

Unite the people from the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean

Thursday 30 August 2007

"As long as boundaries inherited... drawn arbitrarily with no heed to the ethnic, economic and social realities of Africa (continue), so long shall we be plagued by the political refugee problem... (Thus) the fault is in ours, not in our stars!" K. Nkrumah, October, 1965, Accra

"Where there has been racial hatred, it must be ended. Where there has been tribal animosity, it will be finished. Let us not dwell upon the bitterness of the past. I would rather look to the future, to the good new Kenya, not to the bad old days. If we can create this sense of national direction and identity, we shall have gone a long way toward solving our economic problems." Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya's founding President

"This is my plea to the new generation of African leaders and African peoples: work for unity with firm conviction that without unity there is no future for Africa...I reject the glorification of the nation-state, which we have inherited from colonialism, and the artificial nations we are trying to forge from that inheritance. We are all Africans trying to be Ghanaians or Tanzanians. Fortunately for Africa we have not been completely successful...Unity will not make us rich, but it can make it difficult for Africa and the African peoples to be disregarded and humiliated. And it will therefore increase the effectiveness of the decisions we make and try to implement for our development. My generation led Africa to political freedom. The current generation of leaders and peoples of Africa must pick up the flickering torch of African freedom, refuel it with their enthusiasm and determination, and carry it forward." Julius Nyerere, First president of Tanzania

"Deal with the enemy of today without ever forgetting that he could become the friend of tomorrow" Habib Bourguiba, First president of Tunisia

"...Constructing a nation from scratch: We know we don't have the knowledge. We know we do not have the resources. We know we do not have the experience. Our conclusion is: let's face it." Isaias Afewerki, current president of Eritrea (quoted from National Geographic, June 1996, p.87)

By Mammo Muchie*

August 29, 2007 - The Horn of Africa Conference was held for the sixth time in Lund University, Sweden between 23 August and 26 August, 2007. It is guided by a wonderful concept of generating constructive dialogue amongst civil society groups, scholars, political leaders and business communities from the Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti

The theme of the conference was on post-conflict peace-building with the objective of identifying key characteristics and contentious issues with a view to facilitate a communicative rationality to encourage consensus by enabling networking and possible undertaking of future activities by the stakeholders drawn across the regions. Indeed such a venture to bring the relevant and significant actors from the region to learn to cooperate and not continue to fight and hate is commendable. In this conference attendance was full, the arguments were lively and at times heated and the issues urgent and very compelling. Not only were all the ambassadors from the region represented and participated, (except Eritrea represented by a Counsellor serving as the ambassador), but also scholars from the region as well as from Scandinavia participated. There was a lot of information and opportunities for networking in the conference. The conference was to come up with recommendations to facilitate a post-conflict era in the wider region from the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean. The question we ask is the following: will such a useful forum be helpful in advancing the cause of building trust and moving into a higher level of unity amongst the relevant forces in the region? Can it be useful to create dialogue and communication by refocusing thought and action to solve the real problems of real people? Can it bring the communities, intellectuals, civil societies, the state and society together? If nothing else this conference concentrates our thoughts to ask many pertinent questions.

Special Relationship

The people residing from the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean have a special relationship. The Ethiopian ambassador made this point very clearly and in several occasions in the two days I attended on the 25th and 26th. The people and the region can either move forward by acting together "like a great body that refuses mutilation" (Fanon) and works for enduring composition or they can also remain trapped in fighting, spreading hate and confusion by trying to pursue misguided missions to form nations without knowledge, resources and experience as Isias boasts. In Africa the post- colonial states have not been successful to bring about a tolerable and acceptable level of well being of the people nor bring fully yet the dignity and respect of Africa from marginalisation and constant state of conflict and warfare. The countries of the Horn of Africa by now should have learned the bitter lesson from the way they mutilated each other by joining the cold war and dying for an agenda which has nothing to do with their own welfare. Having failed to learn from the Cold War debacle, they seem to fall in once again for being victims of global agendas and global politics they have absolutely no part in manufacturing. Some of them fight on the side of one set of global actors that fight another set of global actors. As long as they continue to do so and

behave with such subservience to other powers greater than them, they may have a geographical proximity, but may not be able to realise and cement their special relationship to construct a shared present and future free from war and misery. A special relationship means a unity of purpose and approach to develop a shared goal, direction and strategy on how to deal with the external forces and internal challenges in the region itself. How can "one Africa that fights against colonialism and another that attempts to make arrangements with it" (Fanon) ever unite to pursue shared goals either as good neighbours or as entities that need to share a common approach in relation to outside forces that come with their own exclusive agenda and/or internal challenges that can be overcome by deploying unity borne of the special historical, cultural and spatial connections of the region and the people in it?

Myth of Origin

Looking back far ahead at the possible birthdates of the names Ethiopia, Sudan, Djibouti, Eritrea and Somalia, one finds a remarkable history that they more or less originated in the same area and the forces that shaped each one has shaped the other. If we look back thus to the myth of origin of these entities, we find that it argues for their unity and composition rather than their division and fragmentation.

If we take the Pre-Judaic, Pre-Christian and pre-Islamic phases of historical evolution, again the same thing transpires: the same forces that shaped each have shaped the others.

If we take the Judaic, Christian and Islamic periods respectively, we see a history of interaction, communication, migrations, wars, and a shared civilisation and extensive contact through trade with the outside world of Europe, India and China. We see not only did these entities from the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean communicate through mutual subjugation and the brutalities, injustices and oppressions recorded in history from the outside medieval and ancient worlds, but also through the migration of their own civilisations through the Indian Ocean, the Mediterranean, even the Atlantic and other outlets. (Shihan de S Jayasuriya & R. Pankhurst (eds.) *The African Diaspora in The Indian Ocean*, 2003)

The division of these entities into the states as we know them as they are arranged now came during the notorious period of the European Scramble for Africa. During this period in the 19th century the people of this region were divided or mutilated and their determined resistance against the colonial encounter was largely and on the whole, though heroic, was unsuccessful. Even the Ethiopian kings that appeared to have been able to snatch and retain a territorially carved Ethiopian state formation that waxed and waned territorially over time from the jaws of the European scramble only were able to maintain and retain on the whole a tenuous grip. Their states have been constantly threatened by perfidious imperial humiliations through unequal treaties and unrealistic and unfair border demarcations that imbedded the seeds of all sorts of conflicts and antagonisms that have undermined state and unification in Ethiopia. The imperial-colonial pressure was victimising rather than building. Ethiopia emerged scathed with the scars and threats of the imperial agenda of the time falling prey to it once more by those it defeated, for example, at Adwa in 1896 and falling under fascist occupation between 1936 and 1941 under the Italians colonial adventures.

Whilst it is very clear to any sober person that Ethiopia suffered as an oppressed country, and whatever it managed to recover from the imperialist onslaught is gained through huge sacrifice and resistance, a particularly sinister reading and twist was given to its role during the Scramble for Africa, as if it was part and parcel of the Great Powers, and indeed a great power itself!! Nothing can be further from the truth than this preposterous claim that Ethiopia was part and parcel of the imperial and colonial system. Ethiopia was a victim of the colonial-imperial order and cannot be considered as part and parcel of the imperial system even if it were to have allied with one sort or group of imperial powers locked in rivalries with each other to retain a partially carved state from the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea.

In the Conference in Lund some delegates who should know better tried to spread some unusual tales claiming that the current Somali invasion by the Ethiopian Government was a continuation of the imperial colonial project of the Scramble for Africa where they alleged Ethiopia participated by sending a delegation to the Berlin 1885 infamous meeting. Even if Ethiopia sent an observer, it is a far cry from exaggerating such a presence into a role that Ethiopia was part of the forces that carved the African continent.

Conceptually such a claim is outrageous and bankrupt. The Ethiopian emperor was clear that the people from the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean are historically and culturally connected. But he lamented the fact that the imperial project disrupted their unity and appealed to God to restore their unity at some possible time in the future. That prescient insight by emperor Menelik has nothing to do with a colonial project. It has everything to do with redressing great power imperial and colonial injustice visited upon not only on the people from the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean, but also Africa from the Mediterranean to the Indian and Atlantic Oceans.

In Ethiopia those who have legitimate demands to decentralise the states of the region particularly in Ethiopia by localising authority at the grassroots by devolving power and empowering ordinary citizens went overboard and created false ideologies of Ethiopia as a 'colonial' power. This thesis has been loosely spread by books such as Addis Hiwot's *From Autocracy to Revolution*, London, published by the Review of African Political Economy group, 1975, Bereket Habte Selassie, *Conflict and Intervention in the Horn of Africa*, MRP, New York, 1980, A. Jalata, *Oromia and Ethiopia: State Formation and*

Ethnonational Conflict 1868-1992, Lynne Reinner, 1992, Sisay Ibsa et al The Invention of Ethiopia, Trenton, Red Sea press 1991. There are many articles and pamphleteering from the various fronts from the TPLF to OLF, ONLF, Sidama Liberation Front and others that spread loosely the false conception of Ethiopia's relations with the various communities both inside and outside the region as a colonial relation. This sinister anti- intellectual and devious misconstruction must be rejected and the precise concept that truly characterises relations of oppressions involving the peoples of the region re- formulated by mounting an unsparing criticism of so much of the propaganda masquerading as science. Ethiopia's relations with Eritrea, Somalia, Djibouti or Sudan has never been colonial and is not colonial in the sense of a relationship that Britain, Italy or France had with these various states including Ethiopia.

Build the Unity of the People from the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean

The people of the region must enter into an overriding project to unite and reject colonial boundaries. It is a scandal that in 1998-2000 nearly 100, 000 people died to defend borders drawn by others for their own reasons against the interest of the grassroots population by the elites that chose to split Eritrea from Ethiopia and bring both regions to the brink. This is indeed a historic wrong that continues to amaze all justice and humane people throughout the world. Not only has a war being fought, but to this day a no war and no peace state prevails affecting negatively the people who live on both sides of the Mereb River.

The elites have created refugees from each side and it looks the refugees have turned into a breeding ground to destabilise each regime. In recent weeks a new rhetoric has been launched by both the rulers in Ethiopia and those in Eritrea. Isias has given an interview in a glossy magazine in three languages about his undying and unchanging commitment to a 'one Ethiopia—andit or hanti Ethiopia'!!! He declared in the front cover: "It's our persistent stance to strive for a united Ethiopia." Isias utters such a statement, according to the Ethiopian ambassador in Stockholm, whilst hosting forces that have an explicit agenda to break away and create splinter states from Ethiopia in Asmara!

It is also the case that Isias has been instrumental in the support given to the TPLF during its early formation. It is no exaggeration that the formulation of Eritrea's relation with Ethiopia as a relation between colonized Eritrea and colonizer Ethiopia has given impetus to the tactics and strategy of using and exacerbating ethnic division in order to facilitate Ethiopia's separation from Ethiopia. This strategy has been used by the EPLF and now it looks rhetorically Isias wishes to join the forces of unity rather than the forces of fragmentation. Curiously in the back cover of this glossy magazine which was distributed at the Lund conference, it has a picture of engineer Hailu Shawl of CUD and Siye Abraha of the TPLF!! Siye has been credited for refusing to be bullied by Isias and urging to re-arrange fair settlement of the Eritrea and Ethiopian problem.

To his credit Isias now seems to oppose ethnic inequalities under the guise of equalising ethnic communities in his concept of 'hanti Ethiopia': He said:" The people of Tigray have suffered and have become victims of the hostility created by the TPLF regime's apparent favour towards the people of Tigray over other ethnic groups." (p.56)What prompted this commentary in a glossy magazine projecting an austere and modest Isias? If indeed there is a profound change in the way Isias understands Ethiopia, his call for 'hanti Ethiopia' can be welcomed. The real problem is what does Isias understand by it and even more does his word and deed match or go in opposite directions as the Ethiopian ambassador to Stockholm pointed out at the conference? The true reasons for this latest posturing by both sides, i.e., Isias swearing for Ethiopian unity on the one hand, and Meles and Sebhat swearing to preserve Eritrean sovereignty on the other, may be revealed when something in terms of actions ensue.

The only way that the recent rhetoric from Isias can be taken seriously is if it stops him from reacting with knee jerk logic and continues to support forces that keep mis-formulating relations between Ethiopia and others in the region with concepts of colonialism and such like. Any colonial formulation is not aimed at a fight against the regime in Ethiopia now. It becomes a fight against Ethiopia's existence: it is thus, above all, a fighting of the very survival and ontology of Ethiopia as an entity and country itself.

The TPLF leaders now in power too believe in such loose concepts as Ethiopia being a 'colonial power in Eritrea' and they too are putting at risk the very survival of Ethiopia both by the clumsiness of ethnicising the country's politics and by insisting Ethiopia has been a 'colonial' power over Eritrea until they took over the helm of state and found they have to deal with their own idiotic games on Ethiopia's future. Such self-serving formulation has deeply hurt Ethiopia's prospects and future. The worry that Ethiopia may be harmed by them is shared by all those who understand Ethiopians having a project of unification of the people who share a long history and fate from the Red sea to the Indian Ocean.

Searching for a Constitutive Foundation to unite the people in the Region

Looking back to the long duree, one sees the origin of each of the states we now call Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan is shared and similar. And if we, for example, take the origin of Ethiopia we see two myths of origin: one is Atiopiak, grandson of Noah who created the Ethiopian nation and his son Aksumai who formed the Axumite civilisation. In this sense Ethiopia which included not only the states of Eritrea, Djibouti and Somali and Sudan, but also southern Egypt, Yemen east of Aden, Southern Saudi Arabia can be seen like what Scandinavia is to Norway, Denmark, Finland and Sweden today. The other version is Ethiopia as in the Greek term for sun- burnt faces, in this latter sense-making, Ethiopia can mean 'the whole of

Africa' today.

If we take each of the states and play back history we see the organic connections that existed amongst them throughout history until the 19th century Scramble for Africa. This brings us to an important theorem. How have we tried to understand the past? How should we understand it now? Should we derive positive possibilities from our past or condemn it? Should we dialogue with the past or reject it? Can we back-cast to look far ahead in the future and shape the future together with rules and procedures for full rights of all the grassroots whilst finding workable arrangements for living together peacefully and with security and stability? What constitutive foundation will bring the people from the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean to live together in peace, stability, security and unity by doing away with the hurts, hatreds, fights and various unhealthy interventions by outsiders owing to the chronic mistrust, fragmentation and divisions amongst the people that has made it possible for such negative and destructive interventions to occur so frequently and so unnecessarily? How can we heal the divisions and create trust to go beyond the innumerable tragedies, hatreds and fights that have accumulated over years and years of wrongs and internal oppressions backed by external divisive interests?

Moreover should we look back to our past to learn from it or justify the current fragmentation? Should we look at the past to justify division rather than overcome it? Should we look at the past to set new standards rather than accept the ineffective post-colonial states that have earned the ignominy of fragile, collapsed and failed states varied status? How can we derive positive and constructive spirit and energy from the past to create a positive and constructive spirit and energy capable of generating a national direction for transforming the individual, society, and economy, polity with shared democratic systems, rule of law, human rights and governance in the region as a whole?

The 19th century division mutilated the body of our region as indeed it did mutilate the whole of Africa to use Fanon's words. As the distinguished thinker Prof. Kwesi Prah put it: "We had nothing to do with the creation of these states (say from the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean in our case). They were created for us, not with the intent of serving our interests, but rather with the object of benefiting the European powers, which carried out this carve-up, so painfully, and with ruthless determination.

Ironically, while we often bemoan colonialism and the legacies of the colonialists, we appear to want to defend, most tenaciously, the most detrimental legacy of colonialism, the colonial borders." (The Africa Nation: the State of the Nation, CASAS, Cape Town, 2006, pp.289-290). Wars have been fought between Ethiopia and Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea to defend colonial borders drawn by others for their own purposes. People have died in hundreds and thousands for something that must be rejected and not defended. Eritrea and Ethiopian ruling elites tell us they are in a 'no war and no peace' state situation because they are fighting over the issue of making sure one of the borders drawn by Italy that divides families and parishes must be honoured. Such is the utter bankruptcy, myopia, lack of self-respect, and criminality of the elites that rule over with crude power and putting at risk our region and not having any positive hope to offer a way out.

The Only Way out is Unity not fighting and spreading hate and lies!

This commentary was prompted by the Conference on the Horn of Africa in Lund. I found the emotional temperature of this conference very high. It was difficult sometimes to see a constructive way out when people who should behave as organic intellectuals and see deeper and with greater vision feel hurt and communicate that hurt. I write this to urge us to go beyond the hurt and find a resourceful way to deal with the many problems and conflicts that complicate the emergence of a bright future for our region.

I think we can only ignore or side step the variegated history of communication of the peoples through migration, civilisation, wars and injustices at our peril. The past must be dealt with moral intelligence and we must be prepared to deploy and construct the present and shape the future. The 19th century burden must be lifted from the backs of our region by only rejecting it and not defending it. Unity of the region must be a priority of priorities. The people must be allowed to come together. The elites must stop using various stratagems to obstruct the crystallisation of people's unity in the region. The people's transactions must be increased systematically and not discouraged. The architecture of peace and stability must be built not partially but regionally. There must be legitimate and agreed rules and procedures to bring us together. Without building a common perspective of the region in relation to external and internal challenges, it would be difficult to create enduring institutions that can valorise the power, rights and freedoms of the people of the region by constructive a flexible , sustainable and workable democratic arrangements.

The current destructive expressions of elite nationalisms would not bring the region together too. Religion would not bring us together either. Only sustained commitment to democratisation and liberty to realise and consolidate the unity of the region and the people from the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean will bring us to the promise land of unity and development in freedom.

And once we unite, we can create the model for the next important project: the unification of Africa starting from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean and culminating with from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean. When we become more Africans, we become even stronger Ethiopians, Somalis and Sudanese by embedding our security, stability, peace, freedom, democracy, rule of law, freedoms of association and speech and governance in our region on a sustainable pedigree.

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