

The Dragon's egg: Ethiopia's Ethnic Divide

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I. Introduction

Ethnicity is a multifaceted word that evokes emotions of both pride and disdain. With pride comes a sense of belonging, of originality, collectivism, and sometimes power. Disdain on the other hand, which is embedded in ethnocentrism, sends a clear message of superiority, of not belonging, intrusion and threat. These emotions are natural and hence, inevitable; but with deliberate wisdom, coupled with the desire for a better Ethiopia, they can lead to a greater common good, and an Ethiopian we all can be proud of.

Ethnicity arouses these polarized emotions in the young and the old, the educated and uneducated, political elites and the poor peasants in Ethiopia's heartland. But, how did we reach here? Who benefits from a divided nation, from our ethnic squabbles? What is the real cost of our ethnic division? Honesty about where we are as Ethiopians, and the Ethiopia we want to leave for our children and grandchildren, starts with a bold conversation around these questions with ourselves, families, friends and neighbors.

The metaphor of the dragon subtly illustrates the two competing sides of ethnicity. A dragon is a legendary creature, usually with a reptile traits, and it is part of the fabric of many cultures' folklore. In the Chinese folklore for example, the dragon is portrayed as a benevolent creature with abilities that signify strength, power and good luck, which is synonymous with the benefits of belonging to a specific ethnic group. On the contrary, the bible (and the western folklore) refers to the dragon as the Leviathan; a fearless fire breathing king of all wild beasts, whose *belly scales are like jagged pieces of pottery that tears up the muddy ground like a threshing sledge*. Job 41's description of the Leviathan is of a terrorizing creature that cannot be tamed once aroused. This terrorizing side of the dragon reminds us of the thin line between ethnicity and ethnocentrism that when crossed, we risk wobbling on the wrong side of history. The Rwanda genocide, the civil war in Angola, and Jews extermination in Germany are a stark reminder of what that history can look like.

Indeed, many have written on the issues of ethnicity in Ethiopia; and how far we have come as a nation is very clear. What is equally clear and unquestionable is the pride of being an Ethiopian, a citizen of a country that thwarted the claws of the colonial master with unmistakable determination and blood. However, what is unclear is why we have refused to learn from history; why for example we are not at par with, or even better than countries that were colonized; why we allow bigotry to define who we are; why we refuse to focus on real problems (such as poverty, rampant unemployment, poor social services and bad governance) and the agents of these problems.

II. How did we get here?

To understand the implications of ethnocentrism, ethnic divide and more so, ethnic federalism in Ethiopia, we should contextualize it's origin in history. Sun Tzu wrote in his book "The Art of War": *Do not allow your enemies to get together. Look into the matter of his alliances and cause them to be severed and dissolved. If an enemy has alliances, the problem is grave and the enemy's position strong; if he has no alliances, the problem is minor and the enemy's position weak (P78)*. Sun Tzu's book was written more than 2,000 years ago as a handbook for military strategy. Later in the 16th century, the great philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli also provided a similar recommendation as a powerful military strategy in part IV of his book that bears a similar title as Sun Tzu's. He writes; *'A captain ought, among all other actions of his, endeavor with every art to divide the forces of the enemy, either by making him suspicious of his men in whom he trusted, or by giving him cause that he has to separate his forces, and, because of this, become weaker (P145)*.

In academic discourse, economists have formalized the "divide and conquer" strategy under the game theory, which is often illustrated by the story of the prisoners' dilemma. The story talks about two people who are brought to a *Shimagle* on suspicion of breaking a village taboo. Since these people are only suspects and nobody witnessed them breaking the taboo, the *Shimagle*'s men question them from separate rooms with a hope that one or both will admit to what they did. At the beginning of the interrogation, the two people are presented with possible punishments:

1. If both do not admit to breaking the taboo, there will be no evidence to punish them, and therefore, they will be set free.
2. If one of them admits to breaking the taboo and the other remains silent, the one who admits is set free and the one who remains silent is expelled from the village.
3. If both admit to breaking the taboo, they both receive a heavy punishment but are not expelled from the village.

Given the above options, the most rational and best choice for the two people is to remain silent (option 1). However, since they are held in separate rooms and each suspects that the other might admit to avoid being expelled from the village, both will be motivated to admit. And if any of them is hesitant to admit, the *Shimagle*'s men questioning them could make them think that their partner admitted. If they believe the *Shimagle*'s men, they will be compelled to admit.

Imagine that the two people represent two ethnic groups, and the two separate rooms represent the two areas/regions that the two ethnic groups live. Also assume that the two ethnic groups live in a country with a repressive government, which knows that if the two ethnic groups cooperated they will stage a revolt against the government and demand good governance and other rights. Because the government knows that such cooperation is not in its best interest, it develops a strategy (as suggested in Sun Tzu and Machiavelli) that will make the two groups suspect each other, develop enmity, refuse to cooperate, and thus fight one another. If you lived in such a country, what option would you take? Will you suspect the other ethnic group (based on misleading information), or will you trust the other group and cooperate for your mutual interest?

As illustrated above, the divide and conquer strategy entails breaking up existing power structure into smaller groups that individually have less power than the one implementing the strategy. In addition to disintegrating the power structure, the implementer of the strategy devises a mechanism that prevents these groups from creating alliances that could challenge his/her power by instigating rivalries and discord, and fostering distrust and enmity within and between the groups. The overall objective of this strategy is to empower the implementer to control the population without challenge, and thus rule in perpetuity.

Many great leaders have employed this strategy, including Julius Caesar of Rome and Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte of France. During the colonial period; Britain, France, Germany, Spain and Belgium used it in Africa and elsewhere to subjugate the masses in their colonies. In the post-independence period, some of the newly elected leaders were quick to embrace a strategy that they had previously fought against because of its unjust and demeaning nature. The caste system in India and the continuing civil war in Afghanistan and other parts of the Middle East are the products of the divide and conquer strategy. In Africa, this strategy has led to catastrophic consequences at best. The most notable one including the 1994 Rwandan genocide - thanks to the structure that had been put in place by the Belgians and Germans, which gave the Tutsi ethnic group economic and social advantages over the Hutus. Other examples include the Biafran war in Nigeria and the 2008 inter-ethnic classes in Kenya. Many of these African countries have learned from their mistakes and are making conscious efforts (socially and politically) to move away from the ethnic divide towards an inclusive nation building strategy. Of course, the improvement in economic performance in Rwanda and Kenya are an attestation to the potential beneficial effects of inclusiveness.

The question we need to ask ourselves as Ethiopians is whether we are ready to learn from history and embrace a nation building approach, or, defy history and maintain a path that has been proven disastrous. While the divide and conquer strategy is justifiable in the military case where a country is facing threats from an external enemy, how can we justify when it's used to divide a nation along ethnic lines? Ethnicity is not what defines us. It is a psychosomatic aspect, which is characterized by man-made norms that are learned over time. It is not the blood that runs through our veins or the air that we breathe or our intellect, instead, it is an accident of our birth. Being Anuak, Amhara, Gurage, Oromo, Tigre etc. does not give us superiority over death or another ethnic group or person. We all face the same destiny regardless of our ethnic affiliations, religion or the color of our skin. So, should we allow superficial factors to define what/who we are as a nation or individuals? Why should we allow ethnic-based boundaries that have been imposed on us by self-seeking political elites; to define us along ethnic lines, and instigate hatred, suspicion, and mistrust?

Of course, many could rightfully argue that some ethnic groups have been unjustly treated and payback is necessary. But isn't this the same kind of thinking that led us into the current predicament? Even if it was possible for each ethnic group in Ethiopia to have its moment in the sun, a chance to payback, the question becomes; when does it stop? Look at the instability in the Middle East that is grounded in ethnic and religious divide. Is that the world we want in Ethiopia for our children and grandchildren? Some elites in our communities argue that the best solution is secession along ethnic lines. But history

shows that it is not a satisfactory solution. Even if it were satisfactory, the differences in resource endowment across regions will require that the newly formed countries trade with a country of an ethnic group that they once mistrusted or disliked. For example, the Eastern and Northeastern regions of Ethiopia are either arid or semi-arid, while the Northwest, West, Central and South have good agricultural farmlands: what will be the economic basis of the disadvantaged 'regions/countries' if they were to secede?

Most of us are well aware of the prolonged civil war in Sudan. Like the rest of the world, we welcomed when South Sudan eventually seceded from Sudan. It was expected that with self-governance, the newly formed government of South Sudan would tirelessly work to promote the long-awaited peace, dignity, and prosperity for its people. Instead, what do we see? In other words, peace, dignity and economic prosperity do not come by default or secession; rather, they require leaders who are visionary, self-less, and willing to put the nation's interest above their selfish aspirations, regardless of the country's ethnic composition.

In many cases the divide and conquer strategy starts as a benevolent act, a solution to years of injustice. The case of Ethiopia as has been elsewhere, started with dividing the nation into regions along ethnic lines with a promise of 'self-determination' and 'economic prosperity'. Then, came elimination of social interactions by introducing segregation in schools and access to other public services; whereby people are limited to access these social services within their region. What the later has done is to minimize opportunities for cross-cultural learning, and condition the mindset to trust only those people within ones ethnic group, while suspecting and mistrusting other ethnic groups. This is consistent with Sun Tzu's and Machiavelli's strategy of defeating the enemy. We can attest to the strength and success of this strategy - with its ability to transcend Ethiopia's physical boundaries - by looking at the interactions of Ethiopians in the diaspora. The suspicion and mistrust has taken hostage of many Ethiopians (regardless of their economic and education background) that even when free in foreign countries, we are still prisoners of our origins.

The anecdote of the '*boiling frog*' best illustrates how we got where we are; imprisoned in ethnocentrism and conditioned to accept a structure that has been rejected elsewhere. The premise of this anecdote is that if you put a frog in a pot with boiling water, it will immediately jump out. However, if you put it in a pot with cold water, then slowly start heating it; the frog will become comfortable and not perceive the danger, and eventually, will be cooked to death without any resistance. In the same way, as Ethiopians, we have over the years been slowly cooked in a pot of ethnic divide such that we did not realize when things started getting too toxic. Many of us have become complacent and in fact have embraced secession. But what makes us think that secession, a geographical boundary, will eliminate the deeply embedded mistrust and suspicion that have already been planted in us?

III. How do we break away from the ethnic divide?

The great philosopher Thomas Hobbes alluded that the individual is the starting point of social analysis. That means that if we are fighting for change in Ethiopia, that change has to start with us as individuals, flowing to our families and then the extended network. We cannot expect change if we are not willing to change ourselves. In fact, another philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his book “A Discourse of Inequality” uses a metaphor of ‘stag hunt game’ to illustrate the benefits of social cooperation. The metaphor, which is also referred to as the “trust dilemma”, “coordination game” or “assurance game” goes along these lines: four men (from 4 different ethnic groups) who live in a society where hunting is the only occupation and source of livelihood, go out to hunt in the same forest. The only wild animals available in this forest are Rabbits and Antelopes. While the Rabbits are easy to catch, they are small; one Rabbit can hardly feed a family, and is less valuable. The Antelopes are bigger, they can feed more than one family and thus, both their meat and hide are very valuable. Unlike the Rabbits, a successful hunt for an Antelope requires a coordination between two or more hunters. On any given day, all hunters would prefer to catch an Antelope, but, these men are unwilling to work together for a number of reasons: 1) they speak different languages, 2) because of their difference in language, they do not trust one another, and 3) cooperating means that they share the proceeds of their hunt. From their past experiences the men know that:

1. If they do not cooperate, each can catch only one Rabbit in a day and zero Antelopes
2. If they cooperate, the team can catch either 12 Rabbits (if hunting only Rabbits) or 5 Antelopes (if hunting only Antelopes). If they hunt both Rabbits and Antelopes at the same time, the team can catch 8 Rabbits and 4 Antelopes per day.

These payoffs show that the benefits of cooperation are bigger than not cooperating. Now, let us think of this metaphor in terms of politics in Ethiopia. Right now there are many political parties, each engendering ethnic-based policies. Alongside the many political parties are our political (ethnic) elites who are aspiring to lead the country in a way that will advantage their alliances (mainly their ethnic group). Obviously, members of the public will align themselves with a party that promotes their ethnic-specific interests. Let us also assume for a minute that the elections are always free and fair in Ethiopia, and that for a party to win it must represent at least 51 percent of the population. Currently, none of the ethnic groups in Ethiopia represent 51 percent of the population, meaning that ethnic-based parties can never win the elections. However, if we put aside our ethnic differences and define ourselves as Ethiopians rather than Anuak, Amhara, Gurage, Oromo, Tigre, etc.; and our leaders stop pursuing self-interests by forming a unified party based on nation-building ideals; and choose merit-based leaders regardless of their ethnic-affiliation; then it will be easy to catch the 8 Rabbits and 4 Antelopes in a day.

In economics students are often taught about the benefits of trade, whether it is local or international. We trade because we cannot produce everything we want. With trade we are able to diversify our diet, our wardrobe, and access services that we cannot produce ourselves. For example, with engineers we get roads and bridges, and with doctors we get medical care. Imagine if the world produced only *Teff* and no meat or lentils. Can we live on *Injera* alone? In other words, the world was created to have diversity.

Different species of plants and animals co-exist, each benefiting from the other. The same way, as human beings, we can co-exist with people from different ethnic groups or race or religion. The story of the Tower of Babel (Babylon) in Genesis (11: 1-9) shows that God intentionally introduced different languages. Also, in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 12: 12-26) the body is portrayed as one with many parts that must work together for our overall wellbeing. If the eyes would refuse to see because they do not like the legs or the fingers refuse to pick food because they dislike the mouth, then our entire body would become dysfunctional. In the same way, a country is far much effective and far much better, if we cooperate regardless of our ethnic or skin-color differences.

Sun Tzu also illustrates the essence of diversity and its beneficial effects when he writes “*The musical notes are only 5 in number but their (combined) melodies are so numerous that one cannot hear them all*” (P91). This implies that we can find endless benefits in our diversity if we make conscious efforts to embrace it.

IV. The potential economic and social consequences of ethnic divide

In 1919 Willaim Buttler Yeats wrote a poem titled ‘*The Second Coming*’. The first verse of that poem reads:

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre (spiral)
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

While this poem was written to depict emotions and confusion that people were experiencing after the 1st World War, it is easy to see how the same can be used to capture what many Ethiopians are feeling right now about our country. But the phrase that has often been repeated from this poem is; “*when things fall apart, the center cannot hold.*” This phrase is loaded with social, economic and governance consequences of a divided nation. The implications of racial discrimination in the United States of American and apartheid in South Africa have well been researched. Thus, we can borrow a leaf from the findings of these research to help us understand the consequences of ethnic division in Ethiopia. Figure 1 below provides a pictorial illustration of the vicious cycle of ethnic divide. The outcomes depicted in this graph are a reality to most Ethiopians. For example, if you travel outside of Addis Ababa to Ethiopia’s heartland in the South or East, or the West or North, you will realize that access to basic necessities like hospitals, roads, and bridges are a luxury to a typical Ethiopian.

It is not by chance that Ethiopia is ranked as one of the most multidimensional poor countries in the World (as measured by the multidimensional poverty index). We should bear in mind that while Ethiopia was not colonized, many of the African countries emerged from the clutches of colonialism less than 60 years ago. In other words, by the time other African countries were getting their independence, Ethiopia had a long history of self-governance, yet many of these countries have surpassed us in terms of economic, political and social development. It is thus fair to ask; what is our Achilles' heel? So, while we pride ourselves in bravely thwarting the clutches of the colonial master (unlike other African countries), we are slowly drowning in a muddy pond of ethnocentric-led governance. The unemployment rate in Ethiopia is very high, poverty is rampant, not to mention our aid-dependency and the recurring famine.

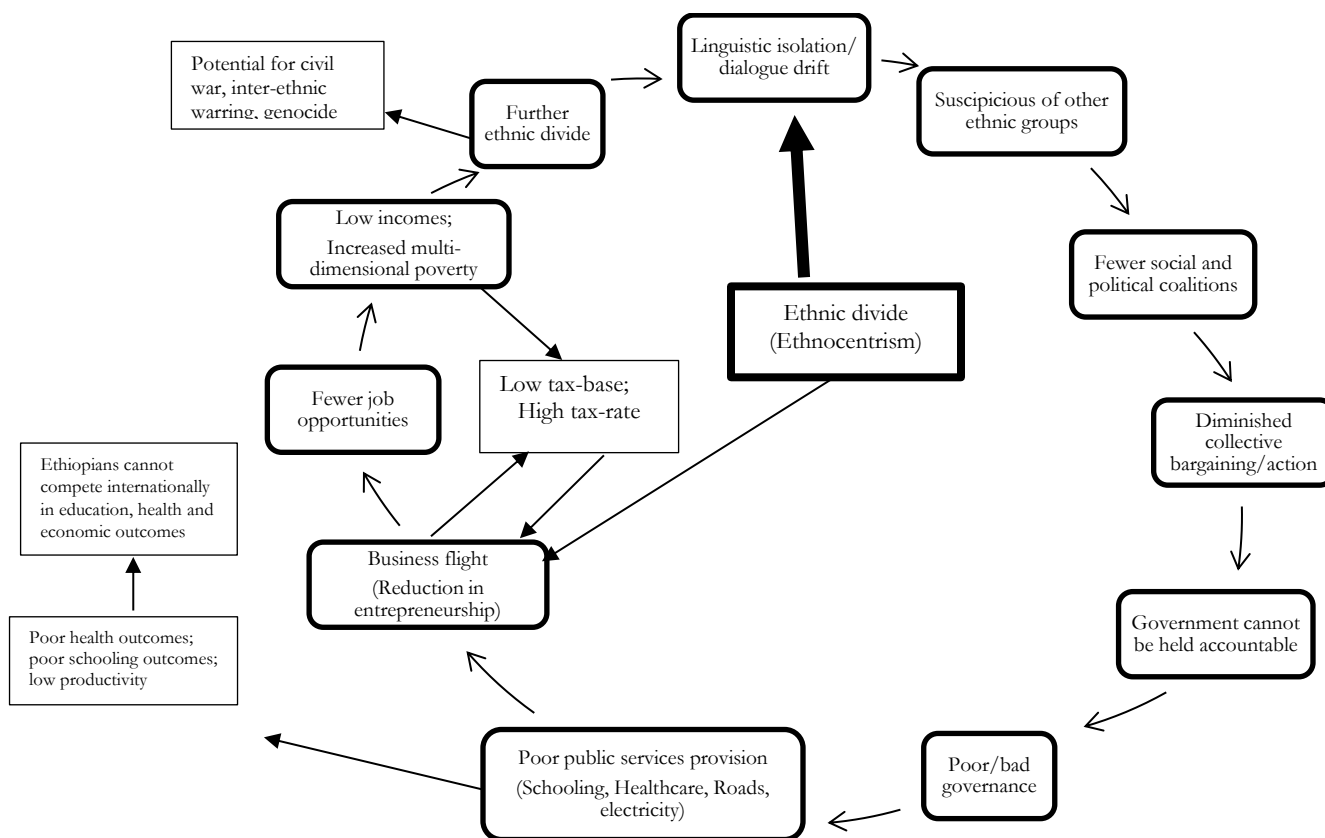
Undoubtedly, many African countries have liberalized their economies to allow free market competition and private enterprise. Ethiopia on the other hand, still maintains a tight grip on sectors (especially finance and information and communication) that have been known to jumpstart other sectors of the economy and enable entrepreneurship, with positive consequences on job creation and improvement in the overall standards of living. Fewer private enterprises imply that existing ones are heavily taxed. It also implies fewer jobs created and fewer people to tax, hence, the continuous poverty and foreign aid dependency.

At a more granular level, ethnic division deters other ethnic groups from working and investing in regions outside of their ethnic group. It curtails sharing of ideas across ethnic lines, and from a social perspective, diminishes the genetic pool. Moreover, if the population is divided along ethnic lines, it means fewer/weaker coalitions and therefore, nobody to challenge the government. This leads to poor/bad governance, which in turn further contributes to poor public service provision, business flight, fewer jobs, less income and increased poverty.

It is fair to mention that even in a unified nation, lack of economic opportunities and material resources can also fuel ethnic and other social divisions. However, these divisions are exacerbated in a nation that is already divided. Consequently, for those who are promoting secession as a panacea for Ethiopia's problems, they have to bear in mind that when our material needs are not met; when a large proportion of the population is poor, and the unemployment is high; there will always be another form of social divide; whether it is on the basis of religion, skin color, or income.

I conclude with words from a very inspiring author: *I leave you faith, I leave you hope. I leave you ethnic (racial) dignity. I leave you also a desire to live harmoniously with your neighbors. I leave you finally a responsibility to our future generations.*

Figure 1: Potential Economic and social consequences of ethnic divide in Ethiopia



Note: This figure which represents the vicious cycle of ethnic divide is adopted from *American Apartheid* by Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton, 1983, Harvard University Press.