

During Menelik's and Haileselassie's Era, Luck was for the Few, and Silent Death for the Many

By Mezgebe Gebrekiristos, November 26, 2013

This piece was triggered by Dr. Teshome's article titled, "If we give up on ourselves, we have no place to go," that was posted on AIGAFORUM. Teshome expressed his views, and rightly so, on the recent plight of Ethiopian immigrants that were humiliated, raped, and displaced as part of the brutal crackdown on innocent immigrants by the Saudi authorities and, at times, by civilians who were functioning as 'vigilantes'. I agree with Teshome's narrative of the unimaginable suffering of Ethiopians perpetrated by Saudi hooligans and the ignominious police force. Certainly, Ethiopians who accepted the followers of the Prophet Muhammad in 615 with open arms and accorded them with unprecedented protection from the persecution they were facing in Mecca at the time, don't deserve what we witnessed in the recent rounding of illegal immigrants in the *Kingdom of Hell*, Saudi Arabia. Ethiopia has been home to Muslims since the first Hijra, and Islam is one of the main religions in Ethiopia.

But the most important question remains unanswered. Who is to blame for the unspeakable atrocities committed on our brothers and sisters in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Arab world? Teshome and the vociferous diaspora would like to tell us the Ethiopian government mishandled the unfortunate situation; and thus, it is guilty as charged in the suffering of Ethiopians in Saudi Arabia. What else can the Ethiopian government could have done beyond sending strong condemnation of the actions or inactions of the Saudi government by summoning its ambassador; dedicating more than 50 million Birr for the transportation and rehabilitation of the returnees; addressing the plight of affected Ethiopians on various venues by Foreign Minister Dr. Tewodros Adhanom, and mobilizing Ethiopians to help their compatriots? After all, the Ethiopians didn't go to Saudi Arabia at the behest of the Ethiopian government. Like most of us who immigrated to the United States, European countries and other parts of the world, the Ethiopians who found themselves in Saudi Arabia went there willingly to advance their interest. In today's Ethiopia, citizens are free to leave the country if they wish to do so. The government doesn't have the right to impose immigration sanctions against its law-abiding citizens for extended period as long as they fulfill the immigration requirements.

However, the government can play a big role in making sure that under-age people are not being enticed with false promises made by con-artists, and those who are of legal age to immigrate have prior understanding of their host countries' culture, labor laws, and the rights of immigrant workers. To this end, efforts to educate the youth in particular and the public in general have been made by the media, specifically by ETV and Ethiopian Radio stations.

In an attempt to bring a lasting solution to the immigration problem, the Ethiopian government has been working relentlessly to improve the lives of its citizens, so that Ethiopians would find the confidence and the courage to uproot the proverbial poverty once and for all without resorting to immigrating to various countries. The government's effort has paid off, as witnessed in the lives of ordinary Ethiopians in Ethiopia. For instance, the farmers who used to be called "geberie" (scorn tainted name for farmer) in the old days are now millionaires; the dark-skinned Ethiopians who were owned by family members of emperor Minilik and emperor Haileselassie as slaves are now free Ethiopians; the blacksmiths that were belittled during the

feudal era are today's sole inventors, and major investors; and the downtrodden that were humiliated and treated as second citizens by past Ethiopian emperors that Teshome is still fond of are free at last. Wise Ethiopians in the Diaspora have been noticing these impressive changes in their homeland. As a result, more and more Ethiopians who lived in United States and Europe for years are returning or are entertaining the possibility of relocating their families to Ethiopia for good. Ethiopia is seeing reverse immigration and the trend is very encouraging.

Teshome suggested in his writing that today's Ethiopia needs a leader with the moral compass that of emperors Minilik and Haileselassie who, according to him, managed to inspire Ethiopians to fight against Ethiopia's past enemies using simple sound bites. By mentioning these emperors to showcase his point on the need of efficient leadership during hardship, Teshome has shown lack of good judgment. An emperor who abandoned his people and moved to a hardship free life in Great Britain when, at a time, his presence among his people could have been crucial in defeating the Italian fascist cannot be a role model for current leaders of Ethiopia who are fighting poverty amid their people. Truth be told, Haileselassie was a ruthless emperor who held Ethiopians hostage from thinking freely in the development of their country. During his rule, education was limited to the elite who were "lucky", as Teshome put it, at the time. The majority of people were serving the families of the emperor and his accomplices. Given the circumstances during his rule, we may forgive the emperor, but idolizing him for the wrong reasons is tantamount to insulting the millions of Ethiopians who suffered under him.

Similarly, Emperor Minilik was and still is the source of all Ethiopia's internal and external tribulations. He was the reason for the protracted civil war that was culminated in Eritrea's independence. He abandoned the Ethiopian land beyond Mereb to consolidate his power within Ethiopia and crush other Ethiopian local kings, and Eritrea became the launching ground for Italian invaders to constantly attack Ethiopia. Where was Menelik's leadership in uniting the people when he left segment of our society at the enemy's mercy? By the same token, the unpleasant experiences of our Oromo people in our history has to do with the ill treatment they endured during Menilik's reign, and that practice has continued under the rule of emperor Haileselassie. I would further argue that this was the main reason for the formation of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). However, thanks to the current constitution that guarantees equal freedom for all nations and nationalities, the old grievances of the Oromo people have been addressed to the satisfaction of the people, and, with that, the OLF has lost relevance.

In conclusion, it is normal to criticize the government for not doing more in bringing solutions to the current situation. But invoking emperors who have done more harm than good to Ethiopia and Ethiopians lacks common decency. It is true that few people like Dr. Teshome might have benefited from the emperor's legacy. But many people have lived a life of abject servitude and they still have a vivid memory of that. The legacy of emperor Menilik and emperor Haileselassie is full of despair that stands in stark contrast to that of the current government. In this regard, Dr. Teshome should have known better by concentrating on offering possible solutions. Sadly, most of us were not 'lucky' enough to have been born during *Janohoy's* time!

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