse of state's rights and federalism as masks and shields for racial injustice and disregard for minority rights. I cannot now narrate, let alone explain, how the abuse of federalism led to a turn away from federalist conceptions of public values and institutions. I will just sketch a characterization of the important shift in constitutionalism and constitutional jurisprudence. The Fourteenth Amendment held that the states, not just federal government, must comply with the requirements of the Bill of Rights. But this revolutionary extension in the reach of constitutional rights was coupled with a radical recasting of the conception of rights. Before Reconstruction, it is arguable that many rights enunciated in the Amendments were collective entitlements belonging to the people as associated in bodies such as local churches, legislatures, juries, conventions and militias. What tended to be seen after Reconstruction as civil rights affording individuals protection from federal and state government - - rights to speak, to worship, to assemble, to petition, and to bear arms - - were originally construed as political rights empowering popular bodies of citizens to enjoy a share in self-government and thereby to serve as alternative seats of public authority. In his book, The Bill of Rights, Akhil Reed Amar, a keen student of federalism at Yale, demonstrates the wide gulf separating the American conception of rights before and after Reconstruction - - a turn from a republican to a liberal conception of rights that has since proved influential beyond the United States. The shift has been bolstered in the second half of the twentieth century during the second Reconstruction, following Brown

vs. Board of Education. What was lost in the course of these worthy struggles for freedom was Madison's original idea that localism and liberty or, differently, federalism and freedom, can be mutually supportive.

I have been trying to suggest that with cultural diversity, cultural identity and federalism, as with much else in our public life, historical context can shape our starkest political choices and our deepest political allegiances. This is not to question or deny the possibility of providing principled reasons to justify our political choices and allegiances. It is rather to admit that it matters whether or not historical conditions are favorable to what is favored by reasons of principle. To adapt a phrase from Joseph Brodsky: "There are times when history is inescapable" - - an observation I believe we will see also bears on how Ethiopia resolved to turn onto a federalist path.

The excursus into the abuse of cultural pluralism should give us pause from reductively regarding all Africans alike as emerging from the same unhappy past rooted in dirt and proceeding to find a place in the sun in a national state. Against this backdrop, it may be easier to see that unhappy peoples, not unlike unhappy families, can be (to coin a phrase) unhappy each in its own way different. A look at Ethiopia's peculiar past and her divergent departure from it may show why Ethiopia was conducive to federalism.

In Ethiopia, which had managed to remain free of colonial rule, the ruling political order sought to create a modern, unitary government rooted in an inclusive national culture, bent on the assimilation or subordination of all Ethiopian cultural communities to the language and religion of the particular culture privileged by the state. In Ethiopia, to embrace cultural diversity and the preservation of cultural distinctiveness was therefore not to keep but rather to

defy the old ruling order. To champion the political freedom and equality of all cultural communities here was to call for the emancipation of many whose cultures and identities had been scorned, their land and labor forcibly taken by those who belonged to the politically privileged culture.

Despite the state's determination to impose inclusive nationalism, it cannot be said that the mission was altogether successful. The state's limited power and the poor penetration of its economic and social institutions did not permit deep entrenchment of an inclusive culture. There was also a sense of patriotism across cultural communities so that they all came to the country's defense during attempts at conquest by imperial and fascist Italy. Notwithstanding patriotic solidarity in the face of alien aggression and the state's ardent assertion of inclusive nationalism, there was recurrent nationalist resurgence against a centrist, homogenizing state throughout imperial and military rule. During most of his regime, Haile Selassie had to contend with nationalist rebellion by a wide range of cultural communities: Tigrai, Oromo, Gojjam, Somali, Eritrea. Under the military, armed contest by organized nationalist movements plunged the country into protracted civil war, ending finally with the defeat of the military in 1991. Why did defeat of the military usher in the political recognition of diversity and self-rule as the political instrument for preserving the equality and freedom of distinct cultural communities? The defeat of the military was seen by the chief protagonists as a revolution bound to bring about a new constitution of the political community. To capture the novelty, it is important to be clear on what was defeated. As Hannah Arendt remarks; "nothing seems more natural than that a revolution should be predetermined by the type of government it overthrows. "The revolutionary self-image of the agents who defeated the military regime is confirmed by observers. For instance, Christopher Clapham

says: "... The overthrow of the military in 1991 amounted to more than the collapse of a regime. It effectively marked the failure of a project dating back to Menelik's accession in 1889 of creating a modern and centralized state around a Showan core." The defeat of the military regime thus spelled the end of the defining political project of modern Ethiopia. In spite of the end of monarchy and in the face of formidable resistance from nationalist movements, the military desperately clung to the project it had inherited from modern imperial Ethiopia. Beyond doing away with the crown, the military, inspired and mobilized by the Ethiopian left, had attempted to answer the chief social question of the country by nationalizing land and by releasing the peasantry from the burdens of tenancy. Yet, it soon became clear that the state used its tyrannical powers to make increasingly large demands on the lives and labors of peasants, demands that became more onerous than their obligations under the previous regime. Citizens and communities realized that newly found access to land cannot be meaningful unless they enjoyed political authority over land as well as over the disposal of their labor and their produce.

In 1991, each of the nationalist movements had organized and marched under the banner of their own cultural or national identity and in the name of the right to self-determination. Whatever their other aspirations, the victors were eager to be rid of resentful memories of the fallen order and its dead project. It is not easy to convey the urgency, anxiety and intensity sweeping so many ready to unshackle themselves from a deeply troubling, powerful legacy. The words of the Turkish Nobel laureate, Orhan Pamuk, about the passing of another empire may help to evoke the unsettled climate of feeling. He writes: "the melancholy of this dying culture was all around us. Great as the desire to westernize and to modernize may have been, the more desperate wish was probably to be rid of all

the bitter memories of the fallen empire, rather as a spurned lover throws away his lost beloved's clothes, possessions, and photographs." (Istanbul: Memories and the City.) In view of the exacting sacrifices made to win, no nationalist movement would have consented to a constitutional arrangement that would incur risk of a return of the old order and its defining project. Now that the champions of the project were powerless, there was little reason for nationalist movements to entrust their fate to the contingent balance of power among groups and interests, however circumscribed by democratic rights and procedures. Having supported Eritrean self-determination and with evident preparedness to go along with Eritrean independence, it was not clear how political movements long committed to self-determination could reasonably refuse self-rule or the right to secede to any cultural community in Ethiopia. In this historical setting, the makers of a new constitution had little reason to resist but abundant reasons to seek a federal constitution. It was a time, once again, when history proved irresistible.

So far my claim on behalf of federalism is that it enabled both Ethiopia's survival and the establishment of legitimate political authority - - two foundational accomplishments without which the pursuit of other public aims is unthinkable. Thanks to federalism, many who felt they had been renounced by their birthplace were now persuaded not to renounce Ethiopia but instead to join together to form a legitimate political order for peaceful mutual cooperation.

Once in place, federalism subserved wider public aims. For one thing, it enabled democratic values and practices not easily secured under the burden of poverty and the lack of a background democratic culture such as a culture of peace, the rule of law, secularism, a free press, competitive political parties, and free associations. Put differently, in the face of the burdens of pervasive poverty and

a lifeless public culture, the collective rights and political spaces of federalism eased the transaction costs and coordination problems that usually hamper effective exercise of individual and group rights by ordinary citizens. Regional states with robust self-rule over their territories created a firm check on the abuse of federal authority and on illegal transfer of the power of government. Regional states also offered new spaces where citizens can deliberate, decide and act on a wide range of public issues. They assumed responsibility for the provision of justice, education and health care. More importantly, the dispersal of power away from the centre to the periphery served radical democracy by extending to the many and the least advantaged the opportunity to enter their vital interests into the national political agenda: for example, hunger, poverty, agricultural productivity, rural schools and health services, rural roads, access to water and electricity, and rural gender issues such as freedom from abduction.

The dispersal of power, moreover, yields a more equitable distribution of resources as well as greater accountability of public authority to citizens. Fair representation of cultural communities in the federal legislature and executive together with the mobilization of regions in public policy and action makes for popular engagement in development and more equitable distribution of its fruits. Equitable share in growth together with special support for historically disadvantaged cultural communities and groups is the basis for a new sense of solidarity among all citizens and communities.

With all this happy outcomes, it is still too early to speak with confidence about federalism's trajectory. There are still those who oppose federalism and mourn loss of the past. For some federalism seems a diminishment of Ethiopian identity: a provincial profile has, in their eyes, supplanted a glorious self-image. They forget that the grand and self-aggrandizing narratives and icons of empire are

entirely alien to many. Even events and symbols commanding wide collective pride are not equally or similarly prized by all peoples of Ethiopia. Victory at Adwa earned international recognition and prestige for Menilik's Ethiopia, an accomplishment about which conquered peoples of imperial Ethiopia, including those that fought valiantly at Adwa, are bound to be ambivalent. A true portrayal of our past can no longer be a triumphant tale of the elect. A sense of the past we can all reasonably and honorably share must be shaped by the stories of those in our midst who were variously excluded, humiliated and victimized. If weaving their stories into our past diminishes the grandeur, purity or allure of our self-image, this is a price we should be happy to pay in keeping with fidelity to truth and solidarity with communities that endured grave indignities in the making of our history. There are others who also long for a different past, a past they see through nostalgic eyes as an age of innocence, when, supposedly unmindful of differences, we all lived in harmony. Those enamored of an imagined innocent past could do well to remember that: "The difference between an identity which is mine and I eagerly recognize as mine, and an identity which someone else simply assumes to be me, is in one sense all the difference in the world." (Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline p.62)

Those who have experienced this deep difference - - and there are by now countless many in Ethiopia - - are now too self-conscious of their own identity and their title to it to be able or willing to forget. Since innocence once lost is generally irreversibly lost, it may now be too late to recover the past. If the past is shown to be false or no longer available, it is not difficult to resist the elusive, illusory quest of those who persist in looking forward to the past.

Let me conclude with brisk remarks about federalism's future in Ethiopia. Beyond cultivating cultural pluralism, federalism has lent support to political

pluralism as well as to the cause of greater political and social equality. The wider political community manifests political cohesion and solidarity stemming from the freedom, equality and diversity of the constituent parts. Political cohesion and solidarity resting on the autonomy and integrity of the diverse parts has, in turn, galvanized the populace into concerted public engagement and action, resulting in unprecedented advance in the quest to find freedom from hunger and poverty. Material advance and the attendant emergence and spread of industrial and urban life will no doubt engender greater uniformity and mix among cultural communities. Material progress will equally encourage wider moral and political pluralism, thereby generating individual and collective identities that will compete with and cross cultural identities. To make room for the emergence, and realization of novel diversities and identities would require vigilant respect of individual and group rights in regional states as well as free and open flow of people, ideas and free associations across states.

With material advance and the fulfillment of the constitutional aspiration to create a single, living political community and an integrated economy, I think we will also come to feel the need for an animated, particularist sense of our common Ethiopian identity. I submit the wisdom of reaching for a sense of the whole that is more than the sum of the constituent parts. To complement and transfigure our diverse identities calls for the cultivation of a new sense of a shared history, shared public ideals and a shared identity that captures what binds us together as citizens of a single political community with a singular destiny.

As you can tell from my lamentably sketchy account, Ethiopian federalism is still an unfolding work in progress. I hope and trust that you - - champions, friends, and students - - of federalism, with far richer experiences of federalism, will help

us see how best to go forward. We can surely benefit from wise counsel, because we are embarking on uncharted terrain in an unusual historical context. Today, more than ever, many are persuaded that particular cultures are fated to vanish or fade with the advent of modernity. Some are resigned to this fate, others defy it by means that are sharply different: first, to cordon off culture as best one can; second, to repudiate modernity. Ours, however, is a rare, bold venture of deploying the cultivation of our own culture and identity with all its rich diversity as a leading asset in our determination to become a proud member of a cosmopolitan community of peoples on our own terms.

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