



IN DEFENSE OF THE SURVIVAL OF OUR ERITREAN IDENTITY IN DIASPORAS

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National identity is commonly explained as a person's identity or sense of belonging to one state or to one nation. It is a sense of pride, dignity and honor inherently placed and developed in our inner state of mind. It is the symbol of a personal reputation acquired either by birth or inheritance from parents and sometimes it is acquired by being naturalized in a certain nation or country of residence. National identity is the sense of representation of a nation as a cohesive whole by recognizing, considering and combining the distinctive traditions, history, culture, language and politics of the various ethnic identities of the nation. National identity is important as it affects the relationship building and the interaction of people among themselves living in the same country. Failure to realize and form own identity leads to failure to form a shared identity relationship with others which may lead to instability in our facts of life. If we do not know who we are or how we perceive ourselves, then we are vulnerable to be taken in by all sorts of believes and ideas, or politics being sold or propagated by others. **Developing a strong sense of national identity is basically developing self-esteem and together they are very important and essential to good mental health. It is, therefore, necessary to illustrate the analogy of the functions and significance of a giant tree in our humble village in Eritrea as related to the social obligations and responsibilities of our Eritrean communities, religious institutions and Eritrean political groups in the survival of our Eritrean identity in Diasporas.**

Once upon a time there was a majestic tree named Momona located in front of our village in Eritrea. It was situated on a flat plain land surrounded by other small trees, short shrubs, and fertile farm lands. The green large leaves and beautiful flowers of the tree used



to give a special grace and sweet aroma, respectively, to the surrounding area. Momona was home for all kinds of singing birds and crickets and its beautiful flowers were the main sources of food for the honeybees. The village residents and their animals alike enjoy the cool breeze of air sitting under the shade of the tree against the scorching heat of the sun. The village boys and girls danced and played swings and all sorts of traditional games under the shade of the tree. The village residents

placed flat stones around the tree for the elders and others interested to sit and relax under the shade of the tree. At times the village judge delivered his judiciary services for the village people when they came to him with cases related to land disputes, domestic violence, and other property and personal conflicts. The village residents usually gathered first under the shade of this majestic tree before they started to celebrate their annual church festivals, wedding ceremonies and funeral services. Suddenly, the beautiful tree became very sick from the inside. The leaves and branches started to fall to the ground one after the other. After a while, the whole tree became just dry wood from top to bottom. The village residents could not figure out the problem. Finally, the whole tree fell to the ground dismantled into pieces because it was rotten and consumed by termites from the inside. The whole surrounding area became barren and dry when the huge tree disappeared forever. The absence of Momona adversely affected the traditional and cultural activities which

were regularly undertaken by the village residents under the shade of the tree. Momona was the symbol of identity and pride of the village residents and its legacy and gracious contribution to the memory of the village remains to be eternal.

The story narrated above is directly related to what is happening in our Eritrean communities and religious institutions in Diasporas. The expectation was that our existing Eritrean communities would bring the Eritreans in Diasporas together in unity and make a strong and meaningful connection with our younger generation. The Eritrean community centers were expected to be the center of attraction where the young generation would come and participate in various cultural activities so that they would adapt and appreciate their Eritrean identity. The expectation has not been fulfilled mainly because our Eritrean communities have fallen apart and become dysfunctional communities. Our religious institutions were also expected to bring our people together in unity and embrace our younger generation and make them develop the passion of coming to church, socializing with their mates and Eritrean elders and participating in church activities. Instead most of our Eritrean Orthodox Christian churches except for very few of them, are preoccupied with their own problems. Since some of them have kept splitting from one another and some have been wasting their time in unnecessary cases sitting in courthouses, they are unable to concentrate in initiating and organizing a conducive youth-friendly environment or youth-attractive programs for our younger generation. It is commonly observed that our younger generation are completely absent from attending the spiritual services and other activities of most of the Eritrean churches. **Men and women of faith in our churches have the power, capability and divine support to make a significant difference in the lives of our younger generations.** Obviously, politics is the main intruder and instigator in disturbing and interfering in the affairs of the Eritrean communities and religious institutions in Diasporas. If the younger generation do not take over the leadership role and management of the functions and affairs of the Eritrean communities and Eritrean Orthodox Christian churches, it is evident that both institutions will eventually fall to the ground just like the majestic tree which became rotten from the inside. To this effect, the Eritrean national identity is gradually and consistently vanishing from our social fabrics in Diasporas because we have failed to provide our younger generation with the proper and appropriate guidance to adapt the Eritrean identity and acquire our traditional values and cultural heritage. Our own Eritrean communities and religious institutions should emerge as the pioneers for changes to mobilize and initiate an inviting environment for our children to respect and honor the Eritrean identity.

In view of our current situations, it has been recently observed that many of our younger generation born and raised in Diasporas are getting married to others outside their national identity. For instance, Solomon, an Eritrean American, married Seblework, an Ethiopian American. Together they have a son Sirak, who is half Eritrean American and half Ethiopian American. Sirak is married to a girl named Solia, who is half Irish American and half Chinese American. They have a daughter Sasha, who is now a quarter Eritrean American, a quarter Ethiopian American, a quarter Irish American and a quarter Chinese American. Sasha is married to Samuel who is a quarter Native American, a quarter Mexican American, a quarter Lebanese American and a quarter Armenian American and they have a son named Simon. It is odd and very confusing for little Simon to identify himself as an Eritrean, Ethiopian, Chinese, Mexican, Irish, Lebanese, Armenian American or Native American because he does not belong fully to a specific national

identity. If little Simon is asked to identify his race on an application form, he may indicate the so-called 'other' category, or simply indicate just an American. The Eritrean identity has been shrinking from generation to another in the immediate family of Solomon. If Simon is married to a girl who has a combination of multiple national identities it is inevitable that the little element of Eritrean American identity remaining in Simon will soon disappear from the initial Eritrean family of Solomon. Obviously, our unhealthy social relations, undesirable religious disputes and unfriendly political confrontations among ourselves are the major contributing factors for the gradual disappearance of the Eritrean identity from our younger generations. Our current situation challenges us to make an immediate and prompt changes of behaviors and attitudes towards one another. If we fail to make the necessary changes and do not fulfill our purposes as parents, the situation may lead or encourage our children to declare their freedom and separation from their parents and ultimately neglect the Eritrean identity. Considering the social crisis and political dramas played in our Eritrean communities and religious institutions, most of our younger generation may prefer to identify themselves in general as African Americans. But they need to understand that an African American identity does not reflect an affiliation to one specific national identity of origin in Africa. Thus, the gradual loss of our Eritrean identity is becoming eminent and an alarming reality among many Eritrean families, as it happened in the family of Solomo, unless otherwise we stand firm and react fast in defense of the survival of our Eritrean identity in Diasporas.

If we closely look around at what is happening in our neighboring Somali and Ethiopian communities, we observe that the Somali Shopping Centers in Columbus, Ohio and Minneapolis, Minnesota and the '*Little Ethiopia*' centered in Los Angeles and Virginia-DC Metropolitan area did not appear by accidents. They are built by collecting and bringing their businesses and community activities together to one specific area. Their unique presence in a convenient location gave them great reputation, honor and dignity to their communities. However, our Eritrean businesses cannot sustain for long because we do not support each other. Our communities and community and cultural centers cannot survive because they are constantly plagued and disturbed by our chaotic political discourses. Our children cannot socialize and associate with each other because we cannot tolerate each other and live together in the same neighborhood. Some Eritreans prefer to attend, worship and conduct baptism for their children, wedding ceremonies and funeral services in the Ethiopian, Greek, and Egyptian Coptic churches though our Eritrean churches may be conveniently located in the same neighborhood. The main excuse of these Eritreans for not worshiping in our Eritrean churches is that they hate to observe the constant disputes, quarrels, disorders, and political interference that occur in our Eritrean communities and religious institutions. Despite having unfavorable situation among ourselves, their intentions and deeds reflect a rejection of our Eritrean identity. Some Eritrean elders also seek assistance from the Ethiopian communities to process their application forms for financial support from the Federal government for their medical conditions because we have dysfunctional Eritrean communities unable to provide the necessary public services to Eritreans. It is quite clear that we cannot build bridges of peace and harmony among ourselves by creating animosity and hostility in our Eritrean communities and religious institutions. We cannot ensure the survival of our Eritrean identity by creating a toxic environment for our younger generation that really make them run away from our Eritrean communities and religious institutions. As a result, it has been

observed among our children a downward spiral in rejecting our Eritrean identity and we, the parents, are enabling the situation to occur by being silent which is basically a denial to what is happening with our children in our own respective households.

Alex Hailey, an outstanding African American author, became very much concerned about his identity. He did an extensive search to find with which African nation he could identify himself. In his bestselling research book called the *'ROOTS'*, he traced his linkage to Gambia as the specific country of his national identity. On the other hand, a good African American friend is observed to be in agony because he could not identify his affiliation to one specific country or nation in Africa. Using the results of his DNA search, he came to understand that most of his family ancestors came as slaves from West Africa, but he could not identify from which specific country they came. He still torments himself by asking questions like, *"Who am I? Where did I come from? To whom do I belong?"* He feels lonely and empty inside because he does not know anything about his national or ethnic identity. Likewise, if our younger generation do not know their identity as Eritreans, then they do not know anything about themselves. If we as parent fail to connect the family tree to its roots, in the distant future it will be impossible for our great and great grandchildren to trace their linkage to Eritrea as their specific country of their national identity. Our children would feel the same empty feeling inside just like our African American friend because both the African American and our children are the products of the melting pot of America with no specific ethnic or national identity of origin. We lose our reputation, pride and dignity when we lose our national identity. If we lose our Eritrean identity, we lose everything. Since we came to this world as Eritreans and have lived in this world as Eritreans, then when the time comes we must leave this world as Eritreans. Knowing our national identity is knowing ourselves and knowing ourselves is the beginning of wisdom and the end of ignorance. However, there is no national flag that we may acquire from our country of residence large enough to cover the shame of denying or losing our national identity of origin. If we do not love and honor our national identity, it is the loss of personal identity which is the loss of humanity. Blessed are the younger generation in various states and households who are determined and prepared to inherit their national identity from their parents. But if they do not inherit their national identity from their parents, we are depriving them of their personal humanity and stifling their happiness in life. It is essential to realize and consider the significance and importance of identifying and respecting our traditional values and cultural heritage and our ethnic and religious diversities because they are the cornerstone and foundation for building our national Eritrean identity.

Thus, the Eritrean communities and religious institutions are the only legitimate institutions that can build and promote the significance and importance of our Eritrean identity in our own society in Diasporas. The Churches, Temples, Mosques, Synagogues, and community centers should serve as schools, rehabs and resources centers to cultivate and nurture our younger generation. All Eritreans namely the parents, members of the clergy, and the Eritrean scholars and professionals have the moral obligation and social responsibility to play an important role and serve as teachers, mentors, counselors, coaches and guardians in educating our younger generation to respect and cherish their traditional values, history, and cultural heritage, to learn and speak their native languages, and to honor and appreciate their Eritrean identity. It is now the best and right time for all Eritreans in Diasporas , irrespective of our regional, religious and political differences, to

come together in unity: (1) to restore and develop a peaceful and friendly relationship among ourselves, stop insulting and scolding one another, start loving and respecting each other and join together to advocate for the welfare of our people; (2) to build and prepare a progressive and productive environment for our younger generation; (3) to preserve and transfer our traditional values, history, languages, indigenous knowledge, and cultural heritage to our children; (4) to educate and enlighten our younger generation that our Eritrean identity is the hallmark, emblem and symbol of our national heroes who were martyred in the 30-year and then after armed struggle for national independence and liberation of the Eritrean people; (5) to promote and uphold the sense of belongingness and the formation of self-esteem, self-worth, self-respect and self-pride in our Eritrean communities and religious institutions; and (6) to secure and celebrate the glory of our ethnic and religious diversity and the survival of our Eritrean identity. The divine rewards and blessings that we receive from the Almighty God for our noble and kind acts of service that we gladly deliver to our younger generation are beyond our estimation. Since all things that start well end well, if we really desire to build our reputation and uphold our dignity in our surroundings, the most important thing for all Eritreans, our Eritrean communities and religious institutions required to do is to make a positive and significant change in our way of thinking and in our attitudes towards each other and start to work together in unity and safeguard and protect the Eritrean identity. We must understand that when we come together in unity, there are very few things that we cannot accomplish in this world. All that we need to do is simply to appreciate our diversity, to be kind to one another, to respect each other and to come together in unity. If we do these things, other people, including our adversaries, will respect us and God/Allah will also be on our side to bless us and support us.