



What Price for a Reconciled Ethiopia?

By Obang Metho | February 23, 2009

The responses we received to the last article put out by the **Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE)**, “[AigaForum versus Obang Metho: Is there Racism in Ethiopia?](#),” were overwhelming and it has become clear that this issue of racism is something that must continue to be addressed. The purpose of this article is to give the public information on the responses we received and to offer suggestions to help us to productively move forward in this discussion. One of our main goal is the reconciliation of Ethiopians.

This is one of the reasons that we created the Solidarity Movement, for *reconciliation is the backbone of a New Ethiopia. It is based on acknowledging what was done to us and what we have done to others. Anything less than that will hold us back. Ethiopia is infected and dying and the only way to revive it is through truth, God’s truth about respecting God’s creation—each of us.* This is the basis for confronting the issue of racism today, but tomorrow it will definitely be something else that must be addressed in order to have a healthy society.

Let the discussions begin!

In the many hundreds of responses we received to the above-mentioned article, no one denied what was said about the existence of racism in Ethiopia. Instead, many of those responding said that *the labeling of our people by skin-color is as serious of an issue as our country’s tribally-based ethnic problems even though it has never been talked about before.* A number of responders said that they did not think anyone would have courage to bring up this sensitive topic, but my response to that was; if we want a better Ethiopia, we must! *It is only through getting the truth out that we can be reconciled across all divides and it is only through reconciliation that Ethiopia will be healed. If we avoid a topic that is driving a wedge between us, we condemn the future of our country with insincere words of chameleon unity. I do not want to be part of that.*

The existence of racism in Ethiopia is really what led racist Aiga Forum to try to exploit it among Ethiopians in order to accomplish their own purposes, but now, people tell me they want this dialogue to continue. In the past, *some were afraid to bring up the topic of racism because it was embarrassing for some to openly admit to others outside of Ethiopia the depth of our problem; however, the truth is, many outsiders, like many western policy-makers, African Americans and Africans, already know about how some Ethiopians treat the dark-skinned members of their society.* Copying or “cc:ing” the article to Michael Steele, the Chairman of the Republican National Committee and to the NAACP, has simply forced some Ethiopians to look at what has been going on through the eyes of outsiders, even though many already knew it. However, I do not think the impact of the article would have been the same if it had been kept “for insiders only!”

Unintentionally, racist Aiga Forum has triggered an open discussion of racism that they chose to push beyond Ethiopians into American politics. Even though they may now want to escape from the consequences of that, they may not find it so easy to retreat. They should continue to be held accountable for what they did until they formally come forward and apologize to those maligned parties. That is what Chairman Steele's office and we in the SMNE intend to do. We have already identified more of the people who are behind this racist Aiga Forum article and picture. Some of these racist individuals are Aiga editor Esayas ATsbaha- an X-EPRP fighter, located in San Jose, California and Zeru Hagos,

We really want to thank those Ethiopians who responded and took this issue very seriously because, ***if we want a better Ethiopia, we have to go for the truth, even if it hurts both sides.*** We also want to thank those Ethiopian websites, which posted it. They understand that even though this is a sensitive issue, ***it will never be resolved unless it is first acknowledged that it exists.*** We are urging those websites who did not post it, yet who are pro-democracy, to think about how important it is in any effective democracy, to be able to represent different perspectives so ***the public can debate it with civility and mutual respect, sometimes agreeing to disagree.***

There were a number of Ethiopians who suggested to me that we should strongly challenge some of the websites about their failure to post the article, but ***my response is that I want an Ethiopia where even when we disagree with others, we still can embrace each other.*** For example, some of the websites who did not post this article have posted many others in the past and have contributed greatly to keeping Ethiopians informed. If we always had to agree with each other to stay in relationships with other people, we would end up alone.

We must have some basic unconditional acceptance of each other because I hope others who disagree with me will talk to me about it rather than simply going the other way. ***This part of our Ethiopian culture that rejects others and cuts them off based on disagreement will only hinder our progress as a country. Let us not be afraid of either listening to what others believe or stating our own beliefs.*** We can all learn from each other.

What Ethiopians are saying:

We have received responses from a variety of Ethiopians, from the mainstream, from minority groups, from people within both groups of varying skin color, from white westerners and from Africans. Here are a few comments:

- Mr. Achame, a man from the Southern Nations, told me that *the reason he has not participated in Ethiopian political discussions and groups is because of the racism and marginalization that he has experienced when he has gone. He is a talented man, an activist and a very good thinker who could contribute much to Ethiopia, but such attitudes are limiting others from gaining from his expertise.*
- Mr. Andargachew Tsege, a well-known leader from CUDP and now Ginbot 7 said, and gave permission to use his comments, *"Some of us are so ashamed of the prevalence of such attitude [racism] in our society, we pretend that it does not exist. This will not take us anywhere except leading the oppressed and the injured into a quagmire of bitterness and resentment that will ultimately ruin all of us, including the oppressor. I am grateful to Obang that he has taken it up and forcing all of us to confront ourselves. My belief is that as long as tyranny prevails in our country it will be impossible to cleanse our society from such bigotry and prejudice. Our dream to create a just, free and democratic society cannot be realized without a major confrontation of the issues Obang raised.*
- An Ethiopian man from Israel told me *about the discrimination he and other Ethiopians were experiencing in that country—even making it hard to find an apartment to rent because of they are black.*

- Ato Legesse, an Ethiopian taxi driver, living in Washington DC, said that after reading the article, *he tried to put himself in the shoes of those who were called racial names based on their skin color and felt it was wrong and had to be one of the people to stop it. He said he began by talking to other taxi drivers at Dukem, an Ethiopian restaurant, many of whom would commonly make racial insults to others thinking “it was not a big deal;” however, after considering the effect it was having on others, he talked with these other taxi drivers about stopping this and helping to confront others who were doing it. He said that people were taking it very seriously and it was making a difference.*
- An Ethiopian man living in Dallas, a darker-skinned Amhara, *told me how glad he was that we now have to talk about these issues.*
- Ato Ayalew, an Ethiopian man told me that *these racial names are something we say “all the time” and we say it is not a big deal; but now, when someone like you is speaking up for “our human rights” and is saying that this kind of talk is hurting him, we should take it seriously and be concerned about it. He said that no Ethiopian in the West who has been called “nigger” would say it was not a big deal to them so it should be exactly the same to Ethiopians calling another person a baria.*
- Ato Assegued, an Ethiopian man told me that *his sister had married a dark-skinned man from Jamaica and that he and others in the family had been calling their brother-in-law a **nickname** for “baria,” but after he read the article, he told his sister that it really touched him and promised that he would never say it again and would not tolerate others doing it around him either.*

What price are we willing to pay for a New Ethiopia where “humanity comes before ethnicity” and where we take seriously the challenge that “no one is free until we all are free?” If we want a better society for ourselves and for our children, are we each willing to take a penetratingly honest look at ourselves? All of these people I have mentioned above, plus many others that I cannot include, have already done this and are doing their share in reaching out to others to convince them to do the same. This is how to make a break with our past dysfunctional thinking.

Some of these people were not aware of how their words were affecting other people, but now have become people who will help make real our hopes and dreams for a New Ethiopia. This is what I am asking all Ethiopians to do—one by one. The principles of the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia are spread in this simple way and can prevent the destruction and disintegration of our country.

If we, one by one, make Ethiopia a place where some other Ethiopian wants to stay, the collective impact of many of us doing this will ripple through Ethiopian society like a refreshing rain that sends new streams of water to dry places. Keep in mind that there are those opponents, some inside Ethiopia and some external players outside our country, whose greatest hope and wish is to hold us back from becoming one, strong, united and powerful nation.

They believe their self-interests will only be realized through keeping us weak or seeing us disintegrate into many pieces. To avoid this, it will require much from us as people. We must reconstruct our identity to be people who do not only ask for justice, truth, freedom, equality, respect and opportunity for ourselves, but more so, be people who give it to others. This is the kind of society I long to have and to pass on to my children.

Some Ethiopians are asking, “Why is Obang raising this issue now?” They tend to think this issue does not matter to me or is secondary, but the truth of the matter is that it does matter and that it is hurting me. ***If these same people want to ignore or hide the truth, does this mean that they do not really care about my pain or the pain of others like me? Maybe so which makes it all the more important to face it.***

Put yourselves in my or other darker-skinned Ethiopian peoples' shoes and do not say it is not a big deal. The truth is, I expect a great deal from Ethiopians and believe we are all capable of improving our attitudes and actions towards others, just like the people I mentioned earlier.

As I have said before, I am committed to this struggle for a **NEW ETHIOPIA** *as someone who is seeking justice, truth, equality and respect for one another.* For this reason, if I see something that will interfere with that, *it is my duty to say it out loud because I love my fellow Ethiopians and I love my country. I cannot stay silent—even if some do not want to hear it. If something is seriously wrong, which will lead to worsening the misery, alienation, hate and destruction of our people, it must not be covered up or we become part of the problem.*

Some have warned that saying the truth will lead to division. I say that **not** saying the truth leads to division. *The unity I seek is not a unity based on pretending that everything is right when in fact it is not. The unity I seek is based on ideology—the fact that God has created every one of us in His image and that each of us is equally valuable. Any other kind of unity will not help our nation survive. I must state what I believe to be the truth, not to please any people or to win votes for any political office, but to hopefully free people to a new way of thinking to the benefit of all in Ethiopian society.*

My desire is to see Ethiopia revived. I have great expectations of Ethiopians because I am convinced that you all are more than capable, with God's help, *of becoming a transformed people who can be reconciled to each another and who can learn to respect and cooperate in building a more peaceful and harmonious society.*

I know what it is like to grow up poor, marginalized and excluded. As a young person, I knew that those governments from the past could have laid the groundwork for a better future for those of us in Gambella, but instead, only left a legacy of continued exploitation and neglect. Then I experienced the horror of the Gambellan massacre. I remember the numbing shock I felt when I first opened the email attachment I received from Gambella naming hundreds of those I knew that were victims of the December 13th killing. Again, I knew that *it was not only the fault of our present government, but that previous governments could have helped avert such a disaster by addressing our societal problems by valuing all of us. Can we learn from these past failures so we can leave a better legacy for those coming after us? That is my hope for our country.*

We can no longer do anything about those who have died or who have lost opportunities, *but we can do something to build a new and better Ethiopia.* For me, I have chosen to contribute to that future even though I could have easily chosen a different kind of life than the life I am living today. Even some in my own family do not understand why I am doing what I am doing when I could be working to live the “American—or Canadian—dream.”

I could have forgotten about this struggle for justice and equality in Ethiopia and about the hardship in Africa; but instead, I have chosen to remain invested in building a better future by calling people to love one another, to accept one another, to forgive one another and to embrace one another. Some may resist this message or find it threatening, but I am not afraid to go forward because I believe God has called me to this.

Until today, nothing has changed for many of our people, so my mission has not yet been accomplished. *I am not like those who say our goal is only to overcome Meles because simply replacing him, with no concrete change, is not accomplishing my mission. Any who think this way, have a very different agenda than do I.*

I came into this struggle, not for politics, but as a free man and I must be true to God and myself before I can be true to anyone else. If my goal is to please the public, to get their support or to be liked, I may flatter you with what you want to hear rather than to warn you about impending danger.

My conscience directs me to seek justice for those who died—both Anuak and other Ethiopians—who brought me to this work in the first place—for it is such justice that will empower justice in the future. Because that is my goal, what I have to say may not always be welcomed, but I would rather be isolated for the truth than be crowned or cheered for advancing what is destructive and false.

Confronting Injustice Wherever it is Found

If we want a healthy society, we should not be so worried about our image because our image is worth less than the suffering and pain of other people. If we want a new Ethiopia, those structures that are flawed must be redesigned or we will have the same old Ethiopia that devalues minorities.

Part of our “unsound” societal structure is built not only on the exclusionary or inclusionary use of skin-color in deciding who gets through the front door, but also on the belief that “my group,” whatever it is, must be in charge and take everything, while pushing everyone else aside. On the other hand, those who are excluded can also become angry and hateful towards an entire ethnicity of people who they see as “collective oppressors” rather than as individuals, with varying degrees of responsibility. This is also wrong.

Contrary to what some think, the topic of racism based on skin-color is not the only needed discussion we must have in Ethiopia for today the topic might be racism, but tomorrow it will be something else—like the bitterness against all Tigrayan Ethiopians as a group by some other Ethiopians, the labeling of Amharas as oppressors when in fact, it is not the truth, the labeling of the Ogadenis as terrorists when they are fighting for their lives, or the labeling of all Oromo as OLF or separatists when in fact what they all want is freedom and equality like everyone else, the abusive treatment of many of our women, sometimes treating them only as sex objects, the way our young are sexually exploited through prostitution or sexual trafficking or the way some of our indigenous minorities are used to attract tourists rather than to help them develop as a people, still walking naked in the 21st century. The list can go on!

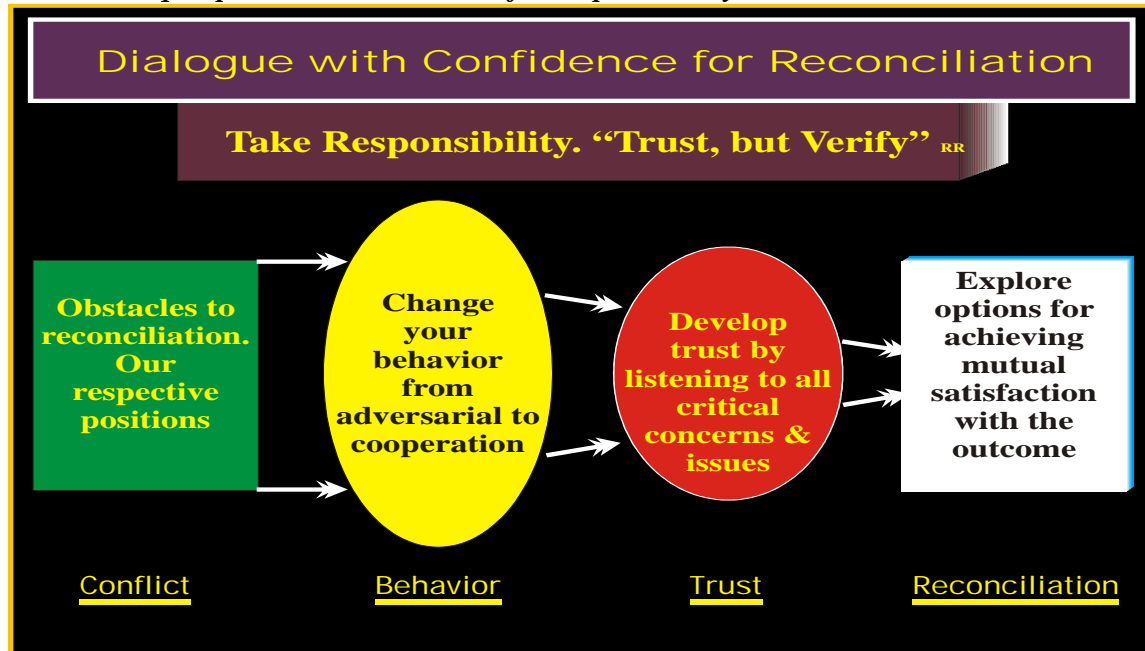
How can we become an inclusive society where humanity comes before ethnicity if we do not address the critical issues that threaten the survival of Ethiopia as a people? Our past leaders have not addressed these critical issues and many still do not want to do so as if magically, they will just disappear.

For example, as I mentioned earlier, *some have been afraid to post the recent article on racism, believing it will divide the people because it has struck a nerve; yet, two years ago when I confronted the Oromo about their separatist positions, encouraging them to know they are just as “Ethiopian” as everyone else, it made the headlines.*

Many Oromo now understand that no one should have to be asked for the key to their own home. In the same light, what broken relationships could begin healing today if there was a public admission that racist attitudes are wrong and must be corrected?

For those who want to “cover their ears” to this truth, it may be provocative, but to those who have been crying out for respect, it is liberating. We cannot be afraid to address this for it may prevent our country from breaking into pieces that might otherwise happen due to some feeling a lack of acceptance, value and belonging.

It is avoiding and denying the problem that causes many to want to leave the country in anger and bitterness. Until such genuine discussions enter the mainstream of dialogue, we are in trouble. I hope those who have blocked such efforts will join others who believe this is the way to bring reconciliation and healing to Ethiopia by 1) listening to others, 2) openly admitting where we have failed, 3) apologizing, 4) sharing one's own hurts and wounds, 5) forgiving each other, and finally, 6) embracing one another as equal partners and members of Ethiopian society.



We must start by talking—but not only about surface issues. Ethiopia is known to others as “mysterious” but this is just a “nice” word for a culture known to “hide and cover up” that which is going on beneath the surface. In our case, it is infecting us and it must be exposed.

If anyone is convinced with the principles of the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia, come join and be part of it. *The SMNE is the solidarity of people-to-people, friend-to-friend, family-to-family, community-to-community, church-to-church, mosque-to-mosque, ethnic group-to-ethnic group and political group-to-political group. This is what we are standing for and the kind of reconciliation we desire.*

Societies are made up of individuals and unless we deal with the hurt feelings and emotional pain of individual people, we will not go anywhere. That is why the chameleon unity of the past, which is still the unity some are offering to us, must be discarded. It never worked before and will only continue to bring dysfunction to Ethiopia. Genuine unity will only be achieved through healthy relationships, which right now are broken in many places. There are many signs.

Has not Ethiopia become a country where we have not valued truth, justice, mercy and compassion towards one another? Have we not become a country that is so dangerous or inhospitable to life that our people, for many years, have been leaving or wanting to separate into their own countries? Are we not a country that is so harsh, uncaring and oppressive, especially to our more vulnerable people that millions are in jeopardy of dying? Have not our current and past regimes passed on a legacy that has devalued and excluded others so much that it is on the verge of collapse and disintegration? What are the possible reasons for this and the solutions?

Come to your own conclusions as you read the following Biblical passage about similar hardship faced by another people at another time and determine for yourself if any of this might apply to us now:

“This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other.’

“But they refused to pay attention, stubbornly they turned their backs and stopped up their ears. They made their hearts as hard as flint and would not listen to the law or to the words that the LORD Almighty had sent by his Spirit through the earlier prophets. So the Lord Almighty was very angry.

“‘When I called, they did not listen; so when they called, I would not listen,’ says the LORD Almighty. ‘I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations, where they were strangers. The land was left so desolate behind them that no one could come or go. This is how they made the pleasant land desolate.’” (Zechariah 7:9-14)

When someone is in pain, you can tell, because it triggers changes shown on the faces of the hurting. What does the face of Ethiopia look like right now? Most of us would admit that it is filled with pain. The question is whether there are solutions for that pain. Is it possible that showing “true justice, mercy and compassion” could be the answer?

I am convinced that we are bearing the fruits of our rebellion against these principles God established regarding how we should treat others and how we should not hold evil in our hearts towards each other. Let us seek God’s help in transforming our attitudes and actions so that we can live in “a pleasant land” where we can feed and take care of our own.

May God give those in pain, new and stronger voices and may He help each of us to be more caring and attentive listeners. May God also help us have the courage to pay the price to accept the truth, the humility to admit our failures, the strength to change our actions and the heart to be reconciled with each other as a society that truly embraces its people.

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Please do not hesitate to email me if you have comments to: Obang@anuakjustice.org,
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