

Beyond Identity Politics: Ethnocentrism and the Future of Ethiopia

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Foundation of identity politics: equality, human dignity, justice, peaceful co-existence...

How did it develop?

- Ancient tribalism replaced by religious tribalism (Xianity and Islam) alongside tribal identity
- Death and destruction in medieval Europe – individual and collective trauma
- Enlightenment rationalism (timeless truths & universal values): power of reason above tribal instincts and beyond divisions over culture, color, class and creed
- 18th c. identity-less universalism was replaced by 19th c. nationalism, Darwinism and Marxism
- Nation, race and class → two world wars, Holocaust, Stalinism
- Movement from collectivism to individualism - from WE to I (Jonathan Sacks)
- 1990s: while thinkers were trying to bring back communitarianism characterised by a network of relationships, state-sponsored multiculturalism was promoted
- Identity labels/politics flourished; back to populist nationalism - current phenomena

Conclusions of Thinkers: I Concur!

Identity is a reality but identity politics:

- Endangers democracy
- Fragments and eventually destroys body politic
- Balkanises society & fosters grievance, competitive victimhood & intolerance
- Discourages any talk about common humanity and the common good
- Creates a vicious cycle of division and conflicts
- Makes it harder to achieve genuine liberty, equality and fraternity

(J. Sacks, M. Lilla, K. Appiah, F. Fukuyama, Amy Chua, Yascha Mounk)

Ethiopian Reality: Similar to the Medieval and Early 20th Century Europe

- Ethnic categories are invented & ethnicity is fused with politics
- History is understood as forged by competing narratives amongst groups
- Claims of entitlement to govern
- Scapegoats or foes are constantly created
- Dehumanising languages are invented and used
- Ancient religious rituals are seen as compatible with Christianity for political purposes
- Division, conflicts and **morally unjustifiable loss of life**

Ethiopian Reality: Beyond Reason and Against Biblical Paradigm

- Human tribal passions (often irrational) above human rationality.
- Divisive irrational tribal instincts ruthlessly exploited by political elites & media

Against Biblical Paradigms:

- **Adamic paradigm:** common humanity grounded in common origin
- **Noahic paradigm:** tribes, languages, lands and peoples but common patriarch
- **Abrahamic paradigm:** God is the Lord of all nations – universal humanity
- **Jesus paradigm:** New Israel → Light of the Nations → Truth, Life and Way
- **Pauline paradigm:** God as Father of Abraham → Israel → Jesus → Jews and Gentiles through the Spirit of Christ → One Humanity (Sisters and Brothers) → Back to Adam

Biblically: WE ARE WRONG

Politically: HEADING TOWARDS DISASTER

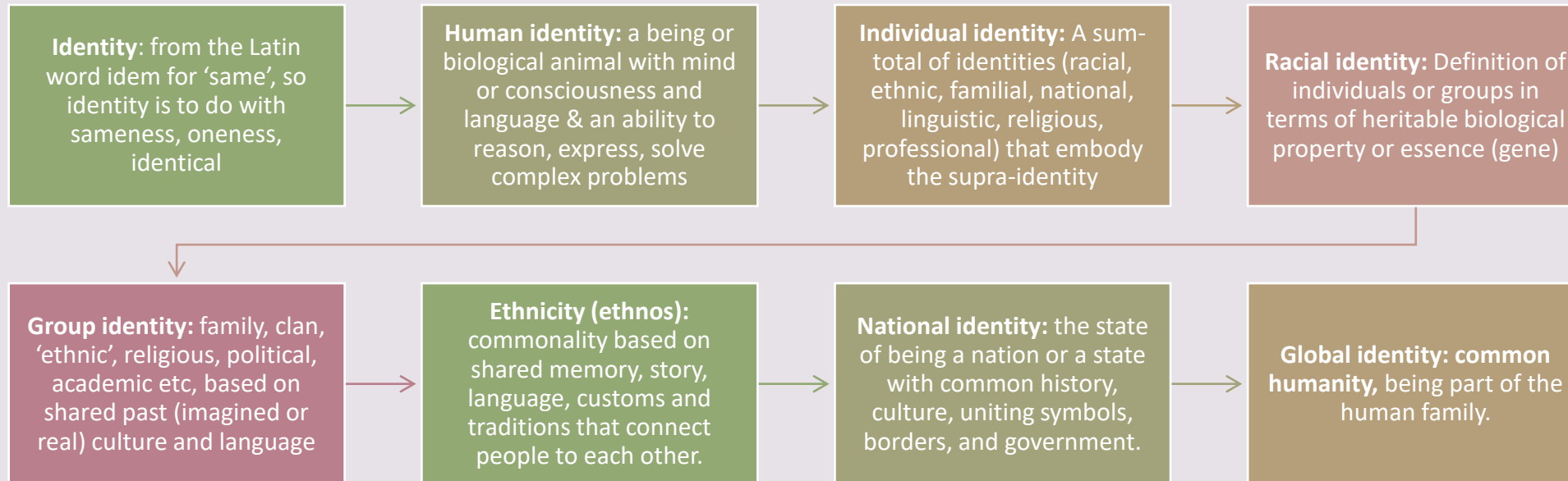
What should we do?

- Deep Reflection
- Reconsideration
- Recalibration

Governed by:

- Humility
- Patience
- Spirit of Accommodation

Identity: What do we mean by it?



*When we declare
'ethnocentrism is
wrong', we are not
saying:*

Ethnicity – which includes family, clan and tribe – is not a reality – 3000 people groups in Africa; more than 80 in Ethiopia

Claiming tribal identity and feeling kinship with members of the tribe & **positive** love for them is wrong.

Doing something good for the people group one originates from is wrong: 'charity begins at home'

Ethnic based social capital that strengthens healthy networks of relationships (or the principle of *Ubuntu* – 'I am because we are') is wrong.

What is wrong with ethnocentrism then?

A strong appeal to common identity that leads to strong boundary markers.

Antagonistic or adversarial, hateful, contemptuous and cruel attitude towards other people groups.

A culture of exclusion based on language, numerical superiority, political & economic dominance.

Othering or a mentality of 'us' versus 'them' that leads to marginalising and dehumanising the other.

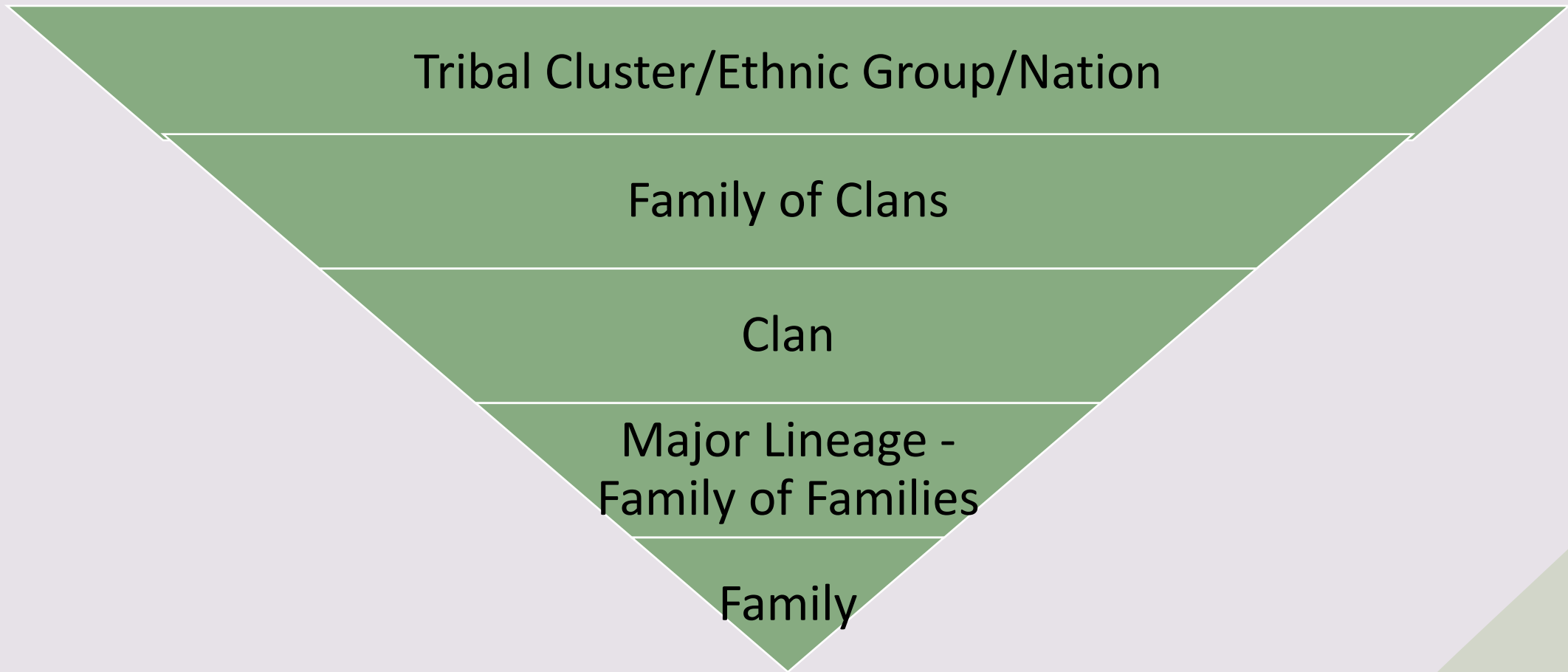
Claiming 'my people group' should get priority over others: education, jobs, leadership etc.

A system that disregards gifts & abilities, denies equality of opportunities & discourages meritocracy.

Ethnic associations that are not based on the values of justice, fairness, truth and tolerance.

Policies that promote tyranny of the majority & zero-sum game leading to competition, communal conflicts and civil wars.

Origins of identity
Shared ancestry & history



Humans are tribal

Shared identity based on traditions, stories and symbols **binds us**

Shared identity can be irrational, so it equally **blinds us**

When identity binds us, we emphasise the WE/US

Blind emphasis on US leads us to blind emphasis on Them, leading to **US versus Them.**



Us. **Them.**

Humans are tribal



‘Humans are tribal. We need to belong to groups. We crave bonds and attachments, which is why we love clubs, teams, fraternities, family. Almost no one is a hermit. Even monks and friars belong to orders. But the tribal instinct is not just an instinct to belong. It is also an instinct to exclude.’ **Amy Chua, *Political Tribes***



‘What is best in us and what is worst in us come from the same source: our tendency to form ourselves into groups, and to think highly of our own and negatively of others’. **Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God’s Name***

*Origins of Identity: Tradition, Myth, Choice, Covenant, Coercion (See also Kwame Appiah, *The Lies that Bind Us: Rethinking Identity*)*

Traditions: customs, beliefs and values (traditional or religious); memory, historical journey and relationships

Myths: stories and symbols not always based on history but nevertheless provides meaning and direction to the life and identity of a given community.

Choices: Individuals or groups choose to take on a new identity

Covenants: Groups enter into a covenant-based relationship, which forms identity

Coercion: A group forces another group or individual to adopt their identity

Origins of identity: Example I: European Identity (Christendom)



- Current 'European identity' is based on Christianity becoming the religion of the Roman Empire
- Constantine → declared Christianity as the universal religion (312)
- Charlemagne → united Europe under the Papacy (800f)
- Centred on 5 symbols:
 - **Cross of Christ:** transformation from savagery to humanity, pride to humility, subjugation to service, fragmentation to fraternity (cf. Tom Holland's *Dominion*)
 - **Pope:** pontifical or religious leadership
 - **Emperor/Caesar:** political leadership
 - **Latin:** the uniting language of the Empire
 - **Catholic or Universal Church**

Origins of identity: Example II: Arab Identity in North Africa

- The majority of North Africa was Christian (produced some of the earliest Christian thinkers, hence 'Africa shaped the Christian mind', Tom Oden)
- Following Prophet Mohammed's rise:
 - 1) His followers/Arab conquerors as ***muhajirun***, 'those who have undertaken an exodus'.
 - 2) The Prophet as the **new Moses**
 - 3) Their campaign as **exodus**
 - 4) Any land they subdued as '**holy**'
- New identity in North Africa: Arab identity = Muslim identity
- Centred on: The Prophet, His Message, Arabic language, Land, *Umma* (Universal Brotherhood)



Origins of identity:

Example III: United Kingdom/Great Britain

British identity was made up of indigenous people (Angles) and invaders (Romans, Vikings, Saxons/Germanics, Normans)

- Bede the Venerable (7th century): Angles, Saxons & Jutes (warring kingdoms): Moses vs Pharaoh; destined to create a new Israel ('Jerusalem' by William Blake – 19th century)
- A new identity under a single Christian kingdom – **Anglia**.
- Scotland, Ireland and Wales later added by dominant England
- British identity based on shared history, traditions, stories, symbols, Union Jack, the Crown (over 1000 years) etc – contested but bloody wars unlikely
- No written constitution: precedence, conventions, statutes



Origins of identity: Example IV: United States of America

Modern America was created by European settlers

Escaped from poverty, hunger, state persecution, lack of political and religious freedom

John Winthrop in 1630: 'we shall be as a city upon a hill'

Modern USA = *mythical* city upon a hill (all will see and follow us, exemplar): guides presidents, shape policies

Some argue USA was founded upon two covenants

- Covenant with God: **Christianity**
- Covenant with one another: **Constitution**



*Origins of
identity:
Example V:
Ethiopian Ethnic
Groups – Choice,
Covenant,
Coercion*

-
- I grew up being told I belong to two ethnic clusters: Badogo and Ware/Lemo
 - This was based on **choice and covenant**.
 - In Gadaa, the Oromo social system, not only those who are born from the Oromo group lineage are Oromo, those who are adopted are also Oromo
 - This adoption process historically is based on **choice, covenant and/or coercion**



Origins of identity:

Example VII: Ethiopian Identity

Ethiopia: *Cush, Ethiopis, Sheba ...*

- Kibre-Negest (14th C. AD):
- Solomon and Queen of Sheba → Menelik I: Ethiopia's King
- Ethiopia: New Jerusalem
- The Ethiopian king: earthly representative of the Heavenly King
- Kingdoms: Aksum, Lalibela, Gondar, Shewa → Christian Kingdom
- Subdued southern, south-eastern, western kingdoms + Christian Kingdom = Ethiopia's Kingdom: **one country, one flag, one king...**
- Ethiopian king: from the line of Solomonic dynasty
- Haile-Selassie: *The Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I, King of Kings of Ethiopia, Elect of God.*



5. *Diverse Perspectives on Ethiopia & Ethiopiawinet*

The system was **exclusive**, characterized by the hegemony of the Amhara (Donald Levine)

The system was **inclusive**, characterized by the dominance of the Orthodox Christian religion and Amharic language (Christopher Clapham)

Prison of nations and nationalities (Walelegn Mekonnen)

Ethnocratic system (never pan-Ethiopianic): a loose conglomeration of ethnic groups (Yonathan Tesfaye)

Imposed political project (wax) and social covenant (gold)/ **negotiated 'WE'** (Girma Mohammed)

Ethiopian Identity

Ethiopia's singular statehood came about when different people groups:

- shared common land with common borders;
- accepted ideals believed to transcend differences without dissolving certain particularities;
- associated themselves with shared historical and cultural values and aspirations;
- developed national consciousness;
- and committed themselves to a shared national identity under a shared narrative of *Ethiopiawinet*.

Living with Tensions and Ambiguities

Ethiopia:

A political construct and an unfinished project.

Motherland, not unique to Ethiopia but contested.

How strong is the sense of *national identity* so deeply embedded in the societal psyche?

How strong is the inner passion for Ethiopia and an emotional bond with her?

Do music, arts, sport, national anthem, flag invoke common causes, stories and symbols and rekindle the passion and commitment to the shared identity?

Living with Tensions Ambiguities: USA

- American exceptionalism – probably true – a ‘mythical’ land of liberty & opportunity
- 47 million Americans born outside America (from 140 countries)
- **Supra Group and Superpower:** hence group blindness as against group consciousness
- But a deeply divided nation over issues of race, gun violence, police brutality, abortion, sexuality...
- Trump’s America, Biden’s America, Liberals vs Conservatives; Multi-racial vs liberal democracy?
- Humility, acceptance of common humanity and ambiguities rejected by both extremists and moderates



Living with Tensions and Ambiguities: Britain and Europe

Britain:

- Christianity remains central symbol but tensions and ambiguities within – Scottish, Welsh and Irish identities versus dominant English identity
- Growing and influential minorities (8 million) → fear amongst the whites (English Defence League and other extremist groups)
- Less tolerance 3-4 out of 10 racist, but growing attitude and willingness to embrace ambiguity and diversity

Europe:

- Christianity central symbol but not acknowledged; threatened by population implosion
- Extremist right-wing parties in Germany, France, Sweden and nationalist governments in Poland, Hungary and Holland
- Racial fixation, rejection of ambiguities, Eurocentrism, intolerance, neo-Nazism, anti-immigration

North Africa: Tensions and Ambiguities

- Arab/Muslim world: divided between Shias and Sunnis.
- Moroccan Berbers: **African, Arab or Amizagh?**
- North Africa in general: Arab or African?
- Sub-Saharan Africa versus North Africa
- European settlers in Africa: African or European?
- African vs universal identity (Christianity, *Umma*)
- Better to accept current realities & live peacefully with ambiguities while continuing to ask questions



Ethiopia: Transition from the Zone of Tensions & Ambiguities to Rigid Certainties



- The principle of self-determination of nations and nationalities against national sovereignty
- Attempt to create a new Ethiopia with a new understanding centred on ethnic consciousness
- We are X and not Y (shown in IDs) = we are taken out of the zone of ambiguity into rigid certainty
- Who is Oromo? Who is Amhara? Who is Hadiya? Answers marked by ambiguities
- An instinct to exclude starts with ethnic fixation or identity-fixation: e.g. Prof Fikre Tolossa's የኦሮሞና የአማራ እውነተኛ የዘር ምንጭ
- Rigid certainty = peeling an onion to the end = no onion will be left.

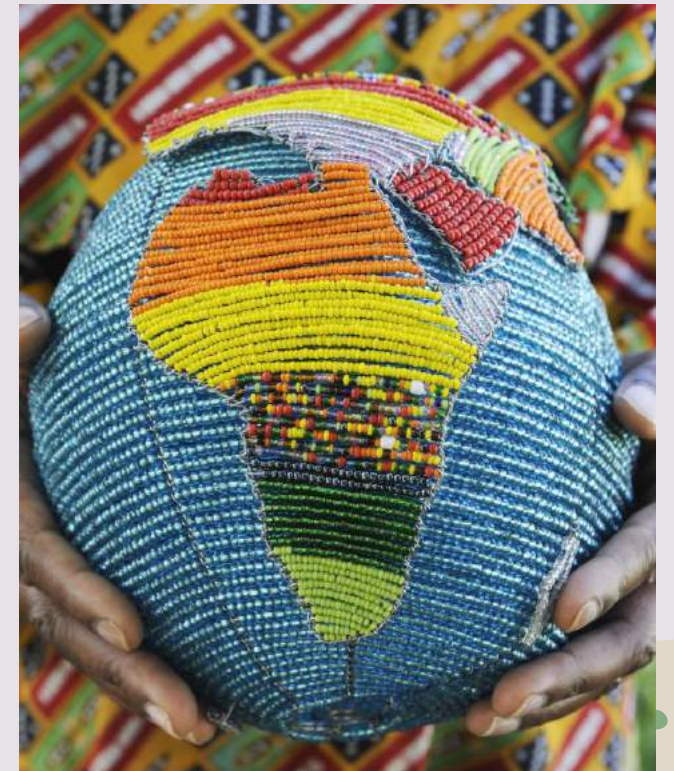
Rigid Certainty → Racism/Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism & Racism – two sides of the same coin

- **Racial ideology:**
- Race is seen as biological attribute influencing rationality, intelligence, ethics, strength
- Divides humanity into qualitatively different races based on skin colour
- Seeks to achieve **racial purity** by using intolerant, totalitarian, violent methods
- **Ethnonationalist ideology:**
- Divides humanity into different groups according to blood relations
- Seeks to achieve **ethnic and linguistic purity** (pure X, pure Y...) through division, violence
- The reverse of the saying 'the blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb' – i.e., chosen bonds vs family relations (both-and rather than either-or) – exclusionary, undemocratic, intolerant, potentially violent

RECAP: Why Stand against Racism/Ethnocentrism?

- Cultivates irrational & strong boundary markers, hence division
- Promotes a culture of exclusion: **us versus them**
- Maintains a mentality of victimhood and blame-shifting
- Promotes an adversarial, antagonistic and hateful narrative
- Fosters a culture of patronage and nepotism
- Promotes unhealthy competition and zero-sum game
- Marginalises and dehumanises others
- Denies equality of opportunities, justice and fairness
- Maintains tyranny of the majority



Way Forward:

I: Learn from Our Own Tragic History

- Geroge Santayana: ‘Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it’
- **Our Own**
- Territorial and tribal conflicts and constant power-struggles in the past; e.g. from 13th-21st centuries:
- **Ethiopia = blood bath (history of violence).**
- EWP/Derg, 1000s of ethnic based killings
- EPRDF era: constant tensions, rebellions, divisions, conflicts:
 - Relative stability, but from Gambela to Gondar, Wollega to Wello, no true peace or justice.
 - Ethnos/nation took up sword against ethnos/nation – regional special forces (*‘Warlordism’*).
- Prosperity Party era: ‘warlordism’; devastating war in northern Ethiopia from 2020-2022; current warfare in Amhara, and continuing conflicts in Oromia, Gambella...

2. Learn from Others' Tragic History

Geography and Walls: Tim Marshall: *Prisoners of Geography*, Elliott and Thompson: London, 2015; *Divided: Why We are Living in an Age of Walls*, Elliott and Thompson: London, 2018;

- Colonial project and the Scramble for Africa (Berlin 1885): Creation of nation states (often divisive)
- The 'Wall of Shame' – The Moroccan 1700-mile wall divides the Sahrawi from Morocco & Mauritania

A racialised vision of human history:

- Social Darwinism and Nitché's philosophy: survival of the fittest, power, disdain for weakness...
- Europeans as superior and master of human race (Aryanism)
- History forged by competition between races: Aryans & Jews locked in struggle for global domination
- Apartheid in South Africa: blessed (Shem and Japheth) vs cursed (Ham/Canaan) – whites vs blacks

Genocide: Jews, Armenians, Former Yugoslavia, Rwanda

3. Recognise Failed Approaches and Current Faultlines

Failed approaches:

- Subjugation, annihilation, cultural assimilation.
- Imposition of **absolute monarchic system** based on Biblical royal ideology
- Forced imposition of Marxism and ethnic federalism

Current fault lines or polarisations: Ethno-nationalism/ethnic federalism versus ethio-nationalism, individualism versus communitarianism, neo-liberalism versus social democracy...

Ethiopia's situation demands a new framework that synergises opposing or competing frameworks

4. Reject Historically & Contextually Irrelevant Solutions

Machiavellian 'divide and rule' approach adopted by the British (planted ethnic animosity) and even missionaries (tribalised and regionalised churches)

Nationalist movements & the notion of self-determination

Communist: nation not an economic-political but only a cultural and linguistic unit

Post-colonial - independence movements

American federalist ideal is not relevant to Ethiopia

Swiss administrative arrangements etc do not work for Ethiopia

The British arrangement – 4 Nations of United Kingdom with devolved governments - much of it is not transferrable to Ethiopia

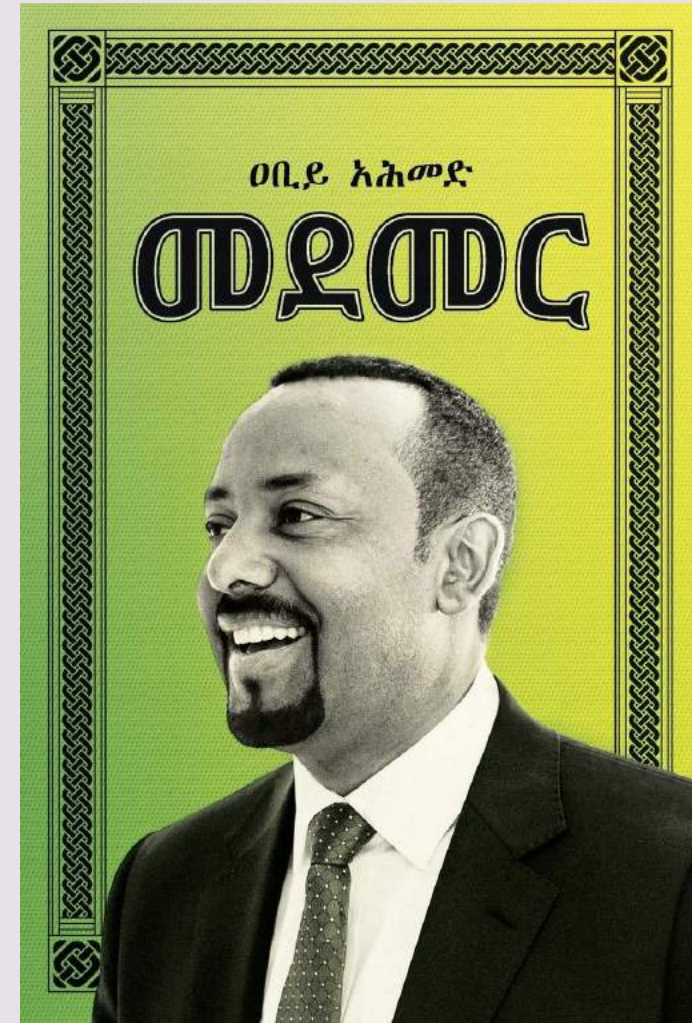


5: *Accept Biological, Social and Historical Realities*

- **We are biologically mixed.** Only very few border groups in Ethiopia have maintained their biological identity
- 50% Ethiopians from mixed ethnic parentage?
- **We are socio-culturally mixed.** Minority ethnic, clan and language groups exist amongst majority groups due to historical or providential accidents and chosen bonds
- **We are historically united** - achieved predominantly through bloody battles, political manipulations, religious coercion and imposition of certain ideals and values



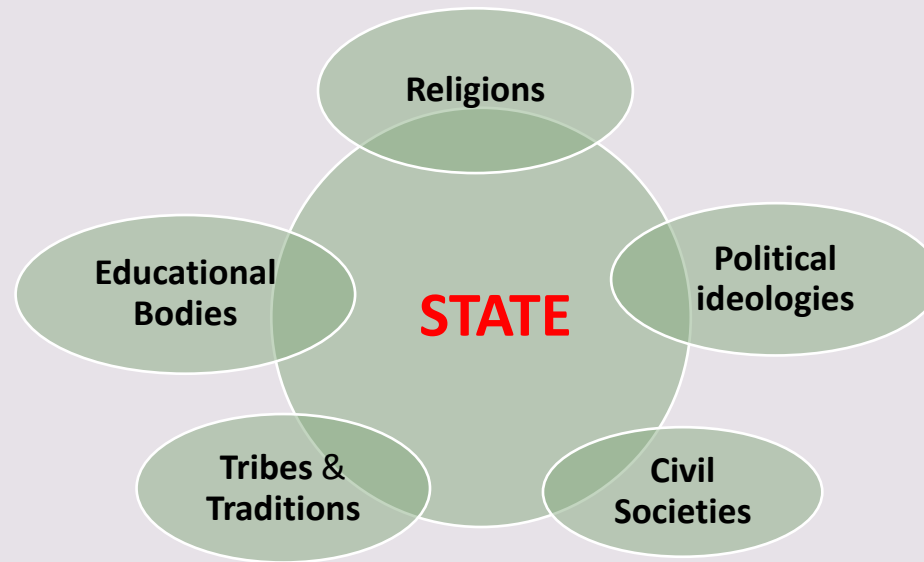
6. Politics of Synergy: Meles and Abiy spoke about 'medemer', but what went wrong?



Confusion: Identity of Tributaries after joining Abay, Fusion of Ethnicity and Politics, and State over Society

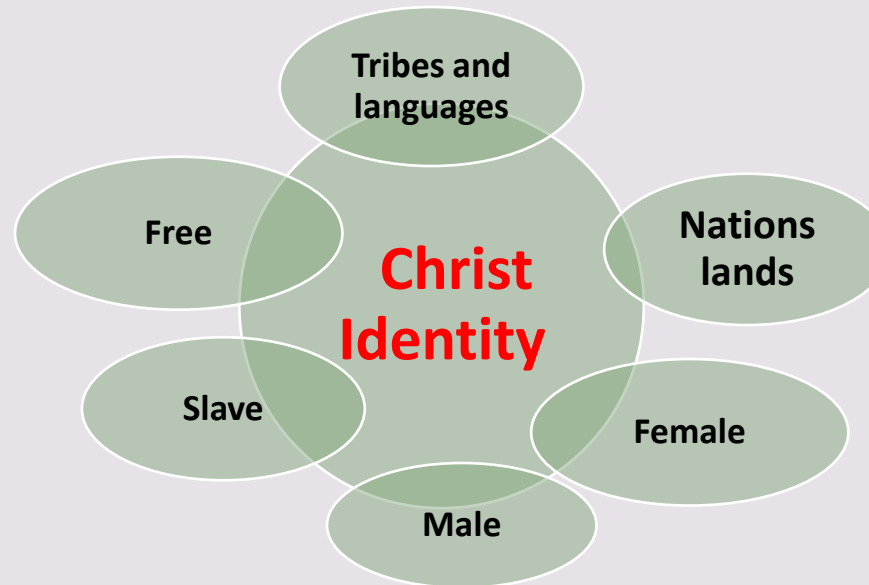
State: Secular and Democractic → Neutral and Constitutionally Inclusive (Power-centred)

Society: Independent (interdependent) religious, traditional, cultural, academic, charitable groups
(Relationships and Service-centred): **good society produces good state**



Confusion: Identity of Christians after joining the Body of Christ, Fusion of Ethnicity and Christianity

Christ Identity as Supra/Meta Identity



So What? Take 4:

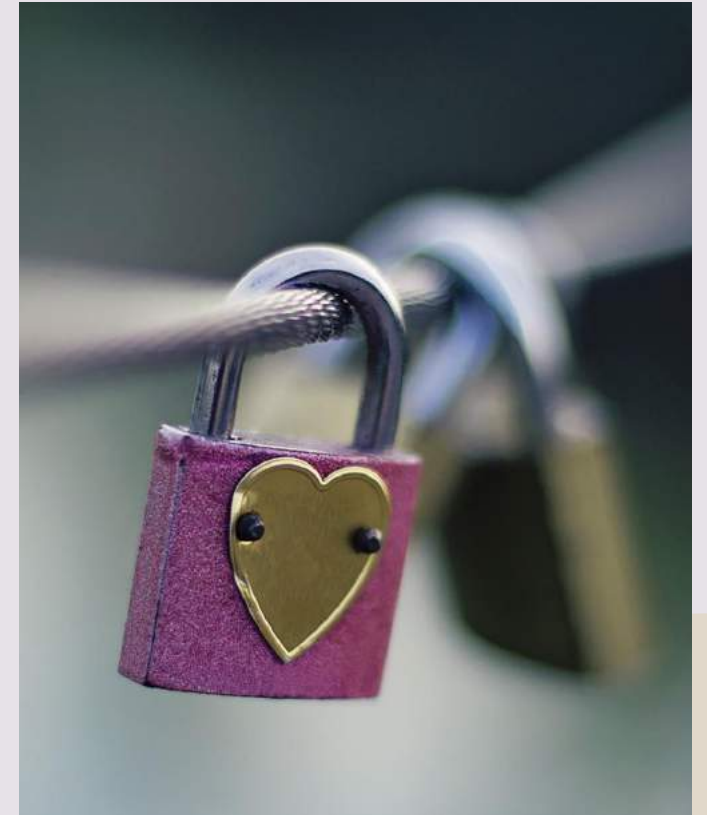
A. Promote a common humanity

- Common humanity (Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice*): human dignity as a uniting factor
- Kant: every person possesses a dignity that is inalienable, so humanity an end not means
- Biblical: Adamic humanity?
 - Archetypal humanity that embodies **a certain group** with the divine image
 - Represents **the whole of humanity** symbolising paternal singularity and universality
- Human life (spirit, mind = inner person) = human dignity
- Common humanity → inner person → human dignity, hence conception of compassion → conception of violation → moral compulsion

B. Foster the civilisation of love

Civilisation of love:

- Unconditional commitment to the world – love of humanity
- Founded on universal values of peace, justice, human dignity, compassion.
- Freedom ‘lived in self-giving solidarity and responsibility’ (Pope John Paul II).
- Civilisation of love vs divisive, exclusionist and unjust ethnocentric ideology
- **Good versus evil:** ethnocentric ideology: moral tragedy, so ethics of renunciation (abandoning or turning our backs on something) is called for.
- Socratic morality (‘It is better to suffer evil than to do it’) vs Utilitarian (creative adaptation of morality – no such thing as moral tragedy)
- ‘For evil to triumph it is only necessary for good men to do nothing’ (Edmund Burke)



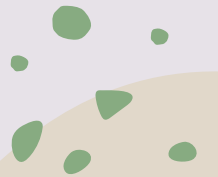
C. Maintain national sovereignty and uniting symbols

- Permanently divorce the marriage between ethnicity and politics.
- A nation-state where diverse linguistic and cultural expressions are respected but whose sovereignty does not depend on regional sovereignties.
- United through sharing the same land, being under a single national government, sharing common language/s, common cultural values, and common history and uniting symbols
- National sovereignty depends on developed national consciousness: 'national consciousness is not a mineral to be excavated but a fabric to be woven' (Appiah).

GERD



ADWA



D. Promote ethno-cosmopolitan patriotism

Ethno-cosmopolitan patriotism: patriotism (good nationalism) founded on uniting national symbols combined with a healthy sense of diversity and common humanity, the notion of secular state and compassionate society

Ethno-cosmopolitan patriot:

- A member of an ethnic group who is a citizen of a nation-state and the world
- She lives with ambiguities rather than absolute certainties
- She combines a sense of shared commitment to her group with a relaxed sense that includes others
- She rejects venerating certainties about imagined or invented past.



Queen Eleni: an example of the principle of tolerance and accommodation

Daughter of the Muslim King of Hadiya

Given to King Zera Yaqob as wife – a tool of peace between kingdoms, and their leaders and subjects

Regent, Advisor, Diplomat, Peacemaker

Example of tolerance, inclusivity and accommodation

Franchesco Alveres (from Portugal), who was there at the time of her death: *“There was a great rumour and talk about the death of Queen Eleni. They said that since she had died all had died great and small and while she had lived all lived and were defended and protected. She was father and mother to all.”*



Humility & Ambiguity; Accommodation and Shalom

Humility: absence of superior or arrogant attitude, as someone who does not claim that she/he knows it all, serving and being accountable to others...

Ambiguity: accepting the multiplicity of perspectives on or interpretations of narratives & being self-critical (rejecting 'my way or the wrong way' approach)

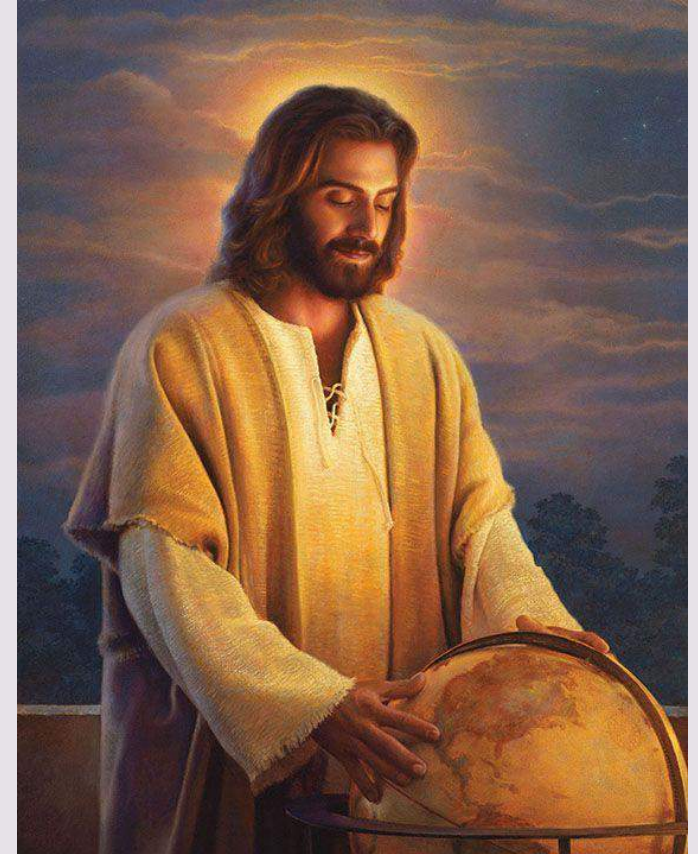
Accommodation: not imposing our ways or views on others, patiently entertaining opposing views and stances, and fully accepting those who don't look like us or share our ancestry or language or culture.

SHALOM: cosmic order, justice, right living, security, wholeness or completeness, and prosperity; a life of peace between individuals and communities; and national tranquility and prosperity.

*Peace on Earth
Peace in Ethiopia*



EIRENE



JESUS



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Thank You!

