# Self-Alienation: Ethiopia's Identity in Postcoloniality and its Implications for a Future Ethiopian Social Contract*

*Dr. Shimelis Kene*

## Abstract

In this short essay, I argue that one of the greatest challenges to a viable future "social contract" for Ethiopia lies in the continuous, unreflective importation of unvetted Western ideas and ideals. This importation has resulted in a "crisis of identity" and "self-alienation," which in turn has denied Ethiopians the "epistemic agency" they need to build a viable society and state. As often is the case, these foreign ideas are imported either to "modernize" the state or as correctives to what went wrong in the immediate past. In other words, a rejection of what is "indigenous" and of the past seems to underpin these importations. In both cases, the received wisdom appears to suggest that a rejection of the past (and of what is "indigenous") is the best, and even the only way to go about the pursuit of modernization or a political project. In the latter part of this essay, I suggest that, rather than disparaging what is actually wrong with Ethiopia's past or underplaying or ignoring it altogether, the whole gamut of Ethiopia's history should be integrated into the present and future of the life of the body politic of the state. To explain this intuition, I will use the concept of the Shadow, developed by the Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung.

## Introduction

Not long ago, one would have been taken as a doomsday prophet if one were to have invoked this notion, but the fact that Ethiopia now is in crisis is beyond

---

doubt. Time will tell whether or not this is just pain before birth, to invoke a metaphorical cliché. Nonetheless, understanding the underlying nature of the crisis and the causes thereof is a good place to start the diagnosis and to identify the prognosis of a viable social contract.

The relatively stable post-Cold War global order is in crisis owing to seismic changes driven by and related to environmental and geopolitical factors, to name but a few. With globalizing and corporate powers in full force, even the notion of the nation-state as the best and most viable means for governing a society is increasingly being questioned. There is little doubt that the crisis in Ethiopia must be understood within this global context. From that perspective, one would see that not many components of the crisis are particular to Ethiopia. While these changes and how they relate to and affect Ethiopia are worth considering, nonetheless, Ethiopia's crisis is deeper and more uniquely Ethiopian than can be explained by these changes.

With the crisis growing deeper by the day, that Ethiopia needs a more viable future social contract that reflects the collective aspirations of Ethiopians seems to be self-evident. If that is the case and there in fact is a political will and environment to initiate and actualize such a project, the key question is, what are those collective aspirations? Is there such a thing as a "collective aspiration" in a society as diverse and conflict-ridden as present-day Ethiopia? But assuming such a collective aspiration exists, why does Ethiopia seem to have failed with that project in the past? In other words, why has Ethiopia not truly transitioned into a stable state, if not a flourishing one? A burgeoning body of popular and scholarly literature has addressed this very question. This body of work has exclusively focused, albeit for a good reason, on socio-political and historical factors to explain that failure.

In this short essay, I argue that one of the greatest challenges to a viable future "social contract" for Ethiopia lies with the continuous, unreflective importation of unvetted Western ideas and ideals, which has resulted in a "crisis of identity" and "self-alienation" that have, in turn, denied Ethiopians the "epistemic agency" they ought to have when building a viable society and state.

# 1. Ethiopia's Postcolonial Identity

Ethiopia is an anomaly within postcoloniality. Its history and identity present problems inherent to the study of postcolonialism as a theoretical and empirical phenomenon. Ethiopia is one of the few countries in the world that has enjoyed uninterrupted political state history and existed as an independent sovereign nation for millennia. However, this dominant narrative elides the fact that, while Ethiopia has more or less kept intact its distinctive identity, its imperial encounters, nonetheless, have left indelible marks on its identity. In fact, Ethiopia's history is arguably one of both reception of and resistance to colonial/imperial influences. As such, within postcoloniality, Ethiopia could be thought of as holding a place similar to the Ottoman Empire, Persia, or many other "middle places" which are neither fully colonies nor fully independent.

In a similar vein, considered from the perspective of the place Africa holds within postcoloniality, Ethiopia's identity seems more a confluence of both an apparent belonging in and exclusion from Africa and an identification with, and rejection of, Europe. It is because of this paradox of presence-absence in Africa that Ethiopia's postcolonial identity is best captured as one of perpetual in-betweenness, or a unique amalgamation of reception of and resistance to the West.

But contrary to the tendency is to see this aspiration to and invocation of Western standards as a manifestation of blind emulation of or actual admiration for Western standards, they were "not purely born of admiration." Instead, they were mostly undergirded by state leaders' keen awareness of the fact that European technological advancement in military wares was, in particular, a reason for some of their defeats by European colonial powers in earlier times and, hence, produced aspirations and orientations. In other words, their aspiration to civilize ought not be necessarily credited to an admiration for the West or a belief in its superiority or internalization of the values therefrom, but more as an instrumentalist move.

For example, during Ethiopia's engagements with the League of Nations in the interwar period, Ethiopian elites framed their interaction with the League as

driven by a desire to aspire towards European civilization. During their involvement with the League, Ethiopian elites frequently invoked civilization while deliberately linking civilization to Christianity. They did this to find common ground with Europe. So, Ethiopia presented itself to the League as "both culturally unique and, therefore, different from the League's other, primarily European members, but also as culturally and hence legally equal to them." But, more importantly, the invocation of civilization is appealing to European standards without necessarily accepting those standards. In fact, the Ethiopian leaders believed in the equality, if not superiority, of Ethiopia's own version of Christianity and by extension, its own civilization. As such, the invocation of civilization is intended to forestall—even if unsuccessfully—colonial conquest on the grounds of "civilizing" Ethiopia. In that sense, Ethiopian leaders are only engaging in what could be taken as an immanent critique in which one invokes "principles which are supposed already to inform the ideas and institutions we seek to question" while not necessarily accepting the standards and ideas that inform those institutions.[1]

What we see, therefore, is that in addition to keeping the core identity of the state intact, Ethiopia's leaders and elites of the past, to varying degrees, used Ethiopia's postcolonial identity in ways that were beneficial to them and to the state. However, with time and increasing global connectedness, the more limited and restrained appropriation of Western discourses was replaced by a characteristically unvetted importation of Western ideas and ideals. Consequently, Ethiopia's core identity faced a crisis, which in turn resulted in the "self-alienation" and denial of the "epistemic agency" of Ethiopians necessary to build a viable polity and state.

---

[1]   Susan Marks, *Big Brother is Bleeping with the Message that Ideology Doesn't Matter*, 12 EJIL 109, 120 (2001).

## 2. The Eucalyptus Tree as a Metaphor for Ethiopia's Identity Crisis and its Consequences

During a field trip to Yem,[2] I had an informal conversation with the then Speaker of the Yem Special Zone Council. Near a small forest, I picked a leaf from a white eucalyptus tree and smashed it in my palm, then inhaled the scent with euphoric gusto. I remarked to the Speaker how intoxicatingly beautiful the aroma was, and how much I loved the eucalyptus tree, especially the white variety. The Speaker then shared with me how much the eucalyptus tree, especially the white variety, had had a damaging effect on the soil, consuming disproportionate amounts of nutrients, unlike other indigenous trees. It grows fast and thus serves construction and energy needs of the locals very well, like the eucalyptus tree in vast parts of Ethiopia. The downside is that the trees have been gradually damaging local flora and fauna over time, and according to the Speaker, have caused serious soil degradation in the region.

It was these apparent benefits of the tree that presumably led Ethiopia's Emperor Menelik II to import the eucalyptus tree from Australia at the tail end of the 19th century, earning it the quite appropriate name ባሕር ዛፍ (*bāhere-zāfe)*, which roughly translates to 'tree from offshore', meaning a tree transplanted from abroad. Unbeknownst to the Emperor, despite his good intentions and the clearly advantageous benefits the tree had, its downsides outweighed the benefits, with long lasting impacts.

Its quick growth and associated advantages often led locals to choose to propagate it over indigenous varieties. Not only did this discourage locals from propagating indigenous trees, but worse, the imported tree even damaged indigenous ones. Irrespective of its immediate and apparent benefits, the eucalyptus tree depletes the soil's indispensable and unique nutrients and destroys the soil's very nature and its viability, leaving something quite different in its wake. In other words,

---

[2]    Yem is one of the Special administrative zones within the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State, one of the eleven regional states within the current federal system of Ethiopia.

while the tree has its benefits, unreflective importation has cost Ethiopia important resources.

One of the clearest parallels to this story of the eucalyptus tree in the socio-political space in Ethiopia is the Student Movement of the 1960s and its characteristic subscription to Marxist and socialist ideologies. An ever-growing number of both academic critiques and popular commentaries attribute the country's sociopolitical ills in the post-Imperial period—from which the country is yet to recover—squarely to the Student Movement. However, the problem with this pattern of importing unvetted Western ideas is that its consequences are not always obvious, as in the case of the Student Movement, and its effects are in fact much more profound.

## 3. Subjugated Knowledge and Its Features and Consequences

The Ethiopian intellectual culture arguably is most aptly characterized as being predicated, by default, on the implicit assumption that what is Western is better, and even superior, to what is Ethiopian/indigenous. This is borne out in the ways that the production of knowledge is typically and, in some cases exclusively, characteristically undergirded by the mass, wholesale importation of unvetted foreign ideas, concepts, and ideologies. No wonder, then, that modernization has increasingly come to be synonymous with Westernization. Revelatory of the starkly perilous nature of this pattern is the fact that, often in the name of "scientific" methodologies, indigenous ways and forms of knowing are either ignored altogether or derided and relegated to an inferior hierarchical place vis-à-vis Western ways of knowing and knowledge production. In other words, indigenous knowledge has become subjugated. This has had the effect not only of eroding indigenous cultures, societal values and the like, but also, probably more importantly, undermines Ethiopians' way of being in the world and denying them epistemic agency.

Furthermore, a lack of critical engagement with these ideas leads to an unconscious subscription to their underlying ideological underpinnings, and

equally, if not more, importantly, it creates a breeding ground for Eurocentric views to take hold and to supplant indigenous values and ways of being.

## 3.1. "Words are things"

A problematic feature of the pattern of importing unvetted foreign ideas is that it fails to properly appreciate the constitutive effects of words. Words, rather than being just utterances, have a profound effect on the psyche of an individual and the social world. Indeed, when Maya Angelou writes that "words are things," she is pointing out the constitutive effects of words. No wonder, then, that the ancient texts of the great religions speak of the profound role that language has in reality and the psyche of an individual and their social lives. One such example is the Biblical reference, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." In a similar vein, the Quran starts with these words: "Read in the name of your Lord Who created … Read in the name of your Lord … who taught by the pen, taught humanity that which they knew not."[3] Words hold such an elevated significance that the Bible tells us in the very beginning there was the "Word"! Similarly, the first word in the Quran is "read" and "creation," and a couple of words down, we read God teaching humanity with a "pen." Both of these ancient of texts intertwine "words" with "creation" and "knowledge."

Another prime example of the causal relation between words and reality is found in the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel, in which God takes the rather odd step of mixing up the languages of the Babylonians, causing the collapse of an otherwise colossal project of human ingenuity. Whether one takes this story as an actual historical incident or not, it speaks, at least metaphorically, to the deep causal relationship between the physical world and the language in which it functions.

---

[3]   Quran 96:1, 3, & 5. I thank Abadir M. Ibrahim for bringing to my attention these Quranic references.

## 3.2. The failure to appreciate the ideological underpinnings of foreign ideas

The problem with the pattern of importing Western ideas and concepts uncritically is even more stark in the Ethiopian politico-legal public discourse. This is so pronounced that often the ideological underpinnings and Eurocentricity of important concepts like human rights and the rule of law, to take but two examples, are either never fully appreciated, ignored altogether, romanticized, or, in the name of "universalism," adopted uncritically. For example, writing in the context of Ethiopian modernism (ዘመናዊነት - *zamanāwinate*), Andreas Eshete extols modernity and the significance of "fraternity," one of the triune ideals of the French Revolution, in the following words:

> The public ideals realized in the modern age are ideals for all human beings. In that sense, fraternity is a central idea of modernity. It is undeniable that modernity provides the possibility of shared values, aims and bonds amongst all human beings and peoples and hence the modern form of solidarity I call fraternity. Indeed, it is striking that it is only in the modern age that we are all contemporaries. Modernity is the era where humanity shares a common destiny.[4]

It is true that "the discourse of human rights … has successfully served as an arsenal against colonialism and in several self-determination endeavours."[5] But, as critical and postcolonial scholarship convincingly demonstrate, irrespective of its earlier history and its continuing emancipatory potential, the human rights agenda has also been, to quote a seasoned scholar in the field, "a core part of hegemonic international law, reinforcing preexisting imperial tendencies in world politics."[6] In other words, the apparent benefits of the ideals of the modern human

---

[4]   Andreas Eshete, *Modernity: Its Title to Uniqueness and its Advent in Ethiopia: From the Lecture What Is "Zemenawinet"?: Perspectives on Ethiopian Modernity*, 13 Northeast African Studies 1 (2013).

[5]   Balakrishnan Rajagopal, "Counter-Hegemonic International Law: Rethinking Human Rights and Development as a Third World Strategy" in Richard Falk, Balakrishnan Rajagopal, & Jacqueline Stevens (eds.), International Law and the Third World: Reshaping Justice 64 (2008).

[6]   *Ibid.*

rights regime aside, this sort of uncritical appropriation and exaltation elides the "darker" side of modernity and its instruments.

### 3.3. They say not what we mean: Disjunctive realities in Ethiopian public discourse on rule of law

Another key feature of the mass importation of unvetted foreign ideas is that they create what I refer to as "disjunctive realities." Again, to cite an example from a familiar field, Ethiopian public discourse on rule of law subscribes by default to a liberal conception of the rule of law. The crucial question is whether and if this conception actually captures an Ethiopian view of law, if there is such a thing as an Ethiopian view of law.

Within the political ontology that underpins the rule of law, law comes into being—is legislated—as a product of free will. In a variety of different guises, "Western" jurisprudence presumes that "modern" aggregates of individuals, unable to agree on the common good, submit to a legal framework which allows them to "agree on how to disagree." Hence, "society" can be "realized." Indeed, the social contract model is particularly relevant with respect to human rights, where rights have long been understood to exist "when a duty bearer owes an obligation to the right-holder because of a prior promise."[7]

However, as the widely known Amharic saying, ሰማይ አይታረስ ንጉስ አይከሰስ (*samāye 'ayetāraśe neguśe 'ayekasaśe*), which roughly translates to "as the sky cannot be plowed, the King cannot be prosecuted," highlights, there is a clear disjunction between a liberal conception of law and an Ethiopian view of law. This saying underpins the teleological and ontological bases of a conception of law that is starkly different from a liberal conception because it renders the King as the only source of law and grants the individual a minimal and, hence, a mere subsidiary role. Not only that, but more importantly, as the giver of law, the King is not subject to the rule of law like the common man. To be sure, within a diverse and

---

[7]    Costas Douzinas, *The End of Human Rights* 232 (2000).

legally pluralistic society such as Ethiopia's, thinking of a single conception of law/rule of law may not be theoretically or practically possible, or even desirable. Nonetheless, the important point here is that the default dominant liberal conception of law/rule of law that underpins Ethiopia's politico-legal public discourse is in clear disjunction with the indigenous understanding of law.

What is of particular import to the issue under discussion is the way in which a contractual framing of rights not only underscores the legislator (state) as a duty-bearer bound by mutual agreement to a rights holder (individual), but the extent to which that relationship is insular and circumscribed. A contract does not create chains of relationships. Each contract binds only the two parties concerned; contracts are not transitive in the way that extracontractual liability is.[8]

## 4. Integrating the Shadow

One of the deeply divisive and persistent issues in Ethiopian political discourse has been the issue of what to make of Ethiopia's past, both the good and the bad. In fact, this issue will remain the most critical challenge to crafting a viable future social contract. Leaving aside the contentious issue of what constitutes the standards by which the good and the bad are to be measured, the fault line of contemporary Ethiopian political discourse lies in what to make of Ethiopia's history and how much of that history should inform contemporary political and legal discourses and institutional arrangements. Thus, it is beyond the pale that a future social contract would have to address this issue head-on.

Those who oppose the historicity of these grievances implicitly or explicitly, consciously or unconsciously, associate the acknowledgement of these historical injustices with somehow putting a stain on the otherwise "glorious" history (albeit not fully without blemish) of the state. For those in this camp, historical injustices, while unjustifiable and never to be condoned—especially if done for no apparent

---

8  Sari Wastell, "Being Swazi, being human: custom, constitutionalism and human rights in an African polity," in Mark Goodale & Sally Engle Merry (eds.), *The Practice of Human Rights: Tracking Law between the Global and the Local* 323 (2007).

reason other than to defend the interests of the state—are a natural part of the genesis/evolution of a state. While the intentions of those subscribing to this position may not be as blameworthy, they seem to be guided by an erroneous assumption that acknowledging those historical injustices would somehow fundamentally change the identity of the state and, hence, they have to fight it at any cost. In stark contrast, those who claim to have been on the receiving end of these historical injustices firmly believe that not only should these historical injustices be duly recognized, but they staunchly defend the idea that those injustices be the foundation of any future politico-legal projects, such as a future social contract.

What is clear is that both camps would have us believe that all there is to Ethiopian history is only either the "glorious" or the "bad." Hence, both camps to varying degrees underplay one or the other aspect of Ethiopians' shared history. Here, of course, politics, devoid of moral and ethical considerations, contributes more than generally accepted history. Nonetheless, this issue presents itself as the absolutely crucial issue whose resolution is a prerequisite to crafting a viable future social contract. For that reason, it seems to be the case that the historicity of past injustices is not nearly as relevant as the issue of tackling it in ways that satisfy both political camps. The question then is how and—beyond the political utilitarianism devoid of the ethical and moral considerations that animate them— why it is that both camps are recalcitrant to addressing this problem? Is there a potential solution at all?

To think through these questions, I will use the concept of the Shadow developed by the Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung. According to Jung, humans always have both good and bad things about them. These he calls the Shadow. Conventional wisdom tells us that, for a person to build what is considered to be a good and meaningful life, they must fight the Shadow in their lives. The Shadow is to be shunned at any cost, lest an individual not have the desired good life full of meaning, purpose, and happiness. In stark contrast to this conventional understanding, Jung argued that rather than running away from the Shadow, an individual is better served if they acknowledge it and then, crucially, integrate it

into their lives. According to Jung, failure to identify and integrate this shadow results in self-alienation or identity crisis. Therefore, identifying and acknowledging the problem/the Shadow is the first step, followed by the integration of the Shadow into the person. In other words, it is the successful integration of the Shadow, rather than total ignorance or—upon discovering or becoming conscious of the Shadow—denial of it, that delivers a person from themselves and, so to say, makes them "whole." As such, knowing one's Shadow and coming to terms with it—as Jung put it, integrating it into the person—as such is discovering one's authentic self.

One important application of integrating the Shadow is that it can productively serve as a guiding framework for approaching Ethiopia's past and future. Rather than disparaging what is actually wrong with Ethiopia's past or underplaying or ignoring it altogether, this framework suggests that this history be integrated into the present and future of the life of the body politic of the state. Put differently, both the good and the bad ought to be considered part of the Ethiopian life story. To be sure, this is not to say that all those ills are to be condoned or that the task of integrating is an easy one by any stretch of the imagination. Rather, it is to accept that they are part and parcel of the Ethiopian biography/historical genesis, there is nothing wrong with that from an ethical standpoint, and, more importantly, as Jung's conception of the Shadow drives home, it is a necessary and useful way of identifying an authentic Ethiopia.

## DISCUSSIONS

### Dr. Abadir M. Ibrahim

I have two literary leads you might want to follow. First, for the purpose of showing the connection between language and reality, rather than the Babylon story, you might want to pick up the Biblical reference: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." I think this is about

words and discourse becoming reality and reality coming back to being "the word." I think this analogy or metaphor might be a better one. And in the spirit of inclusiveness, I suggest picking up the first sentences of the Quran, which states in part as "Read in the name of your Lord Who created … Read in the name of your lord … who taught by the pen, taught humanity that which they knew not." I mean, it does not get better than this. The Quran's first words include "read" and "creation" and a couple of words down you have God teaching humanity with a "pen," and then the Bible is telling us in the very beginning there was the "Word"! Both the Bible and Quran are intertwining "words" with "creation" and with "knowledge," meeting your argument more than halfway.

### Dr. Juweria Ali

I found it really very interesting the way Ethiopia's postcolonial identity is framed. But I think there is slight simplification of the way Ethiopia appropriated or manipulated Western colonial discourses. The use of the League of Nations as an example is very interesting. The claim to civilization or appealing to European standards without necessarily accepting those standards can be looked at in a broader way. I think it was not only as a means to resist European imperialism that Haile Selassie appealed to European civilization. This is actually a feature of historic Abyssinia; we can see the writings of emperors Yohannes and Menelik to British monarchs—where they used terminologies like subjecting heathens, pagans, Muslims, and slaves—as reflecting European superiority and their discourse of civilization to justify why they should subjugate others. So, it was not only to realize their own agency that they did this—to be seen as a civilized nation by European states—but it was also very much a feature of historic Abyssinia.

I think there is a room for greater appreciation of Ethiopians' negotiation between the statuses of victims and aggressor. The period of Italian occupation is a very interesting era to look at. But in terms of problematizing Ethiopia's postcolonial identity, I think it would be a shame not to take stock of the very anti-black elements of state ideology, which, paradoxically on one hand, capitalized on the global movement for black liberation, Pan-Africanism, and greater rights, but at

the same time very much emphasizing its own non-black phenotype by emphasizing Semeticism and other elements of historic Abyssinia.

### Dr. Abdi Jibril Ali

I sometimes get angry about importing ideas from the West; sometimes trying to implement them without contextualizing them can have very disastrous consequences. But I then wonder, can we actually avoid importing those ideas in this era of globalization? And I would like to relate this problematization of the importation of ideas to Dr. Mohamed's presentation. He said the main challenge (ethnicization of the political space in Ethiopia and the attendant rise in ethnic conflicts) started in 1991 with the success of ethnonationalists forces. But what if I see it differently as a success of liberalism or capitalism over communism? This is one indication of the importation of ideas from the West; whether it is capitalism or communism, it is all imported.

### Dr. Zelalem Mogessie Teferra

As Prof. Teshale Tibebu says, Ethiopia is anomalous country by African standards: it is inside Africa but at the same time also outside Africa; it is present and also absent; and according to Prof. Assefa Jaleta, Ethiopia claims to be independent and anti-imperialist but at the same time it colonizes its own people. In all the countries I travelled to in Africa, there are anomalies specific to each country. So, the question is, why do we think Ethiopia is more anomalous compared to other countries? There may be particular nuances to Ethiopia's anomaly, but still Ethiopia shares the anomalies of other countries across the world.

You also said that one of the biggest problems we are having is uncritical appropriation of Western ideas. Maybe that is true, but there is also another problem or the other side of this narrative; in Ethiopia, there is a culture of a blind suspicion and a default negative reaction to everything foreign and sometimes an uncritical rejection of Western values. The problem has a dual nature, which is characterized by uncritical appropriation of Western values and ideas but also uncritical rejection of anything foreign. It should also be remembered that there

was also acceptance of, at least during EPRDF era, East Asian ideas like kaizen and the developmental state ideology.

## Melhik Abebe

I am intrigued by the section of your paper that talks about the past and how it needs to be addressed to allow for a working social contract. I want to state the need for us to agree that, in our past, there are some things that were bad and some things that were good. We cannot leave it by saying that one side does not agree with the other side. Inaugural sins need to be addressed in a negotiated social contract or through constitutional review processes that come forward. Without doing that, there is no hope of us doing away with the wounds that ail us now.

Another point I want to make relates to what we saw in the past few years, that is the use of state resources to renege on or take back concessions about Ethiopia's past that were gradually extracted through revolution as well as resistance struggles. There is an effort, it seems an unprecedented one, that comes from the state to renege on those concessions that were agreed to and codified in the Constitution. So, I believe that we should not do that if, as you rightly said, we should not uncritically appropriate and supplant ideas from somewhere else to Ethiopia's context. We will in fact be guilty of uncritically appropriating Western ideas if we pretend that Ethiopia's modern political history was not very heavily leftist, that it did not teach us some things or bring us some [good] concessions, however gradual that may be. If we start from scratch, as if these past decades did not happen, then I think we will be even more guilty of uncritically appropriating ideals that came from somewhere else. Because, even if the leftist tradition came from somewhere, it has over the decades become as Ethiopian as it can get.

## Dr. Berihun Adugna

Under normal circumstances it would have been great if we could start with Ethiopia's political identity in a postcolonial context. We do not talk about it in our political discourse but I think that it is foundational in many ways. It has structured our political problems. If you look at Ethiopia in the postcolonial

context, it joined the community of nations when it was independent and secured, but not on equal terms and equal bases. So, its membership in the community of nations was somehow unequal and externally vulnerable. That situation created lack of internal cohesion and increased external vulnerability. So, the modern Ethiopian state started its statehood with external vulnerability and lack of internal cohesion. This, I think, is where your idea of postcoloniality comes in. My question is whether self-alienation could be the proper frame to think about these issues.

For example, you can see what the Ethiopian state has been doing since Adwa: it was incorporated (think of the 1931 Constitution promulgated by Haile Selassie); there have also been waves of codifications in the 1950s and 1960s and also the 1995 Constitution. What you see in all these is the incorporation of Western values and ideas. So, the country has to respond to two demands: it has to respond to the demands of the international community and Haile Selassie has to respond to that by adopting a constitution. He also did those things in a way that changed the internal power dynamics that structured the political struggle in the country. Likewise, if you see the 1995 Constitution, they had to frame the political settlement in the language of human rights and the language of democracy; it is a human rights state. The Constitution is all about human rights, democratic rights, and self-determination. From an international perspective, if you simply look at it, Ethiopia is a human rights state. The only difference with South Africa is that South Africa is based on individual rights while Ethiopia is based on group rights.

So, our state and government have been responding both to the demands of the international community, partly because we are incorporated on unequal terms, and we have to accommodate those demands, but at the same time they have to also respond to some of the local demands. Yet our conversations, even on the nationality question, did not pay much attention to Ethiopia's integration into the international community and the liability that comes with it.

My other question is related to human rights and the rule of law. Yes, they have dark sides, but what are these dark sides and what is your take about them?

### Dr. Adem Kassie Abebe

For me, the conversation about history is about two things, which are related but also distinct. The first one is about being heard, in the sense of being understood in their story about how they experienced the state and the political system at a particular time. They particularly wanted to be heard by people who rejected their ideas. It is only about being heard and understood, not necessarily agreed with.

The second one is how that background should then be the basis for the kind of institutional, political or epistemic architecture we want to build. These two are related but they are distinct. I say they are distinct because we can debate on what kind of state we want and what kind of epistemic community we want to build, without reference to the state system. We could have justified the current system without necessarily agreeing; we could have built the current system without a background of past repression. So, creating that distinction may be helpful; we can look at them separately but not ignore any of them.

### Reply: Dr. Shimelis Kene

To Juweria: Yes, you are right, I have simplified Ethiopia's postcolonial identity. I will address all those questions in an upcoming book chapter. Regarding those orientalist constructs like pagans and Muslims, yes that is right but the focus of my essay is Ethiopia's postcolonial identity relation vis-à-vis the West, not internal colonization.

On Abdi's question of whether Ethiopia can avoid importing Western ideas or live as an island, the answer is no. The point I am trying to make is, let us be reflective on the ideas we import; I am not saying we should not import. From a postcolonial or third world perspective, when we resist Eurocentrism we are not really disagreeing with European views; we are only resisting the construct that European ideas are higher in a hierarchy. So, the point is Europe should be seen as being co-equal with others, rather than the source. So, we always should ask that kind of question, especially in the intellectual community.

Zelalem reminded us of the historian Teshale Tibebu's characterization of Ethiopia as an anomalous identity. Yes, Teshale speaks about Ethiopia's image, but he speaks from the European perspective, how Europeans view Ethiopia, listing seven or eight European constructs of Ethiopia. Teshale also raises the anomality of Ethiopia's identity in relation to the image Ethiopia itself projects within the African context. The other constructs are just Eurocentric; Ethiopia does not really have a role in those constructs.

To Melhik: Yes, you are right, although, as this is a work in progress, I have not fully and clearly spelt out the idea—I was actually talking about the good and bad in Ethiopia's past, and how integrating both is good for the future of Ethiopia.

To Berihun: All these are very important questions. As regards the League of Nations, it is a very complicated history. I address this in the context of colonial international law and how Ethiopia encountered it, especially in the interwar period, and how Ethiopia approached it; Haile Selassie's involvement and the discourse of civilization; how the League of Nations applied the so-called Standard of "Civilization" and then used that standard to justify Italy's claim that Ethiopia was "uncivilized" and that it needed Italy's tutelage to redeem itself from its barbaric state and, hence, to justify Italian colonization of Ethiopia. It is a complicated history. An important point I wanted to make is Haile Selassie used it to some extent to Ethiopia's benefit, but that is also a complicated history and I do not want to go into that in detail.