

Prisoners of Past History or Producers of a Better Future?

By Tesfaye Habisso, 12/06/2014

Since recent times, my wife and I have somehow developed a sort of deep interest or passion for Pastor (Dr.) Gamachis Desta's evangelical sermons on the Elshaddai program broadcasted to Christian followers in Ethiopia every week via the EBS. This is due to the pastor's forceful inspirational and very touching spiritual messages that deeply overwhelm all listeners, we do believe. Gradually, we have also developed a healthy habit of not missing Pastor Gamachis' weekly spiritual lessons as long as possible. As we were expecting the weekly broadcast anxiously, just a couple of days ago, Pastor Gamachis Desta shared a very fascinating presentation with his followers and admirers via the TV channel as usual. He preached about people who do not seek to detach themselves from their unjust past but unabatedly resort to lamenting the injustices that they had suffered under evil/cruel world rulers and conquerors in the distant past and thus pitiably dwell on defeats and wallow in despair or self-pity rather than overlooking the ugly past and toiling to make their future right, on the one hand, and other people who, despite similar or worse injustices and indignities that they had borne in the past, make a calculated choice not to become prisoners of history with the deep commitment and patriotic zeal to relentlessly work to make their common future right, enjoyable and sustainable. His concluding remarks touched upon the historical evidence about the Jews who at a certain juncture in their history decided not to lament historical wrongs of the distant past and made a firm determination to toil for their better future. They made spectacular achievements in a relatively short period of time and realized fundamental improvements in the living standards of their people while the African-Americans who rather inclined to clinging to their history of slavery, humiliation and racial discrimination failed to fundamentally change their own lives and the lives of their people. This was the gist of the Pastor's message, as far as I understood it. Then, this teaches us the self-evident lesson that every people has to make a clear and clean break with its past in order to grow, develop and prosper. It is axiomatic, for instance, that even a newly born baby cannot grow, develop and become a strong adult unless it makes a clear and clean break with its past life in the mother's womb. That is why the long tube of tissue that connects the baby to its mother before it is born [umbilical cord] is cut at the moment of birth.

As noted here above, Pastor Gamachis mentioned about the Jews and the African-Americans as illustrative examples in history to substantiate his arguments and to defend his thesis. These two groups, he said, had faced unparalleled injustices and atrocities for more than four centuries in the long and tortuous world history since the 15th century and earlier: enslavement, racial discrimination, oppression, dehumanization, tortures, massacres, banishment, genocide, etc. The most reprehensible and barbaric fate of all was suffered by the Jews in Germany during WWII when the Nazis exterminated more than six million Jews in what has been historically known ever since as the Holocaust. And yet, according to the Pastor, the Jews rather chose to preserve the uglier episodes of their history, including the Holocaust, in a museum and to detach themselves from agonizing over their evil past with the strong aim of getting their future right, sustainable and enviable. After several decades of persistent political struggles and conflicts with Great Britain as well as the Palestinians and the surrounding Arab/Islamic countries, the Jews created the State of Israel in 1948 and thereafter toiled in a life-and-death sort of fierce struggle to effect revolutionary and fundamental changes in their political and socio-economic condition and eventually succeeded in making their future right and admirable: the most powerful country and state in the Middle East by all economic, social and political indicators one chooses to apply. Above all, a Nuclear Power to be reckoned with throughout the world!

On the contrary, according to the words of Pastor Gamachis, the African-Americans could not detach themselves and make a clean break with their long history of slavery, dehumanization, exploitation, oppression, racism and internal colonialism that they suffered under successive British and American White rule in U.S. America for many

centuries. They rather failed to detach themselves from their past and thus to wallow in despair and self-pity or else pursue retributive measures against their former slave owners and the long-entrenched racist, unjust and exploitative capitalist system managed by the successive U.S. Administrations under White rule. The clear message of the Pastor's sermon is that African-Americans have so far failed miserably to take maximum advantage of the American Dream and the immense opportunities that the U.S. America has made possible for all immigrants of the globe in order to become big self-improvers in the country. And, sadly, according to Pastor Gamachis Desta, among the over two million and half prisoners languishing in the several thousands of prisons across the U.S.A today, more than 80% are African-Americans. The latter have not yet discovered the wisdom of detaching themselves from their age-long excruciating historical wrongs and painful experiences that they and their forebears have gone through over the ages and thus unable to take advantage of the immense opportunities available in U.S. America so as to make and shape a far better future for themselves and their future generations. Therefore, the lesson to be learned: Instead of being prisoners of history, African-Americans or all other politically, economically and socially least-developed peoples of the so-called Third World must rather become students of history, learn lessons from their history of the past and toil relentlessly to make their future right, enjoyable, sustainable and enviable. This is the only feasible and sustainable course of action to pursue; all other options are doomed to fail.

I strongly believe that this must also be an enduring lesson to be learnt by all peoples of similar standing throughout the world. What pricks my mind at this juncture in particular is the sorry state of affairs borne by the American Indians or Native Americans in the U.S. Reservations, the Aborigines in Australia, the pre-1994 Black South Africans in the Republic of South Africa and other long colonized Third World countries and peoples that still yearn to see a better future for themselves and their children. Having a brief personal glimpse of the conditions of some of these marginalized peoples since 1992, I can imagine how much they could improve their lot if they heed the advice of Pastor Gamachis Desta at the earliest time possible.

Frankly speaking, it was Pastor Gamachis Desta's broadcast on the above vexed issue that prompted me to throw my brief personal thoughts about the current Ethiopian situation where the agenda of digging out all sorts of real and imagined historical wrongs of the 19th century especially those perpetrated during King Menelik II's centralization campaigns and wars (1889-1913) by several ethnic entrepreneurs hailing from the hitherto oppressed peoples has become the fashionable topic of the day since the last two years or so. As we all may know, there was no central government of Ethiopia to talk about during the expansionist campaigns of the King of Shoa, Menelik, until he was crowned as Emperor of Ethiopia in the wake of Emperor Yohannis' death in 1889 even if we are thinking of a government public apology today toward healing the wounds of those days. Be this as it may, the rise of ethnic politics and ethnic entrepreneurs since 1991 has at times flared a sort of nationalist wildfires which have, off and on, sadly precipitated the expulsion and forced removals of some non-indigenous settler minorities ('not sons of the soil') in some areas such as Guraferda in the Tepi-Majji-Bench Zone, Benishangul, Ambo and a few other regions since the last few years in absolute disregard of the EDRE Constitution, thus testing the strength and legitimacy of the constitutional order in place. Such reprehensible and unconstitutional measures must be stopped once for all and those responsible for these heinous crimes must be severely punished and removed from office according to the law of the land. Such short-sighted and irresponsible measures are absolutely against the much-desired and constitutionally guaranteed for ideal of building one strong political and economic community in Ethiopia, and thus to be condemned strongly as well as prevented from occurring again throughout the country.

Be this as it may, this sudden surge of digging out old historical wrongs has not been limited to the elites at the federal level but gone down to the level of many regional, zonal and woreda elites of the numerous ethnic communities of the Southern Regional State (SNNPRS) in particular targeting their former ruling classes or even clans long removed from their monopoly of power since the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution and the absolute demise of monarchy and feudalism in Ethiopia, never to resuscitate again. Whatever the case, there seems no end to this

bizarre and senseless attempts by some myopic ethnic agents to pit one ethnic group, tribe or clan against one another under the guise of righting historical wrongs of the yester-years. Many people do not seem prepared enough to detach themselves from memories of their ugly past but still seek to cling to it in order to revenge, if possible, on their old enemies or just to wallow in despair and self-pity by reminiscing it at every occasion as a possible disguise for their own failures rather than totally investing their full time and energy toward making their future better and bright through their own day and night toil and hard work. [As a footnote, let us all beware of our traditional enemies who relentlessly hanker after our divisiveness, inter-ethnic and inter-religious rivalry and internecine regional conflicts in order to achieve their sinister ends and to safeguard their selfish national interests upon our peril].

In Ethiopia's case, most of the alleged historical wrongs were perpetrated a century ago when there was neither international law nor recognition of human rights and at a time when states and their rulers had every freedom to deal with their subjects as they wished, with utmost impunity. Even slavery and the slave trade, conquests and colonialism/imperialism were not reprehensible crimes at all. International law was then only a law governing inter-state relations that fully respected the sovereignty of states in full—no interference in their internal affairs of states at all. The UN Charter as well as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was promulgated only after WWII, in 1945 and 1948 respectively. Thus, even though massive atrocities and injustices were perpetrated upon different peoples throughout human history and despite their being morally reprehensible and abominable, there are no legal bases today in order to retroactively try and charge the perpetrators of such evils and misdeeds in the courts of law.

When we deal with the Ethiopian story of clinging to the past, we find two camps in the nation's political marketplace: 1) those who perpetually dwell on the achievements of their forebears and wallow in vain glory that is not the result of their hard work but that rightfully belongs to their ancestors; 2) those who lament the injustices of the past and wallow in despair and self-pity even though they themselves were not victims of those injustices at all as they were not even born during those bygone times. As far as I am concerned, both groups are responsible for putting our country and our people on the bottom rung of world nations-- as one of the poorest countries and nations on earth today by all yardsticks imaginable-- because of endless bickering and disunity amongst themselves and because of not making a clear and clean break with their past in order to declare a united, concerted and patriotic offensive as Ethiopians against poverty, economic deprivation and hopelessness. Today, the only feasible option available for all of us Ethiopians is to rectify our historically unjust relationships and to promote our shared interests in order to get our future right and realize a prosperous and democratic country where the rule of law reigns, human rights and fundamental freedoms blossom, and peace and stability prevail. It is only when we make an unflinching resolve not to become prisoners of history but learn appropriate lessons from our past history and move forward in unison to energetically and patriotically participate in the nation's massive developmental and transformational projects that are taking place today throughout the country that we can really effect revolutionary and fundamental changes in the lives of our people and genuinely wallow in glory in the end realizing now that these achievements truly belong to the present generation. Lastly, let us stop becoming prisoners of our past history but instead become producers of a better future for the present and the future generations. AMEN!