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January 2009

# Being in and Out of Africa: The Impact of Duality of Ethiopianism

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# Being in and out of Africa

## The Impact of Duality of Ethiopianism

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This article critically examines how the duality inherent in the concept of Ethiopianism shifts back and forth between claims of a “Semitic” identity when appealing to the White, Christian, ethnocentric, occidental hegemonic power center and claims of an African identity when cultivating the support of sub-Saharan Africans and the African diaspora while, at the same time, ruthlessly suppressing the history and culture of non-Semitic Africans of the various colonized peoples, such as Oromos. Successive Ethiopian state elites have used their Blackness to mobilize other Africans and the African diaspora for their political projects by confusing original Africa, Ethiopia, or the Black world with contemporary Ethiopia (former Abyssinia) and at the same time have allied with Euro-American powers and practiced racism, state terrorism, genocide, and continued subjugation on the indigenous Africans who are, today, struggling for self-determination and multinational democracy. Exposing the racist discourse of Ethiopianism and liberating the mentality of all Africans and the African diaspora from this “social cancer” must be one of the tasks of a critical paradigm of Afrocentricity. Developing *Oromummaa* (Oromo culture, identity, and nationalism), the Oromo national movement engages in such a liberation project.

**Keywords:** *Ethiopianism; Semitic identity; racism; colonialism; Abyssinia/Ethiopia; Oromos; Habashas (Amhara-Tigray); Africanness/Blackness; Euro-American powers; state terrorism; Afrocentricity; Oromummaa (culture, identity, nationalism); self-determination; multinational democracy*

The critical and thorough examination of the essence and duality of Ethiopianism in relation to Habasha (Amhara-Tigrayan) and global politics demonstrates the negative impact of this ideology on the processes

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**Author’s Note:** The first version of this paper was presented at the 2004 African Studies Association Annual Conference, New Orleans, LA, November 11-14. I thank Harwod D. Schaffer for his substantive comments on the first draft of the paper.

of identity formation, state building, and development in Ethiopia. Ethiopians/Abyssinians or Habashas consider themselves Semitic and suppress their Africanness or Blackness by claiming racial and cultural superiority to Blacks in general and the indigenous Africans they colonized in particular (Jalata, 2001). Successive Ethiopian state elites have used the discourses of civilization, race, culture, and religion to justify and rationalize the colonization and dehumanization of the indigenous Africans, such as Agaos, Oromos, Ogaden-Somalis, Afars, Sidamas, and Walayitas, and have selectively utilized the politics of Africanness or Blackness without actually practicing this aspect of Ethiopianism. The duality of Ethiopianism and the politics of building contemporary Ethiopia as an empire on the foundation of racial/ethnonational hierarchy have prevented successive Ethiopian state elites from building a viable country. Consequently, Ethiopia has remained one of the most impoverished countries in the world and has become infamous for its recurrent famines and a series of internal and external wars.

## **Background**

Since ancient times, repeated episodes of migration from Arabia have led to a series of conflicts revolving around issues of religion, identity, land, and power between various indigenous African population groups and the Africanized Arab descendants in the Horn of Africa. Currently the Horn of Africa is the home of “Africans of Two Worlds” (Deng, 1978). As indigenous Africans phenotypically and culturally impacted the Arab immigrants, the Africanized immigrants influenced the culture, religion, and identity of the original Africans through trade, colonial settlement, marriage, conflict, war, selective cultural borrowing, and cooperation. However, the descendants of these Africanized immigrants still control state power and refuse to treat as equal partners those indigenous Africans they dominate, abuse, and exploit in the Horn of Africa.

The modern ideology of the Ethiopian state evolved from what was once the Axumite kingdom of Abyssinia formed in the 1st century A.D. by the Africanized descendants of Arab settlers (Jones & Monroe, 1969; Michels, 1991). The kingdom developed through commerce, migration, colonization, and the assimilation of some African and Arab cultural elements. The Axumite kingdom accepted Orthodox Christianity in the 4th century through the commercial relationship it developed with the Greco-Romans. The Muslim Arab immigrants who arrived after the rise of Islam in the 7th century spread this new religion in African coastal towns subsequently challenged the Axumites.

As Islamic influence increased, the commerce of the Axumite kingdom started to decline. The final death blow was given to the deteriorating kingdom not by the Muslim Arabs, but by the indigenous Beja and Agao peoples who had been exterminated to some degree and enslaved by the Axumites. They revolted in the 10th century and occupied the northern trade routes to the Mediterranean world (Jalata, 1993/2005, p. 32; Pankhurst, 1997, pp. 26-27). In the mid-11th century, the previously colonized Agao people established a kingdom known as the Zagwe dynasty. This dynasty lasted until 1270, when it was overthrown by one of the groups that descended from the remnants of the Axumites. These Axumite descendants developed a separate identity known as Amhara.

The Amhara ethnonational group and another group known as Tigray are collectively called Habashas or Abyssinians. The Habashas developed a common religion, tradition, and set of customs, but each group, the Amhara and Tigray, maintained different languages. Although phenotypically and culturally Africanized, the Habashas have suppressed their Africanness or Blackness by linking themselves to the Middle East and by considering themselves a Semitic people, claiming to be racially and culturally superior to indigenous Africans (Jalata, 2001). In Abyssinia proper, using their state power, the Habashas imposed their Christian religion, their languages—Amharic and Tigragna—and their customs on the peoples that they colonized, resulting in Abyssinization, which can be described as “the complete destruction of the identity of the colonized population groups” by claiming “racial and/or cultural superiority” (Jalata, 1993/2005, p. 32).

The colonization and destruction of various indigenous population groups, such as Qemant, Agao, and Gafat, in their homeland (later called Abyssinia), along with expropriation of their lands and other economic resources, the establishment of military colonies, the evangelization of the remnants of the colonized population groups, and their cultural assimilation were central to the continuous process of marginalization and Abyssinization. The modern Ethiopian state that emerged in the last decades of the 19th century through the alliance of Ethiopian colonialism and European imperialism has continued similar policies of colonization, genocide, and subjugation (Holcomb & Ibssa, 1990; Jalata, 1993/2005). How did Abyssinia gradually become Ethiopia? What role did European powers play in this name change?

Although the historical meaning of Ethiopia is applicable to all Black peoples, its contemporary meaning applies mainly to Amharas and Tigrayans, who have successively dominated Ethiopian state power. The name *Ethiopia* originated with the Greek word *Aethiopes*. Classical Greek explorers and writers gave this name to the territories inhabited by Black peoples that they called burned-face peoples in Asia and Africa. According to A. Wallis Budge (1928),

The descriptions of Ethiopia given by Homer, Herodotus, Diodorus, Starbo and Pliny make it quite clear that they indicated by this name the vast tracts of country [regions] in Asia and Africa that were inhabited by dark-skinned and black faced peoples. (pp. 120-121)

Therefore, ancient Ethiopia and the current Abyssinian Empire (contemporary Ethiopia) are not geographically coterminous, but the latter occupies a subset of the area of the former.

Recognizing the political significance of the name *Ethiopia* and especially its Christian Biblical connections, Abyssinian leaders started to claim an Ethiopian identity and to argue that their territories once included all regions that classical geographers and historians described as Ethiopia. In actuality, the official adoption of the name *Ethiopia* for the Abyssinian Empire occurred in the early 1930s. In 1931, Haile Selassie officially changed the name *Abyssinia* to *Ethiopia* in his constitution (Melba, 1980, p. 32). Few Africans and members of the African diaspora know the difference between ancient Ethiopia and contemporary Ethiopia (former Abyssinia). As we shall see below, successive Habasha state elites have used this historical ignorance, through the discourse of Ethiopianism, and mobilized Africans and the African diaspora for their racist projects of enslaving and colonizing various indigenous Africans in the Horn of Africa. Most Africans and the African diaspora still subscribe to the ideology of Ethiopianism without critically understanding its duality and oppose the struggles of indigenous Africans in Ethiopia for self-determination and multinational democracy.

## **The Emergence of the Modern Ethiopian State and the West**

The practice of creating and supporting a neocolonial state in accordance with the interests of the West started with the emergence of the modern Ethiopian state in Africa (Jalata, 1993/2005, 2001). The creation of the modern racialized Ethiopian state and the emergence of the Ethiopian Empire occurred within the expansion of the European-dominated capitalist world economy (Jalata, 2001). Because of their Christian ideology and willingness to collaborate with European imperialist powers, such as Great Britain, France, and Italy, successive Habasha rulers received access to European technology, weapons, administrative and military expertise, and other skills needed for the construction of a modern state. As Bonnie Holcomb and Sisai Ibssa (1990) noted,

“Ethiopia” is the name that was eventually given to the geographic unit created when Abyssinia, a cluster of small kingdoms in northeast Africa, expanded in the mid-1800s by conquering independent nations in the region using firearms provided by European power. (p. 1)

Obtaining commodities such as gold, ivory, coffee, musk, hides and skins, slaves, and land was the primary reason behind the Abyssinian/Ethiopian colonial expansion. Glen Bailey (1980) argued,

The creation of the empire-state was financed by the southern expansion. Tribute along with revenue from the control of the slave trade (an estimated 25,000 slaves per year in the 1880s) and valuable ivory, coffee and civet exports financed Menelik’s consolidation of power. (p. 2)

At one time, Menelik and his wife owned 70,000 enslaved Africans (Pankhurst, 1997, p. 75). To obtain slaves and economic resources, the emerging Ethiopian state committed genocide on peoples like the Oromos.

The Oromo population was reduced from 10 million to 5 million through war, slavery, massive killings, disease, and war-induced famine during the second half of the 19th century. According to Alexander Bulatovich (2000),

The dreadful annihilation of more than half of the population during the conquest took away from the Gallas [Oromos] all possibilities of thinking about any sort of uprising. . . . Without a doubt, the Galla, with their at least five million population, occupying the best land, all speaking one language, could represent a tremendous force if united. (pp. 68-69)

The modern Ethiopian state was the continuation of the previous Abyssinian racialized state, which committed genocide on indigenous peoples such as Qemant, Gafat, and Agao and asserted control over the remaining colonized peoples. Contemporary Ethiopia emerged as an empire by claiming the name of ancient and historic Ethiopia with the help of the West during the partition of Africa by European powers, and justified its genocide, enslavement, colonization, and the continued subjugation of Oromos and others through the discourse of race and religion.

### **Contemporary Ethiopia, the West, and the Discourse of Race**

Denying the reality that contemporary Abyssinia/Ethiopia was the product of neocolonialism, invented by the alliance of Ethiopian colonialism

and European imperialism, the West praised Abyssinia (later Ethiopia) as the country that was never colonized in Africa. The idea that Ethiopia was not colonized laid the cornerstone for the ideology of "Greater Ethiopia." Thus, Ethiopia was seen as "A civilized nation of an immense intelligence, the only one that is civilized without wearing trousers and shoes" (as quoted in Marcus, 1996, p. 7). Since then, Habashas and their Euro-American supporters have contributed to the

Ethiopian mythology [which] consists in part of the erroneous notions that [Abyssinian] society had reached a superior evolutionary stage at the time of conquest, making them able to move in and take over Oromia and others. . . . The illusion plays a critically important role in holding the entire complex together, the ideology of Greater Ethiopia. (Holcomb & Ibssa, 1990, p. 143)

The ideology of Greater Ethiopia (Holcomb & Ibssa, 1990, p. 143; Jalata, 1993/2005; Megerssa, 1997) claims that Ethiopia was not colonized like other parts of Africa because of Habasha bravery and patriotism that made this empire unique in Africa. The Ethiopian historical discourse claims that Ethiopian boundaries are sacred since they were established 3,000 years ago. Furthermore, it is asserted that Abyssinian "society represented an advanced level of social and economic organization" that enabled it to defend itself from European colonialism by eliminating slavery and protecting "all the peoples of greater Ethiopia from falling prey to European imperialism" (Levine, 1994, p. 16) and that Ethiopia played a significant civilizing mission by colonizing and dominating Oromos and other nations who were backward, pagan, destructive, and inferior. These racist mythologies of Greater Ethiopia helped the Haile Selassie government gain admission to the League of Nations in 1924. As a result, Ethiopia began to enjoy more recognition in Europe and North America, and "there was extended public discussion of Ethiopia's place in the world community and a great elaboration of the Ethiopian mythology initiated by European writers for a European public" (Holcomb & Ibssa, 1990, p. 176).

By joining the League of Nations, the Ethiopian Empire, according to Evelyn Waugh (1931/1985),

had been recognized as a single state whose integrity was the concern of the world. Tafari's own new dynasty had been accepted by the busy democracies as the government of this area; his enemies were their enemies; there would be money lent him to arm against rebels, experts to advise him; when trouble was brewing he would swoop down from the sky and take his opponents unaware; the fabulous glories of Prester John were to be reincarnated. (p. 16)

The ideology of Greater Ethiopia that has been accepted and developed by European and American policy elites and their successive governments has been the bedrock of racism on which Ethiopia was built and still maintained (Holcomb & Ibssa, 1990, p. 1).

When the French and British could not decide which of them would get this key region of the Horn of Africa, and were not willing to go to war with each other over it, each backed a different proxy leader; the British chose Warlord Yohannis of Tigray, and the French chose Warlord Menelik of Amhara. But when Yohannis died in 1889, the British and the Italians devised a different solution for sharing access to the region. The British and Italians struggled at Menelik's court to advise and control him and seek his favor. Because of Menelik's failing health in 1906, France, Great Britain, and Italy devised the policy behind the Tripartite Treaty without Menelik's even knowing about it. This treaty states that "We the Great powers of Europe, France, Great Britain, and Italy, shall cooperate in maintaining the political and territorial status quo in Ethiopia as determined by the state of affairs at present existing and the previous [boundary] agreements" (as quoted in Holcomb & Ibssa, 1990, p. 8).

The Western foreign policy experts not only provided technology and expertise in different fields, they played a critical role in formulating and promoting racist mythologies to justify the colonization and continued subjugation of the colonized subjects. For instance, the notion of claiming Abyssinia/Ethiopia as an ancient kingdom was originally suggested by an Italian expert in 1891. Francisco Crispi instructed an Italian agent in Addis Ababa

to inform Menelik that the European powers were establishing their boundaries in Africa and that the emperor should, with Italian assistance, circulate a letter defining his borders in order to guarantee the integrity of his empire. Crispi suggested that in the letter, Menelik ought to point out that Ethiopia was an ancient Kingdom which had been recognized as independent by the Christian states of Europe. (As quoted in Holcomb & Ibssa, 1990, p. 14)

The racist idea that Habashas were different from other Africans lay at the core of the European justification for empowering them to colonize and rule the Oromos and other nations. These conquered peoples were seen like other colonized Africans. In the 1930s when Haile Selassie went to Europe and became the darling of the Western media, the ideology of Greater Ethiopia was refined and celebrated in Europe, America, and Ethiopia (Holcomb & Ibssa, 1990, pp. 175-179). He was praised for his "extraordinary handsome face, next door to black, with high standing curly hair, a crisp



black beard, a fine hawkish nose, and large gleaming eyes”; he was also glorified for his “devotion to modernization” (as quoted in Holcomb & Ibssa, 1990, pp. 175-179). The Ethiopian Empire that was created with the alliance of European imperialist powers and Habasha warlords has maintained itself through an alliance with successive imperial superpowers, namely, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States, that have provided protection to successive Ethiopian state elites and their governments (Jalata, 1993/2005, 2005).

After colonizing the Oromo and other nations with the help of European technology and expertise, Abyssinian colonial settlers in Oromia and other regions justified their colonial domination with racist discourse. With the establishment of their colonial authority in the colonized regions, Habasha settlers “assumed that their own innate superiority over the local residents accounted for this accomplishment” (Holcomb & Ibssa, 1990, p. 111). These essential components of racist discourse of Greater Ethiopia have remained intact. “Socialist” and then “democratic” discourse has been introduced by successive Habasha state elites and accepted by their Euro-American supporters without changing the colonizing and racist structure of Ethiopian society. Ethiopian racism and White racism have conveniently intermarried in the U.S. policy formulation and implementation in Ethiopia. When policy issues are discussed on Ethiopia Semitic civility, Christianity, antiquity, bravery, and patriotism of Amharas and Tigrayans are retrieved to valorize and to legitimize Habasha dominance and power. Moreover, the barbarism, backwardness, and destructiveness of Oromos and others are reinvented to keep Oromos and others from access to state power.

The U.S. policy toward Ethiopia builds upon the European policy established before the United States became involved. The combined racist views about Oromos and others and the racist assumptions of U.S. foreign policy elites effectively mobilize the U.S. State Department against the indigenous Africans. The U.S. government supports the Ethiopian authoritarian-terrorist regime that is characterized by extreme militarization and repression; tight control of information and resources in the form of foreign aid, domestic financial resources, and political appointments; and direct ownership and control of all aspects of state power, including security and military institutions, judiciary and other political bodies, and financial institutions (Jalata, 2000).

Because of its racist policies, the Ethiopian state has different policies within Abyssinia proper, the homeland of Amhara-Tigray, and the colonized regions such as Oromia. The Ethiopian state has acted in an authoritarian manner toward Amhara and Tigray ethnations from which it emerged and in a terrorist fashion toward racialized peoples, such as Oromos, Afars,

Sidamas, Ogaden-Somalis, and others, that it suppresses and exploits. Therefore, I have characterized this state as an authoritarian-terrorist regime. The Ethiopia state is owned by Tigray-Amhara elites who control all aspects of state power and use state terrorism to maintain their power and privilege (Jalata, 2005). The Ethiopian state has been Abyssianized or racialized and Christianized to exclude non-Habshas from decision-making power. Ethiopianism has been effectively used to hide such crimes against humanity in Ethiopia.

## The Duality of Ethiopianism

Ethiopian elites boast that their country, Ethiopia, was not colonized like that of other Africans. They are unable to recognize the fact that the Ethiopian Empire has been an indirect colony of Euro-America since its inception. Despite the fact that Habasha elites claim that Ethiopia has been the defender of African freedom in public, they never hesitate to express their disdain for formerly enslaved or directly colonized Africans in private among themselves. Habasha elites have claimed that they have a superior religion and civilization, and even sometimes have expressed that they were not Black and saw formerly enslaved or colonized Africans as *baryas* (slaves). Furthermore, they have degraded the humanity and culture of the indigenous Africans they have colonized and dominated. Alberto Sbacchi (1997) noted that the Habshas

have traditionally looked upon the dark skinned people as inferiors and given them the name of “*Shankalla*” [*sic*]. . . . The Black Americans were known as Negro [*sic*], which in Ethiopia was associated with slavery. Hence to the Ethiopians the Afro-Americans were *Shankalla*. (p. 22)

William R. Scott (1993, p. xv), an African American who participated in a student work camp in Ethiopia in 1963, expressed his painful encounter with *Habasha* racism as follows: “I was called *barya* (slave) by young, bigoted Ethiopian aristocrats, who associated African-Americans with slavery and identified them with the country’s traditional servant class.”

Habshas see themselves as a Semitic people who are racially and culturally superior to other Africans and the African diaspora. P. T. W. Baxter (1994) explained that they

used to stress their Middle Eastern rather than African cultural roots, as is so obvious in the reiteration of the Solomonic legend, taught in schools as history

and justification of imperial rule. Just as the expansion of the European empire in Africa coincided with that of Abyssinian, so the latter took on some of the same sanctimonious assumptions of bringing civilization to the savages. Menelik and his courtiers became honorary, if second-class, bearers of the “white man’s burden in Africa.” (p. 172)

Imitating their white masters, Menelik and his followers saw themselves white gods who were sent to “civilize” Oromos and other indigenous Africans via slavery and colonialism. According to William Easterly (2006), “The White Man’s Burden emerged from the West’s self-pleasing fantasy that ‘we’ were the chosen ones to save the Rest. The White Man offered himself the starring role in an ancient regime version of Harry Potter” (p. 23).

The Ethiopian colonizers started to dehumanize Oromos by changing their name into *Galla*. As the names of various African peoples who were enslaved and brought to America were changed to *Negro*, and as the names of various peoples in America were changed to *Indian* with their colonization and destruction, Oromos were given the name *Galla*. These names were invented in the process of removing these peoples from their respective cultural and historical roots and making them the target of destruction, enslavement, colonialism, and continued subjugation. The appellation *Galla* was given to Oromos as a name of contempt and derogation. It has characterized them as slave, pagan, uncivilized or barbaric, inferior, and ignorant. This name was invented to destroy Oromoness and to devalue Oromo culture, history, and tradition. In Abyssinia proper, *Galla* and *barya* have been used interchangeably (Donham & James, 1986). *Galla* is the name of racist ridicule in academia and popular discourse.

Habashas have effectively used the discourse of cultural racism in destroying or suppressing other peoples. Cultural racism can be defined as the conscious or subconscious conviction of the politically dominant population group that imposes its cultural patterns and practices through its social institutions in an attempt to destroy or suppress the cultural patterns and practices of the colonized and dominated population (Bowser & Hunt, 1996). Cultural racism and its contradictions may result in the extermination or/and continued subjugation of the dominated population group. Racism does not necessarily manifest itself by the discourse of biological difference. Usually it combines the discourses of biological and cultural differences to justify unequal treatment of different population groups. The extermination of Jews by Germans, the continued subjugation of Palestinians by the Jews, the ethnic cleansing of Bosnians by Serbians, the destruction of Tutsis by Hutus, and suppression of Hutus by Tutsis are examples of extreme forms of cultural racism.

The discourses of race and racism emerged with the development of the racialized capitalist world system via racial slavery and European colonialism (Jalata, 2001). The processes of expropriation, slavery, and colonialism resulted in the hierarchical organization of world populations through the creation of an elaborate discourse of racism to maintain the system. Let me provide a pragmatic definition of racism. As the meaning of race is complex, so is that of racism. Racism is a discourse and a practice in which a racial/ethnonational project (i.e., slavery, genocide, colonialism, continued subjugation) is politically, culturally, and “scientifically” constructed by dominating elites in the capitalist world system to justify and naturalize racial/ethnonational inequality in which those at the top of social hierarchy oppress and exploit those below them by claiming biological and/or cultural superiority. According to Howard Winant (1994), “*A racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation or explanation of racial dynamics and an effort to organize and distribute resources along particular racial lines*” (p. 24, italics in original).

Simply put, racism is an expression of institutionalized patterns of colonizing structural power and social control. Race and racism are socially, politically, and culturally constructed to maintain the identities and privileges of the dominant population groups and their power through policy formulation and implementation. They are sociopolitical constructs because all human groups are biologically and genetically more alike than different. According to Kenan Malik (1996),

Geneticists have shown that 85 per cent of all genetic variation is between individuals within the same local population. A further 8 per cent is between local populations or groups within what is considered to be a major race. Just 7 per cent of genetic variation is between major races. (p. 4)

Despite the fact that all human groups originally evolved in Africa and migrated to different parts of the world, Europeans and Ethiopians have been victimizing indigenous Africans by inventing nonexistent “races” and the discourse of racism.

Just as Eurocentric scholars have intellectually separated the original Black civilization of Kemet (Egypt) and Kush or Nubia and then linked them to the Middle East to prove the racist notion of superiority of non-Blacks to Blacks (Asante, 1988, 1990; Bernal, 1987; Ma’at-ka-Re Monges, 1997), Ethiopian elites and some Ethiopianists have tried to prove the racial and civilization superiority of Amharas and Tigrayans by Semitizing and linking them to the Middle East and Europe. Baxter (1994) noted that “evolutionists and racist assumptions, mostly unvoiced, have contributed to the belief that

a Christian, Semitic culture with Middle Eastern leanings had to be superior to a black Africa” (p. 172). Recognizing the political and diplomatic significance of the name *Ethiopia* (the old name for the Black world), the Abyssinian state elites replaced the name *Abyssinia* with that of *Ethiopia*. The Ethiopian ideological history claims

the modern Ethiopian state as the direct heir to the Ethiopia mentioned in biblical and classical sources. Ethiopian and Western scholars presented Ethiopia as an entity that had existed continuously as an integrated and independent state for three thousand years. (Sorenson, 1998, pp. 233-234)

Successive Ethiopian state elites use the African and Semitic discourses both regionally and globally. Globally, they use the Semitic discourse and the discourse of Christianity to mobilize assistance from Europe, North America, and the Middle East. Skillfully, they use their Blackness to mobilize other Africans, the African diaspora (J. Harris, 1986; Scott, 1993), and Black U.S. policy elites against Oromos and other colonized peoples. Several times, Ethiopian state elites have attempted and used the influence of the African diaspora for their political and economic interests, particularly in the United States, by capitalizing on the emotion they have for the name *Ethiopia*. By confusing original Ethiopia (the Black world) with contemporary Ethiopia (former Abyssinia), Habasha elites have misled some historically naive people in Africa, Europe, North America, and the world.

Most people do not understand the difference between ancient Ethiopia and contemporary Ethiopia. Because of this historical misinformation, Africans who were colonized or enslaved by Europeans, except those who were enslaved and colonized by contemporary Ethiopians, wrongly considered contemporary Ethiopia (former Abyssinia) as an island of Black freedom because it was able to maintain formal political power, albeit with the help of Euro-American powers. However, Ethiopia was only directly colonized by fascist Italy between 1935 and 1941. Most Blacks “knew very little about the social and political conditions of Ethiopia. What they wrote or said about Ethiopia was at best a manifestation of their emotional state” (Scott, 1993, p. 26). Other Africans are unaware that Ethiopia’s political power came from allying with the colonizing European powers.

Instead, it has been a “prison house” in which Oromos and other colonized and enslaved population groups were and still are brutalized. By using the discredited racist categorization of human groups, such as Semitic, Hamitic, Negroid, and Cushitic, Habashas have a stratified hierarchy in which they place Oromos between themselves and the people that they wrongly call

*Shankillas*—people they consider Negroid (Donham & James, 1986, pp. 123-124). Despite the fact that Habashas are Black, they consider themselves Semitic to associate themselves with the Middle East and dissociate from Africa, whose peoples they consider both racially and culturally inferior. For instance, when the *Nigerian Daily Times* interviewed Haile Selassie, the emperor of Ethiopia, in the 1930s, about Ethiopian racial identity, he said “that Ethiopians were not, and did not regard themselves as negroes [*sic*], as they were a Hamito-Semitic people” (Sbacchi, 1997, p. 25). John Sorenson (1998) expressed this racist attitude as “a multiplicity of Ethiopians, blacks who are whites, the quintessential Africans who reject African identity” (p. 229).

Because the concept of race is a sociopolitical construct, it is essential to critically understand the historical context in which Ethiopian racism is produced and reproduced to denigrate the colonized peoples to deny them access to Ethiopian state power and economic resources. In Ethiopian discourse, racial distinctions have been invented and manipulated to perpetuate the political objective of Habasha domination of the colonized population groups. “The fact that racial distinctions are easily manipulated and reversed indicates,” Sorenson (1998, p. 229) noted, “the absurdity of any claims that they have an objective basis and locates these distinctions where they actually occur, in political power.” Habasha elites recognize the importance of racial distinctions in linking themselves to the Middle East, Europe, and North America to mobilize support for their political projects.

Jews, Arabs, Europeans, and Americans see Habashas as closer to themselves than the peoples whom they consider “real Black.” Also the West, particularly the United States, places Habashas on “an intermediate position between whites and blacks” and considers them closer to “the European race” or members of “the great Caucasian family” (as quoted in Marcus, 1996, p. 5). There were Europeans who considered Habashas as a very intelligent people because of their racial affinity with the “Caucasian race” (Marcus, 1996, p. 7). There were also those who saw Habashas as “dark-skinned white people” and “racial and cultural middleman” between Black Africa on one side and Europe and the Middle East on the other side (Marcus, 1996, p. 7). One German scholar admired the intelligence of Habashas and noted that he never saw such mental capability among Negroes, Arabs, Egyptians, and Nubians (as cited in Marcus, 1996, p. 6).

These racist discourses go unchallenged in academic and popular discourse because they help reproduce Ethiopian ethnocratic and colonial state power. U.S. foreign policy elites, diplomats, and other officials recognize and defend such “racial pretension of Ethiopia’s ruling class” (Robinson, 1985, p. 53). Racist Euro-American scholars use these kinds of racist dis-

courses to show the significance of Whiteness and denigrate the value of Blackness in human civilization. Despite the fact that their skin color is Black, Ethiopian state elites joined their racist White counterparts to devalue the humanity of Black people (Jalata, 1999). One would expect that African American policy elites in the U.S. State Department, including George Moose, Irvin Hicks, Susan Rice, Colin Powell, and Condoleezza Rice would think differently from their White counterparts and genuinely promote social justice and democracy in Africa. But African American policy elites, because of their distorted historical knowledge, and/or because of their class interests, have accepted the ideological discourse on Ethiopia that presented this empire as the home of Black freedom when all Blacks were under Euro-American colonialism and slavery and endorsed the racist U.S. policy toward Ethiopia and Oromia.

In the same way that some African kings and chiefs participated in the slave trade with European slave merchants to commodify some Africans and ship them to North America and other parts of the world, these African American elites have collaborated with racist structures that dehumanize African peoples. It is an irony of history that the lack of critical historical knowledge or class interest or the ideological confusion built into this racist policy has brought about an alliance between the biological or ideological descendants of slavers and the descendants of slaves to victimize people like Oromos who have been victimized by colonialism and slavery. Current Habasha elites are the ideological or actual descendants of Warlords Yohannis and Menelik who participated in the massacre and enslavement of millions of Oromos and others.

While glorifying the culture and civilization of Habashas, racist scholars, such as Edward Ullendorff (1960), advanced the notion that Oromos, as a barbaric people, did not possess “significant material or intellectual culture” that would allow them to “contribute to the Semitized civilization of Ethiopia” (p. 76). To demonstrate the superiority of the civilization and culture of Amharas and Tigrayans, racist scholars downplayed “the African-ness of ancient Ethiopia [Abyssinia] . . . to emphasize its similarities to European societies” (Sorenson, 1998, p. 229). John Sorenson (1998) expounded,

along with the emphasis on a Great Tradition in Ethiopian history, came a specific configuration of racial identity. As in other discourses of race, this configuration merged power with phenotypic features in order to devalue the Oromo and other groups as both “more African” and “more primitive” than the Amhara [and Tigray]. The Oromo were presented as warlike, essentially “people without history” and without any relationship to the land. (p. 234)

In Ethiopian studies, Oromos were depicted as “crueller scourges” and “barbarian hordes who brought darkness and ignorance in the train” to Ethiopia (W. C. Harris, 1844, pp. 72-73); they were also depicted as evil, ignorant, orderless, destructive, infiltrators, and invasive (Abba Bahrey, 1954; Bruce, 1973; Marcus, 1994; Ullendorff, 1960).

In addition, Oromos were seen as “a decadent race” that was “less advanced” because of their racial and cultural inferiority (Fargo, 1935, p. 45). Therefore, their colonization and enslavement by the alliance of Ethiopians and Europeans were seen as a civilizing mission. Because in racist and modernist thinking, historical development is linear and society develops from a primitive or backward to a civilized or advanced stage, Oromos, who have been seen as primitive people, are also considered as part of a collection of tribes or a single tribe or a “cluster” of diverse groups that cannot develop any nationalist political consciousness except tribalism (Clapham, 1969; Gilkes, 1975, pp. 204-206; Marcus, 1994, p. 4).

Racist and modernist scholars have also denied the existence of a unified Oromo identity and argued that Oromos cannot achieve statehood because they are geographically scattered and lack cultural substance (Clapham, 1994; Levine 1994; Perham, 1969, p. 377). Generally speaking, both Ethiopian elites and their Euro-American counterparts have built Ethiopianism as a racial project, at the cost of indigenous Africans, such as Oromos. The participation of Habashas in the scramble for Africa and in the slave trade and the commodification of millions of Oromos and others encouraged them to associate themselves with European and the Middle Eastern peoples rather than Black Africans. Sorenson (1998) wrote,

Western discourse . . . duplicated many of the assumptions and ideologies that had been put in place by the ruling elites of Ethiopia, constructing the latter as the carriers of a Great Tradition which was engaged in its own Civilizing Mission with respect to what it regarded as other uncivilized Groups in Ethiopia. (p. 232)

## **The Impact of Ethiopian Racism on Oromos**

The popular discourse on Oromos is full of racist prejudices and stereotypes. When Habashas want to make a point of the alleged inferiority of Oromos on the racial/ethnonational hierarchy, or to deny them their humanity, they debase an Oromo and her or his nationality by asking, “*sawu nawu*



*Galla?*" (Is he a human being or a Galla?) This query shows that Habashas consider Oromos as inferior human beings. Even Christianity is used to promote racism in Ethiopia. For instance, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church publication denounced sexual relations between Habashas and Oromos by saying that Jesus would punish those who had sexual intercourse with "the cursed, the dumb, the Moslems, the Galla, the Shankilla, the Falasha, the horse, the donkey, the camel and all those who committed sodomy" (as quoted in Lata, 1998, p. 143). This religious tract was written in Geez (an old Abyssinian language) and translated into Amharic in 1968. While its original date of writing and authorship are unknown, the piece has been popular and widely recited by literate Habashas.

Oromos, Ethiopian Jews, Muslims, and various peoples were categorized with beasts, such as horses, donkeys, and camels. The implicit intention of the Orthodox Church was to draw a racial/ethnonational boundary between Habashas and non-Habashas to maintain the racial/ethnonational purity of the former. Habasha stereotypes depict Oromos as a dirty people; the expression "*Galla na sagara eyadare yigamal*" compares Oromos to feces and claims that Oromos continue to stink like feces with passing days. This expression warns that the closer you get to Oromos, the more you find how they are bad and dirty. This racial insult is used to create suspicion between Oromos and Habashas. Another expression depicts Oromos as a rotten people ("*timbi or bisbis Galla*"). Yet another expression explains that Oromos cannot be clean even if they wash themselves again and again; it says that "*Galla na Shinfila ayitaram*," which literally means, "Even if you wash them, stomach lining and a Galla will never come clean."

Oromos have been depicted as barbarians and backward people in popular discourse. A Habasha expression claims that Oromos' attempt to be civilized cannot be successful because Oromos are predestined to fail in civilization projects. The saying "*Galla sisaltin bacharaqa jantila yizo yizoral*" attempts to show that even if he or she is civilized, an Oromo does not know the true essence of civility. Literally this saying translates, "When an Oromo is civilized he stretches his umbrella in moonlight and walks around so that he can be seen by others." Simply put, because Oromos are stupid, they do not know how to behave in a civilized way. The expression "*Ye Galla chawa, ye gomen choma yelewum*" depicts Oromos as a society that does not have respected and notable individuals. The literal translation of this expression reads, "As there is no fat in vegetables or greens, there is no a gentleman in the Galla community." Generally Oromos have been seen as a useless people who do not deserve respect.

Oromos have been insulted for even trying to assimilate to Ethiopian culture by speaking an Ethiopian language. Habasha racists have expressed their anger toward Oromos who have mispronounced Amharic words by saying that “*Afun yalfata Galla; tabitaba Galla*” (an Oromo who cannot express himself clearly). To psychologically demoralize Oromos, the Habasha discourse also depicts Oromos as cowardly people who cannot resist subordination; the saying “*and Amhara matto Galla yinadal*” clearly shows the essence of this discourse. Literally it translates, “One Amhara can force one hundred Oromos into submission or subordination.” However, historical evidence indicates that until they allied with Europeans and obtained modern weapons, Habashas saw Oromo fighters as their nightmare.

Even a poor Habasha or a leper claims that he or she is better than a Galla; the expressions “Even if I am poor, I am not a Galla,” and “Even if I am a leper, I am not a Galla” clearly show how most Habashas, including the sick and the poor, claim racial/ethnonational superiority. Generally speaking, Habashas have “looked upon and treated the indigenous people as backward, heathen, filthy, deceitful, lazy, and even stupid—stereotypes that European colonialists commonly ascribed their African subjects” (as quoted in Tibebe, 1995, p. 44). Furthermore, Habasha social institutions, such as family, school, media, government, and religion, reproduce and perpetuate these racist prejudices and stereotypes within Ethiopian society. Explaining how racial insults wound the colonized people, Richard Delgado (1998) said,

The racial insult remains one of the most pervasive channels through which discriminatory attitudes are imparted. Such language injures the dignity and self-regard of the person to whom it is addressed, communicating the message that distinctions of race are distinctions of merit, dignity, status, and personhood. Not only does the listener learn and internalize the messages contained in racial insults, these messages color our society’s institutions and are transmitted to succeeding generations. (p. 346)

The prejudices and stereotypes consciously or unconsciously have influenced Ethiopians and Ethiopian studies. Ethiopians, and particularly those Ethiopian scholars and Ethiopianists who have been influenced by these racist assumptions, have never respected Oromo culture and have opposed the Oromo struggle for social justice, democracy, and human rights under a variety of different pretexts. Some assert that because Oromos are dispersed among other peoples, the question of national self-determination is not applicable to their cause; others argue that the assimilation of Oromos to Habashas both biologically and culturally prevent them from having a cultural identity that enables them to have national self-determination

(Lata, 1998, pp. 139-144). Furthermore, because Oromos are considered “invaders” of Ethiopia, some Ethiopian elites argue that Oromos do not deserve self-determination because the region that they call Oromia does not belong to them (Gerbee, 1993, p. 50). This assertion implicitly assumes that Oromos must accept their subjugation and second-class citizenship, or they must leave Ethiopia before they will be totally annihilated for continuing to demand self-determination and democracy.

The political agenda of the destruction of Oromo society is not a new phenomenon. The West has been supporting this political agenda. The massive killing of Oromos by Abyssinian colonialism was never condemned as genocide. As Leenco Lata (1998) noted, “Despite its unparalleled brutality, Menelik’s conquest escaped condemnation as the only positive historical development in the Africa of the late 1800s. To achieve this, the Oromo were made to appear deserving to be conquered” (p. 135). Just as genocide committed by Menelik and his followers escaped world condemnation, so is the ethnic cleansing that is systematically committed by the Meles regime. According to Lata, “The massacre of Oromos by any one of the Ethiopian forces rarely gets mentioned in Ethiopian or Euro-American writings. The slightest threat to the Abyssinian by the Oromo, however, can throw up a storm of protest and condemnation” (p. 135).

Currently Ethiopianism hides the true nature of the Tigrayan-led minority regime in Ethiopia. Supported by the West, mainly the United States, and using political violence, this regime has dominated and controlled the Oromo people and others, denying them freedom of expression, association, or organization, as well as access to the media and related forms of communication and information networks (Jalata, 2005, p. 86). The Meles regime has used various techniques of violence to terrorize Oromos who are engaged in the struggle for liberation and democracy. Its soldiers have whipped or tortured; locked in steel barrels or forced into pits where fire is made on top of them; fixed large containers or bottles filled with water to men’s testicles; or, if their victims are women, bottles or poles are pushed into their vaginas (Fossati, Namarra, & Niggli, 1996). In addition, the soldiers of the regime have openly shot thousands of peaceful peoples in Oromia, leaving their bodies for hyenas, burying them in mass graves, or throwing their corpses off cliffs.

Other methods of killing include burning, bombing, cutting throats or arteries in the neck, strangulation, and burying people up to their necks in the ground. As Mohammed Hassen (2001) estimated, between 1992 and 2001 about 50,000 killings and 16,000 disappearances (euphemism for secret killings) occurred in Oromia alone. Furthermore, he estimated that

90% of the killings are not reported. To hide these state crimes from the world community, the Meles government “does not keep written records of its extra-judicial executions and the prolonged detention of political prisoners” (as quoted in Hassen, 2001, p. 33). The regime has killed or imprisoned thousands of Oromo students because they have engaged in peaceful demonstrations. Saman Zia-Zarifi (2004, p. 1), the academic freedom director at Human Rights Watch, noted, “Shooting at unarmed students is a shameful misuse of government power” in Ethiopia.

Just as successive Amhara-dominated regimes engaged in terrorism and genocide and exploited the resources of Oromos, Afars, Ogaden Somalis, Sidamas, and others, the Tigrayan-dominated regime is engaged in similar practices to suppress the national movements of these indigenous peoples in order to maintain a racial/ethnonational hierarchy and continued subjugation. With the intensification of the national movements of these subjugated nations, the regime has been engaged in massive human rights violations, terrorism, and hidden genocide. While engaging in state terrorism in the form of war, torture, rape, and hidden genocide to control the Oromo people and others and loot their economic resources, the Tigrayan state elites claim that they are promoting democracy, federalism, and national self-determination. This regime also committed genocide on the Annuak people of Gambella in 2003 and 2004 (Jalata, 2005, p. 89). These elites use Ethiopianism to claim the unity of the colonizer and the colonized population groups in the Ethiopian Empire while committing such serious crimes against humanity. It is no wonder that all the colonized population groups in Ethiopia reject the ideology of Ethiopianism. In particular, Oromos have developed *Oromummaa* (Oromo-centric worldview, culture, and nationalism) to oppose Ethiopianism and to dismantle the racial/ethnonational hierarchy and Ethiopian settler colonialism and its institutions.

## **Oromummaa and Critical Afrocentricity**

Oromummaa, as an aspect of Afrocentric worldview, builds on the best elements of Oromo culture and traditions and endorses an indigenous Oromo democracy known as the *gada* system. As an Afrocentric worldview that sees an African culture as the center of African life and the African diaspora (Asante, 1990), Oromummaa bases its vision on Oromo popular democracy, an institution that existed before American democracy. Before their colonization, Oromos used the *gada* system of government to organize and order their society around political, economic, social, cultural, and religious institutions (Jalata, 1993/2005, p. 18). The *gada* system was well developed in the 16th

century. Bonnie Holcomb (1991) noted that the system “organized the Oromo people in an all-encompassing democratic republic even before the few European pilgrims arrived from England on the shores of North America and only later built a democracy” (p. 4).

Gada democracy included the principles of checks and balances (through periodic succession of every 8 years), division of power (among executive, legislative, and judicial branches), balanced opposition (among five parties), and power sharing between higher and lower administrative organs to prevent power from falling into the hands of despots (Legesse, 2000/2006; Lemmu, 2004). Other principles of the system included balanced representation of all Oromo branches, lineages, regions, and confederacies; accountability of leaders; and the settlement of disputes through reconciliation and the respect for basic rights and liberties (Jalata, 1993/2005, p. 19).

Currently, the Oromo movement, led by the Oromo Liberation Front, attempts to retrieve popular Oromo democracy. The aspiration to restore this form of popular democracy is similar to the idea of developing Afrocentric awareness in the African and African diaspora communities. According to Molefi Kete Asante (1988), a critical Afrocentric awareness develops

when the person becomes totally changed to a conscious level of involvement in the struggle for his or her own mind liberation. Only when this happens can we say that the person is aware of the collective consciousness will. An imperative of will, powerful, incessant, alive, and vital, moves to eradicate every trace of powerlessness. (p. 49)

Those who endorse and glorify Ethiopianism are undermining this Afrocentric awareness to enjoy power and material benefits at the cost of various African population groups. Hence progressive Habashas, ordinary Amharas and Tigrayans, other Africans, and the African diaspora must recognize the negative consequences of Ethiopianism and support the struggle for self-determination, multinational democracy, and development in Oromia, Ethiopia, and beyond. Without recognizing the centrality of Africa for humanity in general and the significance of indigenous African cultures in particular, we cannot develop “a victorious consciousness” (Asante, 1988) that equips us with the knowledge of liberation. This knowledge of liberation must be a critical Afrocentric one that “places the African person at the center of analysis” by making “the African person subject, and not object, of study” (Asante, 1990).

Similarly, Oromummaa as an intellectual and ideological vision places the Oromo man and woman at the center of analysis and at the same time

goes beyond Oromo society and aspires to develop global Oromummaa by contributing to the solidarity of all oppressed peoples and promoting the struggle for self-determination and multinational democracy. Oromummaa is a complex and dynamic national and global project. As a national project and the master ideology of the Oromo national movement, Oromummaa enables Oromos to retrieve cultural-centric political strategies and tactics that can mobilize the nation for collective action empowering the people for liberation. As a global project, Oromummaa requires that the Oromo national movement be inclusive of all persons, operating in a democratic fashion. This global Oromummaa enables the Oromo people to form alliances with all political forces and social movements that accept the principles of national self-determination and multinational democracy in the promotion of a global humanity that is free of all forms oppression and exploitation. In other words, global Oromummaa is based on the principles of mutual solidarity, social justice, and popular democracy.

Oromummaa, as an element of culture, nationalism, and vision, has the power to serve as a manifestation of the collective identity of the Oromo national movement. The foundation of Oromummaa must be built on overarching principles that are embedded within Oromo traditions and culture and, at the same time, have universal relevance for all oppressed peoples. The main foundations of Oromummaa are individual and collective freedom, justice, popular democracy, and human liberation, all of which are built on the concept of *saffu* (moral and ethical order) and are enshrined in *gada* principles. Although, in recent years, many Oromos have become adherents of Christianity and Islam, the concept of *Waqaa* (God) lies at the heart of Oromo tradition and culture. In Oromo tradition, *Waqaa* is the creator of the universe and the source of all life. The universe created by *Waqaa* contains within itself a sense of order and balance that is to be made manifest in human society. Although Oromummaa emerges from the Oromo cultural and historical foundations, it goes beyond culture and history in providing a liberative narrative for the future of the Oromo nation as well as the future of other oppressed peoples, particularly those who suffer under the Ethiopian Empire.

As a critical element of Afrocentricity, Oromummaa challenges the idea of glorifying African monarchies or chiefs or warlords who collaborated with European slavers and colonizers and destroyed Africa by participating in the slave trade and the project of colonization. Afrocentricity also challenges those African scholars who degrade African democratic traditions just as their Euro-American counterparts devalue the Oromo democratic system and consider indigenous Africans such as Oromos primitive and “stateless” before

and after their colonization. Challenging the view of Euro-American racist and “modernist” scholars, Asmarom Legesse (2000/2006) asserted that

since monarchy was in decline in most Europe, and the transition to democracy became the epitome of Europe’s highest political aspirations, admitting that some varieties of democracy were firmly planted in Africa in the 16th century when in fact they were not fully established in Britain, the United States and France until the 17th or 18th century would have made the ideological premise of the “civilizing mission” somewhat implausible. The idea . . . that African democracies may have some constitutional features that are more advanced than their European counterpart was and still is considered quite heretical. (p. 30)

Recognizing the existence of various forms of democracy before Africa was partitioned and colonized and challenging Euro-American-centric scholarship that rationalizes and justifies racial/ethnonational inequality can help to develop a human-centric and original scholarship. Learning about Oromo society—with its complex democratic laws, an elaborate legislative tradition, and well-developed methods of dispute settlement—and the Oromo national struggle can present a new perspective for Africana studies and politics. Africans and the African diaspora and other oppressed peoples can ally with one another on global level by exchanging political and cultural experiences and re-creating the ideology of pan-Africanism from “below” and global mutual solidarity based on the principles of popular democracy and egalitarian world order.

## **Conclusion**

Successive Ethiopian state elites have built their power on the foundation of a racial/ethnic hierarchy that has been rationalized and justified by racism. They have maintained their legitimacy and survival through external connections and domestic political violence. Because they failed to remove the political obstacles that have facilitated external dependency and state violence, they were unable to build multinational democracy, peace, stability, and development in Ethiopia. The successive regimes of Menelik, Haile Selassie, Mengistu, and Meles have been racist and dictatorial and have continuously pursued destructive policies that have intensified war, terrorism, underdevelopment, and poverty. The Ethiopian state has taken away the sovereignty of the people, exposing them to massive and absolute poverty by denying them their fundamental human rights and needs.

Because the Ethiopian state has been supported by powerful global powers and the imperial interstate system, there have been connections between

the discourse of racism, state violence, and global tyranny in Ethiopia. Successive Ethiopian regimes have used the discourses of civilization, race, culture, and Christianity to link themselves to Europe, the Middle East, and North America and to consolidate their power against their fellow Ethiopians and the colonized populations. The policies of the West and other regions have also become major obstacles in the struggle for self-determination and multinational democracy in the Ethiopian Empire. Without an accountable, democratic, and legitimate government in Ethiopia, colonized population groups may soon face dangerous conditions similar to Bosnia or Rwanda.

It is not without reason that Ethiopia is identified as one of eight African countries that genocide alert identified in 2004. Because successive Ethiopian state leaders have had no respect for humanity, dignity, and development, they must be seen as those criminal collaborators of European slavers who sold their brothers and sisters to Europe and America to receive alcoholic beverages and guns and engaged in the destruction and underdevelopment of Africa. Such African leaders should be exposed for their crimes against humanity and should not be allowed to hide their crimes under the ideology of Ethiopianism. We need to develop a critical perspective that allows us to critically look at an African society and its leaders. I believe that the Afrocentric perspective that has been developed by serious Africanists to challenge Eurocentrism should also expose African collaborators who have denigrated and underdeveloped Africa. Without dealing with this internal concern, Africans and the African diaspora cannot fully rebuild their humanity and overcome their powerlessness and underdevelopment.

The critical perspective of Afrocentricity can challenge the ideology of Ethiopianism that hides crimes against humanity in the name of Black freedom while engaging in enslaving, colonizing, and destroying African humanity and cultural resources. Those who subscribe to Ethiopianism knowingly or unknowingly contribute to the dehumanization and destruction of various African cultures and peoplehood. Without Afrocentric awareness and respect for various African population groups both in the African continent in the diaspora, we cannot fully understand the essence of Black freedom and development in the racialized capitalist world system that is dominated by Euro-American elites and their collaborators.

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