On the Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia

The main purpose of this article is to provoke discussions on the "sacred", yet very important issue of this country - the Question of Nationalities. The article as it was prepared for a special occasion (where detailed analysis was due to time and other inconveniences impossible) suffers from generalizations and inadequate analysis. But I still feel it is not mediocre for a beginning. I expect my readers to avoid the temptation of snatching phrases out of their context and capitalizing on them. Instead every point raised here should be examined in the light of the whole analysis.

We have reached a new stage in the development of the student movement, a level where Socialism as a student ideology has been taken for granted, and reaction with all its window dressing is on the defensive. The contradictory forces are no more revolution versus reform, but correct scientific Socialism versus perversion and fadism.

The Socialist forces in the student movement till now have found it very risky and inconvenient to bring into the open certain fundamental questions because of their fear of being misunderstood. One of the delicate issues which has not yet been resolved up to now is the Question of Nationalities - some people call it ridiculously tribalism - but I prefer to call it nationalism. Panel discussions, articles in Struggle and occassional speakers, clandstine leaflets and even tete-a-tete groups have not really delved into it seriously. Of course there was indeed the fear that it may alienate certain segments of the student population and as well the fear that the government may take advantage of an honest discussion to discredit the revolutionary student movement.

Starting from last year, a small minority began to discuss this delicate issue for the most part in secluded places. Discussions, even private, leakout and because they were not brought into the open they normally led to backbiting, misunderstanding and grossly exaggerated rumors. I think students are mature enough to face reality even if they are very sensitive. And the only solution to this degeneration, as witnessed from some perverted leaflets running amock these two weeks, is open discussion.

What are the Ethiopian peoples composed of? I stress on the word peoples because sociologically speaking at this stage Ethiopia is not really one nation. It is made up of a dozen nationalities with their own languages, ways of dressing, history, social organization and territorial entity. And what else is a nation? It is not made of a people with a particular tongue, particular ways of dressing, particular history, particular social and economic organization" Then may I conclude that in

Ethiopia there is the Oromo Nation, the Tigrai Nation, the Amhara Nation, the Gurage Nation, the Sidama Nation, the Wellamo Nation, the Adere Nation, and however much you may not like it the Somali Nation.

This is the true picture of Ethiopia. There is of course the fake Ethiopian Nationalism advanced by the ruling class and unwillingly accepted and even propagated by innocent fellow travelers.

What is this fake Nationalism? It is not simply Amhara and to a certain extent Amhara-Tigre supremacy? Ask any body what Ethiopian culture is? Ask any body what Ethiopian language is? Ask any body what Ethiopian music is? Ask any body what Ethiopian religion is? Ask any body what the "national" dress is? It is either Amhara or Amhara-Tigre!!

To be a "genuine Ethiopian" pne has to speak Amharic, to listen to Amharic music, to accept the Amhara-Tigre religion, Orthodox Christianity and to wear the Amhara-Tigre Shamma in international conferences. In some cases to be an "Ethiopian", you will even have to change your name. In short to be an Ethiopian, you will have to wear an Amhara mask (to use Fanon's expression). Start asserting your national identity and you are automatically a tribalist, that is if you are not blessed to be born an Amhara. According to the constitution you will need Amharic to go to school, to get a job, to read books (however few) and even to listen to the news on Radio "Ethiopia" unless you are a Somali or an Eritrean in Asmara for obvious reasons.

To any body who has got a nodding acquaintance with Marxism, culture is nothing more than the super-structure of an economic basis. So cultural domination always presupposes economic subjugation. A clear example of economic subjugation would be the Amhara and to a certain extent Tigrai Neftegna system in the South and the Amhara-Tigre coalition in the urban areas. The usual pseudo-refutation of this analysis is the reference to the large Amhara and Tigrai masses wallowing in poverty in the countryside. For that matter during the hey-days of British imperialism a large mass of British workers had to live under inhuman conditions.

Another popular counter-argument is that there are two or three ministers of non-Amhara - Tigre Nationality in the Cabinet; one or two generals in the army, one or two governors and a dozen balabats in the countryside. But out and out imperialists like the British used to rule their colonies mainly by enlisting the support of tribal chiefs, who were much more rich than the average citizen of the British Metropolis. The fact that Boigne and Senghor were members of the French National Assembly add the fact that they were even ministers did not reduce an iota of Senegalise and Ivory Coast loss of political independence.

Of course the economic and cultural subjugation by the Amharas and their junior partners the Tigres is a historical accident. Amharas are not dominant because of inherent imperialist' tendencies. The Oromos could have done it and history proves they tried to do so. But that is not an excuse for the perpetuation of this situation. The immediate question is we must declare a stop to it. And we must build a genuine national state.

And what is this genuine national-state? It is a state in which all nationalities participate equally in state affairs, it is a state where every nationality is given equal opportunity to preserve and develop its language, its music and its history. It is a state where Amharas, Tigres, Oromos, Aderes, Somalis, Wollamos, Gurages, etc. are treated equally. It is a state where no nation dominates another nation be it economically or culturally.

And how do we achieve this genuine democratic and egalitarian state?

Can we do it through military? No!!! A military coup is nothing more but a change of personalities. It may be a bit more liberal than the existing regime but it can never resolve the contradiction between either classes or nationalities. The Neway brothers and Tadesse Birus could not have done it. Talking about Mengistu and Tadess, one can not fail to remember the reaction that the Mengistus coup though a family one and at that by a sector of Shoa Amharas (with few exceptions, of course among them Workench) was very popular just because it was staged by "Ethiopians" - Amharas. With Tadesse, it was automatically a tribalist uprising. Why? Tadesse an Oromo cannot stage a nationalist coup but Oromo Supermacist.

I am not equivocal in condemning coups, but the Tadesse coup had at least one significant quality and a very important one too. It gave our Oromo Brothers and Sisters self-respect. And self-respect is an important pre-requisite for any mass-based revolution. Even the so called revolutionaries who scoffed at the coup just like the mass of the student body, could not comprehend this quality. You can clearly see in this instance the power of the Amhara-Tigre supermacist fellings. They clearly proved that they were nothing more than the products of government propaganda of this question.

Can the Eritrean liberation Front and the Bale armed struggle achieve our goal? Not with their present aims and set-up.

Both these movements are exclusive in character, led by the local Bourgeoisie in the first instance and the local feudal lords in the second. They do not have internationalist out-look, which is essential for our goal. They are perfectly right in declaring that there is national oppression. We do not quarrel with them on this score. But their intention is to stop here.

They do not try to expand their struggles to the other nationalities. They do not attempt to make a broad-based assualt on the foundations of the existing regime. They deliberately try to forget the connection of their local ruling classes with the national oppression. In short these movements are not led by peasants and workers. Therefore, they are not Socialists. And if they are not Socialists, it would only be a change of masters for the masses. But for the Socialists the welfare of the masses comes first.

The same can be said for the Gojjam uprising. But I would like to take this opportunity once again to show how much Amhara supermacism is taken for granted in this Campus.

To applaud the E.L.F. is a sin. If anything favorable is written out, it is automatically refuted by both USUAA and NUEUS. But the Gojjam affair was different. Support for it was practically a show of identity to the so-called revolutionaries.

Mind you, I am just saying that these movements are not lasting solutions for our goal - the set-up of a genuine Nationalist Socialist State. I am all for them, the EL.F., the Bale movements, the Gojjam uprising, to the extent that they have challenged and weakened the existing regime, and have created areas of discontent to be harnessed later on by a genuine Socialist revolution.

One thing again is certain. I do not oppose these movements just because they are secessionists. There is nothing wrong with secessionism as such. For that matter secession is much better than nationally oppressive government. I quote Lenin "...People resort to secession only when national oppression and national antagonisms make joint life absolutely intolerable and hinder any and all economic intercourse. In that case the interests of the freedom of the class struggle will be best served by Secession." I would also like to quote the resolution on the question of nationalities from the London International Socialist Congress of 1896 attended, supported and adopted by the Bolsheviks who brought about the October revolution. "This Congress declares that it stands for the full right of all nations to self-determination and expresses its sympathy for the workers and peasants of every country now suffering under the yoke of military, national or other absolutism."

As long as secession is led by the peasants and workers and believes in its internationalist obligation, it is not only to be supported but also militarily assisted. It is our backwardness and selfishness to ask a people to be partners in being exploited till you can catch up. We should never dwell on the subject of secession, but whether it is progressive or reactionary. A Socialist Eritrea and Bale would give a great impetus to the revolution in that country and could form an equaliterian and democratic basis for reunification to come back to our central

question: How can we form a genuine egalitarian national state? It is clear that we can achieve this goal only through violence, through revolutionary armed struggle. But we must always guard ourselves against the pseudo-nationalist propaganda of the regime. The revolution can start any where. It can even be secessionist to begin with, as long as led by the progressive forces- the peasants and the workers, and has its final aim the liberation of the Ethiopian Mass with due consideration to the economic and cultural independence of all the nationalities. It is the duty of every revolutionary to question whether a movement is socialist or reactionary not whether a movement is secessionist or not. In the long run Socialism is internationalism and a Socialist movement will never remain secessionist for good.

To quote Lenin again, "From their daily experience the masses know perfectly well the value of geographical and economic ties and the advantages of a big market and a big state. From this point of view of the struggle as well,a regime like ours harassed from corners is bound to collapse in a relatively short period of time. But when the degree of consciousness of the various nationalities is at different levels, it is not only the right but the duty of the most concious nationality to first liberate itself and them assist others in the struggle for total liberation. Is that not true of Korea? We do support this movement, don't we? Then what is this talk of tribalism, secessionism, etc.....?

Note: The preceding is a reprint of an article which appeared in STRUGGLE (organ of USUAA, Addis Ababa), Vol. V, No. 2, 17 Nov. 1969. The author is a popular activist in the Student movement at home. He is currently in prison, having been condemned to a 5-year term by the fascist regime for his political activities.