

**AN OPEN LETTER TO AN INQUISITIVE  
YOUNG ETHIOPIAN SISTER  
ETHIOPIAN HISTORY IS NOT THREE THOUSAND YEARS!**

Dear Beloved Ethiopian Sister,

Thank you very much for your important question about the origin and extent of Ethiopian history. Thank you for inspiring me to write this response.

I am prompted to write the response to your question in a public forum. I do so because many of your doubting friends to whom you refer would also be able to see my answers.

*You write, "Edeminot, I would like to ask you something if you have [the] time. [Many] people ... specially the young...have doubts about our 3000 years history ... they ask [for] evidence... Some comment that [one ethnic group] wrote the history like they want... [But] they doubt if our history is even 100 years... Can you suggest [to] me [a] good book... about Ethiopia? Thank you, Sir" [M.B.]*

I have always known young Ethiopians to be bright and inquisitive. Over 600 years ago it was written in *Mashafa Berhan* (please see my own translation *The Book of Light*, EJ Brill, 1973) from Emperor Zar'a Ya'eqob (1434-68) time: "all the peoples of Ethiopia are thirsty for knowledge". So, I am really not surprised to know that our young continue the ancient tradition of our people to be thirsty for knowledge. I am especially happy that they are inquisitive about our common history. May the Almighty bless them and open the door for them to learn and teach.

Right at the outset, let me tell you that the young people are right to say that **we do not have a 3000-year history**. We **have a 10,000-year common history!**

Going back to about 10,000 years, all the peoples who inhabit Ethiopia-Eritrea-Horn of Africa today had one single common ancestry.

As you probably know, I am a student of ancient Semitic and Afroasiatic languages. So, my answer here to your question about a common Ethiopian ancestry and heritage is based on a sound ground of the study of Ethiopian languages and conclusions reached by the leading international experts of historical linguistics-- scholars from Russia, France, Germany, Israel, Australia, USA, et.al. My own *Institute of Semitic Studies* publishes the major scholarly publication in this field: *Journal of Afroasiatic Languages*.)

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About 10,000 years ago, one single nation or community of a single linguistic group existed in Ethiopia, Eritrea, and the Horn of Africa. That nation had one culture and one language. For lack of better terminology most scholars call that language **Proto-Afroasiatic (PA.)** Most, if not all the languages of Ethiopia today, definitely Ge'ez, Oromifa, Amharic, Tigrigna, Afar, Gurage, Hadiya, Kambaata, Somali, Sidamo, and all the other languages known as Semitic and Cushitic as well as Omotic that including Wolaytta, Hamar, Amuru, Boro, Anfillo, Ari, et.al. are branches of one ancient language spoken by one people.

This is not just my view. As I said above, it is the view of impartial worldwide linguists. They are scholars who study ancient languages and the origin of languages objectively and scientifically. They do deep linguistic research objectively and might have not even visited Ethiopia, like some of the subjective (*tiraaz nattaq*) social scientists who think they know everything about our country after

a year or two of a visit and study, and whose writings often mislead not only our youth but also our educators.

*My sister:* the study of languages is not social science speculation. The relationship of most of the languages of Ethiopia today and the other languages of the world is based on serious scientific research -- a systematic and in-depth comparative analysis of languages and historical linguistics.

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As an example, it is easy to find words in Oromifa that are identical to Hebrew or Ge'ez, two closely related Semitic languages. For instance, Oromifa words like *ana (I), ati (you), abba (father), lubbu (soul, heart), kalē (kidney), aīmā (red), garā (abdomen, throat) baē (come out, come), simbro (bird), rēti (goat), sa'a (cattle), jirā (dwell, live), gibē/goba (hill), 'ol (upward), 'akkam (how? like what?), mā l (what, why) etc.* are interesting proto-Afroasiatic terms that have cognates found also in Hebrew and other Semitic languages. Certainly such specific words point to a strong relationship of one or two languages. They are important, but not even definitive for our basic conclusion.

What really determine the relationship of languages are not only similarities in core vocabularies, but more importantly grammar. It is not the relation of words but the formal analysis and identification of the structure (morphology) of the languages. In this regard, almost all Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Horn of Africa languages of today originate from one language, PA. We can conclude that the Ethiopian speakers of these languages today descend from one primordial family.

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Unfortunately, not on account of their own fault, our young people are not up to date on the study of ancient languages and ancient world history, particularly their own. On the contrary, some half-baked foreign experts of Ethiopia and political philosophy condition them. I elaborate these problems in the following three points: a) reading of available social science writings that focus on our *differences* instead of on our *similarities* and common heritage; b) the recent powerful worldwide political philosophies that questioned the validity of our past history and cultures and influenced the world view of the my generation of Ethiopians; and c) the deficiency of our modern educational system going back to the last century.

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First the question the youth raise about the origin of our Ethiopian history or the assumption they make about its chronological extent is distorted unfortunately by reading the books of some modern half-baked foreign academic "experts" of Ethiopia, anthropologists, sociologists, and political scientists. Unquestioning or trusting Ethiopian students and teachers have transmitted the writings and thoughts of these mostly foreign scholars to our generation of Ethiopians. Many of these fellow Ethiopians, close friends of mine included, are educators in our schools and professors in our universities and leaders in our institutions.

Social scientists make legitimate contribution in their respective fields. However, most of them do not study ancient languages and literatures. So, they often rush into historical, anthropological, and sociological judgments. Their conclusions are based on "field research" or translated documents, conclusions "lost in translation".

Worse still, anthropologists and social scientists, even some historians, focus on what superficially *differentiates* Ethiopian ethnic/linguistic groups, not on what fundamentally *unites* them, or what they have in common.

1. There are two incidents I still remember vividly. In the mid-60s when I was a student at Harvard, I was hired as an Amharic teacher for the Peace Corps. The first night at the dinner for all the teachers, a sociologist asked me where I was from. Of course "Ethiopia," I said. "No", he said, "are you Amhara, Oromo, Gurage, or Tigre?" "I am an Ethiopian," I repeated. "So what language do you speak?" I responded, "I speak Oromo, Amharic, and Tigrinya, Hebrew, know words in Gurage, and know many other foreign languages." He went on, "So, what is your religion?" I replied, "I believe in One G-d". Finally, he was frustrated with me and walked away. Some might say that his motives were malicious. I cannot judge. He could have just been naively inquisitive.

2. In 1967, when I was back home as Director General of the *National Literacy Campaign of Ethiopia*, I was invited by the students of the then Haile Selassie University to speak at the annual meeting of Union of Ethiopian Students. After my talk I was invited to sit for dinner at the table for the student leaders. Our conversation quickly turned to the question of nationalities. One student asked me whether I had read William Shack's book, *The Gurage*. I happened not only to have read the book but I even also knew the author personally, so I told him. He said, "I am a Gurage, and I did not know that we Gurages are an industrial people until I read this book". It was a pity that he had a foreigner to make him proud of his ancestry, as all Ethiopian should know and be proud of their

respective heritage or ancestry.

In those days, there was a story that foreign social scientists bait Ethiopians asking what Ethiopian national group they originate from, ascribing to the different nationalities political savvy, democratic idealism, or intellectual ability and the like to each respective group. They then prod them, saying that their particular ethnic group must be the leaders who must govern Ethiopia. I could be wrong, but the whole objective appears not for our welfare but to dominate us through "divide and control".

Of course, there exist many interesting and beautiful differences [I like to think so] among our Ethiopian peoples. But there also exist many amazingly interesting common cultural and historical features and essentials. For instance, the Sidama, Hadiya, Kembata, etc. (of what is known in general Highland East Cushitic group) beyond a thousand or even less years have a common history. The history that we write today for each of these languages/ people going back a thousand years also concerns the other. Argobba and Amharic speakers share the same ancestor that dates about 1200 years ago. The Argobba history beyond 1200 years is also a history of Amharic speakers and vice-versa. If we go back about 2500 years the history of the Argobba-Amharic group also is the history of Harari, Silte, Wolane, and Zay. Then, if we go back about 10,000 years all the Cushitic, Semitic, and Omotic languages within our present borders, and the other Afroasiatic languages, that are/ were spoken beyond our current territory such as Berber, Chadic, Old Egyptian, Hebrew, Arabic, will share the same history as they descended from the same proto-language.

One absurd theory that has taken deep root in the

thinking of most foreign and even Ethiopian historians is that the Oromo came to Ethiopia in or about the 16<sup>th</sup> century. During any civil war, as it happened in Ethiopia after the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and indeed as it happens everywhere in the world even today, there is always a large population movement. But there is no proof that the large great Oromo population appeared in Ethiopia about five hundred years ago. I did once attempt to answer this simplistic question with its self-evident answer at a lecture I gave in 1972 at the then Haile Selassie University when I was on leave from Harvard. But, this is not the place to go into it now.

In short, however, our study of the Afroasiatic languages does not support the untenable 16<sup>th</sup> century migration story. Oromifa is indeed one of the original Proto-Afroasiatic dialects of Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. The Oromo, like most of the peoples of Ethiopia today, are among the first speakers of Proto-Afroasiatic and contrary to the odd theory, one of the earliest inhabitants of Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. Their first ancestors can be said to be the common ancestors of most of the peoples who inhabit Ethiopia today from the North to the South, from the east to the west.

We Ethiopians must all be proud of our present respective distinct linguistic and cultural heritages -- as long as we do not preach our own singular superiority. Indeed, we Ethiopians are a beautiful multi-lingual and multi-cultural people who in a flower vase called Ethiopia decorate the great continent of Africa.

Sadly, I have yet to see any serious social science book that *focuses on our common heritage*. (I once published an essay called *Social Structure of the Ethiopian Church in the Ethiopia Observer*, edited

by our distinguished Ethiopisant, Richard Pankhurst, in 1972. Some similar ideas were repeated in Donald Levin's more well-known "Greater Ethiopia" but one published a couple years later in 1974.) However, we still await more comprehensive anthropological and sociological studies that would focus on the key common heritage of the peoples of Ethiopia rather than always focusing on what separate us and distinguish us from each other as some social scientists tend to do.

Secondly, the generation of the 60's and 70's were exposed to foreign Marxist-Leninist thought. It is my generation and many of the actors were personal friends. Some of the leaders were my successors as Presidents of the *Ethiopian Student Association in North America*. Even if I did not subscribe to their philosophy, I had a lot of respect for them. They too were patriotic. They loved Ethiopia and wanted the best for their country. They wanted to see a modernized Ethiopia: democracy, justice, land to the tillers with which we all agreed.

Beyond such admirable aspirations, however, they were misguided and blinded by a zeal for the then worldwide popular ideologies. I respectfully conclude that they knew very little about Ethiopia and its history and culture. In addition to being indoctrinated by the kind of anthropological works I referred to above, they discovered Marx and Engels, Lenin and Mao- studied with Marcuse- and became preoccupied with these rightly great political thinkers whom they almost worshipped. With the exception of a handful, the blind majority became even so negative about the value and greatness of Ethiopian history and cultures. To be fair, it was not all their fault as I indicate in the following.

Thirdly, the Ethiopian Ministry of Education never

developed a curriculum of rigorous study of Ethiopian languages, literature, and history in our academic institutions during my generation. During my two years at the then University College of Addis Abba (1954-56), I took courses on medieval and modern European history, as well as on USA history and geography. Today, we live in a global cosmopolitan world. Therefore, of course, it is important for us Ethiopians to study European, American, Indian, Chinese, Near Eastern histories, languages and cultures and of all the peoples of the world. That is not the problem. However, not a single course was offered on Ethiopian history in our institutions as long I remember. The problem thus became complicated not only by the dearth of the study of Ethiopia, but also by what was being offered (on the contrary) - the study of western history and philosophy without the centrality of the study of our own Ethiopia in the context of its relations to these other world cultures.

It was after I came to the USA that I discovered Ethiopia. I started finding books in the libraries of Harvard about Ethiopia and its ancient history. My eyes got opened to the riches of Ethiopian languages and cultures. I met Harvard professors who knew the Ge'ez language and had read the *Ethiopic Book of Enoch* and *Ethiopic Book of Jubilees*. The fact that distinguished Harvard scholars considered such Ethiopic works of such great significance, of course, opened my eyes to the seriousness of studying ancient Ethiopian languages and cultures.

As a person even in my younger days fascinated by the ancient world I would have loved to take a course on ancient or "medieval" Ethiopian history. But as I said above no such courses were being offered at the University College. After many years in the USA and when I became one of the promoters

of the *National Literacy Campaign of Ethiopia*, I had the opportunity to confront directly the then Minister of Education "why were course not offered on Ethiopian history, languages and cultures in our university?" His only answer to me was that the college curricula was developed by foreigners who did not know Ethiopian history and that we did not have professors who could teach these subjects. That is why my first exposure to the study of Ethiopian languages and history, as I alluded to above, was only when I became a student at Harvard in the 60's.

In short, an educated Ethiopian must study other cultures. But there is no reason why we should know more about them and less about our own. It is not good enough to read uncritically books about our own history and culture written by foreign social scientists that focus on our differences, instead of on our common heritage. If we read books written by Machiavelli, Hobbes, Marx, Lenin and Mao, why not those attributed to Kristos Samra, Iyasus Mo'a, Zar'a Ya'eqob, Ewestatewos, Onesimos Nasib, and our other ancient writers? We do we not study Ge'ez poetry and literature? Why do we not study and research the rich oral tradition of the Oromo and other Ethiopian peoples about human wisdom and political democratic philosophy? Why do we not listen to or learn from our own ordinary village elders about mutual respect, humility of knowledge, and, love of peace and wisdom.

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In conclusion, my sister, it is true we have a one hundred year history. It is true also that we have a 3000-year history, which can easily be verifiable from various records: artifacts, inscriptions, etc. It is also true that, leaving the further pre-

historic period, we have at least a linguistically proven history that we all share for 10,000 years! (Someone might ask so why do we fight with each other then? Well, have you not heard of brothers and sisters who are in continual combat?)

Beyond our common ancestry, it is a fact that there is a mixture of people in our country through intermarriage, language shift, etc. If a genuine scientific study is done, I am sure that the majority of our people will be of this mixed heritage/ ancestor. At one occasion, I remember that I respectfully joked to my late great friend, our Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi (may the Almighty bless his soul): if an Ethiopian says I am a pure Oromo, Amhara, Tigre etc. he/she shouldn't get a passport; he or she should prove to be mixed! Ethiopia is not a country comprised of racially distinct peoples. The differences among its people is only with languages that even shrink whenever we go back in time until all become one (recall above)!

Even if we do not have this amazing blood-bonded 10,000-year common history, we are together now. The earth under our feet is a single united ground. It is a paradise that is hidden to us. Our country is a sleeping giant -- as I heard recently from the former President of the South African Bank.

Just focusing on the present linguistic differences does not help our economic growth and strength. If we spend our energy looking at our differences negatively instead of weaving a beautiful mosaic together we go nowhere.

So should we not enjoy our beautiful multi-color linguistic and cultural differences aesthetically and be proud of our separate contributions and go forward?

Is it necessary to focus on our differences and become fragmented and weak, fighting each other? Or, is it not better to try to accept our mutual differences and then build together a strong united economic and peaceful front that will benefit each and every Ethiopian whatever his/her background?

In passing let me also add that like our beautiful ethnic differences, our political and religious differences should also be respected. They should not stand in the way of our economic progress. Our political and religious leaders, educators, businesspeople, and civil servants deserve our respect and love. In turn they should show love and respect to all our peoples. Let us not engage in energy-wasting arguments about our differences, whatever they might be. Instead let us patiently listen to each other and respect each other, as our ordinary Ethiopian people actually do. The only way you and I benefit even as individuals, whatsoever our differences, is when all benefit! There is a Jewish saying, "every Jew leans on every other Jew." That way we can stand strong and do not fall. So, let us unite and show each other love and respect. Let us focus our energy onto overcoming poverty, disease, and illiteracy. That way, Mother Ethiopia can show all Africa too the high way.

Ethiopia is a melting pot. There are now two countries I know that are also melting pots, the US and Israel. Both countries are economically at the forefront of world history. Yet their people are ethnically and linguistically of more different origins than we Ethiopians are. In spite of that, they focus on their common heritage and work together to be socially and economically strong. And they are strong!!! Can we learn from them?

My Sister: Please forgive me if my answer is a long letter. Indeed the answer to your question is a book, not even a long letter. I hope that our Universities will begin to focus on important linguistic, historical, and cultural studies of our peoples to appreciate the positive side of both our differences and similarities and to put them to our economic strength and the prosperity of Ethiopia based on mutual respect and love.

Ephraim Isaac, B.A., B.D., Ph.D., D.Litt, D.H.L.  
eisaac@post.harvard.edu