I. Introduction

Professor Teodros Kiros [hereafter “Teodros”] is a well established personality in our Ethiopian Diaspora community (political life) due to his exemplary hard work and commitment to our political and social struggles. In several of his outstanding books, numerous essays and articles, we are privileged to learn about ourselves, about our struggle, and about our hopes and aspirations. Teodros is no charlatan trying his hand in this or that, but a well educated, brilliant, and socially conscious individual. He received his B.A. at University of Wisconsin and his Ph.D. in Political Philosophy at Kent State University. The following two books (under review) are his most recent contribution to our Ethiopian discourse: Teodros Kiros, Philosophical Essays, Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 2011. [Teodros-1]; Teodros Kiros, Ethiopian Discourse, Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 2011. [Teodros-2]

In fact, Teodros’s sphere of involvement and influence is much wider than our own Ethiopian locality. He devoted all of his adult life in reminding us that there is a much higher plane to all our political and social involvements. To wit here are some of his outstanding books you all might want to explore: 1) Zara Yacob, A seventeenth Century Rationalist: Philosopher of the Rationality of the Human Heart. The Red Sea Press, 2005; 2) Self-Construction and the Formation of Human Values: Truth, Language, and Desire, Praeger Paperback, 2001; 3) Explorations In African Political Thought,
I am tempted to ask what motivates Teodros to write with such depth and scope on a subject that seems, on the surface, contingent to a fruitful academic life. To a great extent, Teodros has answered that question where he stated, “I write because writing is my vocation. I enjoy it. But joy is not the only reason. I write because I consider myself a responsible citizen of the Ethiopia that I love from the depth of my veins. I do not write to please the public; if I did, my life would be so different. To the extent that I can, I try to write truthfully at all times, although that habit will not make me ‘the person of the year’ or even lead me to the right job.” [Teodros-2, p231] If we seek one word to draw as identification adjective to tag on Teodros, the word most appropriate to use would be “courageous.”

What is not published as often as his writings is about Teodros’s commitment to academic life and his exceptional contribution in the field of continental philosophy and ethics from a trajectory that is unique. His views on human endeavor are often interwoven in books and essays dealing with pressing social and economic issues. All of his books deal with economic and social issues (ethics and philosophy). Most of his writing is involved with the interpretation of principles and norms and in relating factual matters to such principles and norms. It is in this context of critical thinking or hermeneutics that I chose to review his recent books.

Both books under review are compilation of a series of essays and commentaries he wrote and published over a period of time. Theodros-1 seems to be more thematically focused than Teodros-2. Teodros-2 is eclectic in the range of subjects discussed over a period of over ten years. Thus, in reading the books under review one cannot help but feel revisiting known terrine of ideas. Nevertheless, there is a degree of novelty in the book-matrix that it is worth our effort to devote time to read these very important books. By way of reassuring all of my readers that there is nothing wrong in collected materials i.e., individual articles in a book form, to be part of our book collections, for references and occasional refreshing reading. I direct your attention to an outstanding article on the virtue (“sin” in the author’s own word) of rereading as expounded beyond the pale by David Gate in his beautifully and passionately crafted article “Now, Read it Again” of June 27, 2009, in Newsweek. “I'm always rereading …The simple answer is that they give me joy. They fill me with the voices of people I know, thousands of them—many times the number in that old Dickens print—the real and the imagined, the living and the dead. Heaven may be like this eventually, but why wait around when it's right here, right now?”

II. The Case of Philosopher Zera Yacob

There are some serious questions that need be answered satisfactorily about the translation into English of the Hatetat of Zera Yacob by Professor Claude Sumner. The treatise of Zärʾa Yaʾqob and of Wäldä Ḥgyw·at, was first printed in 1976. In the book, there is no one named translator, but that of the name of Claude Sumner is stated as the author. Sumner has no knowledge of Geez to qualify him as translator of such work. That fact has casted a dark shadow on the authenticity and credibility of the translation as
presented by Sumner. This means that any writing based on such translation is also challenged because its referential book is challenged.

An Ethiopian scholar wrote some times back that “Sumner proved that the author of the *Treatise* was not an Italian Capuchin Giusto d’Urbino, who lived in Ethiopia in the 19th century; Giusto d’Urbino himself never said the work was his own but told that he had bought the manuscript.” That is well and good but it still remains for us to have a verifiable translation. It is not to discredit the voluminous work and devotion of Sumner to Ethiopia and its people that I am questioning the quality and authenticity of the translation of Zera Yacob’s great philosophical work, but to ensure that we pass to the next generation authenticated documents. Are we dealing here with the copy that was acquired by d’Urbino or some other version? Where is the original Geez version that was the basis for the translated work of Sumner? The problem of authenticity and proper inclusion of unnamed and shadowy Ethiopian translators as “Translators” in very many books/works by foreigners on Ethiopia is the single most serious and persisting defect that need be corrected.

It is obvious that Teodros adores Zera Yacob, the seventeenth century philosopher *par excellence*. [Teodros-2, 36-50] It is heart warming to read a serious scholar devoting his time and intellect to elucidate and explain an Ethiopian Philosopher that some consider the equal of Descartes, if not his superior intellectual brother. Teodros poured his heart and soul in his book on Zera Yacob: *Zara Yacob, A seventeenth Century Rationalist: Philosopher of the Rationality of the Human Heart*, The Red Sea Press, 2005. It is with great emotional difficulty that I discount the value of Teodros’s book on Zera Yacob completely. This has nothing to do with the quality of the analysis or the presentation of the ideas and arguments by Teodros if we assume the translation is a legitimate one and could be verified from the original Geez. The problem is with the translation work of Sumner. We have no way of verifying what is claimed to be a translation. We do not know who translated the Geez into English. For sure it is not Sumner for he could hardly find his way even in Amharic let alone Geez. We need to have the copy of the original Geez side by side with any translation so that there could be possible verification and testing for accuracy.

An entire field of philosophical enquiry has developed from such initial concerns about the accuracy of translations and the appropriateness of interpretations of biblical texts (medieval and early medieval works). Over a period of time such rigorous discipline took a life of its own and developed into a discipline called hermeneutics. Other than the serious technical difficulties that would deteriorate and affect the substance of the original book, there are also exaggerated claims that Zera Yacob’s writing has somehow contributed to “the development of African philosophy.” One must be careful in making such claims. The first question that comes to mind is the question of publication and wide distribution of Zara Yacob’s work for it to have some such impact. The second question has to do with the existence of an “African philosophy” in the sense of categories or types of philosophies. Both concerns/questions are very difficult to address in a definitive manner.
In this book review and miscellaneous comments I am not pouring cold water on a passionate expose of a philosopher by being highly critical of the translation/authorship of Sumner, but rather I am concerned in the verification and authenticity of the work of the Zera Yacob as presented in translation in English with no way of checking on the quality of the translation. I would offer a compromise in rehabilitating the works of Zera Yacob by suggesting that there be constituted a panel of experts in Geez to translate the work of Zera Yacob. But first, what must be done now is to have the original Geez writing verified by experts and submit the same to a body of qualified Geez scholars from Ethiopia. Ethiopian Orthodox Church scholars must be represented in such a panel of experts. At any rate, in private communication, Teodros has assured me that he has the Geez version of Zera Yacob’s work in his collections. It is very reassuring and calming to know that. It may be the case that the book and articles written by Teodros may well be vindicated for being based then on a text that is legitimated and authenticated. The first step in that direction is to publish Zera Yacob in his original Geez.

III. Democracy: Greeks v. the Rest
A number of Ethiopians in the Diaspora talk or write about “democracy” with such intensity that they may give to an outsider the impression that they may be worshiping some god called “democracy.” The irony is that we Ethiopians in general are not democratic as individuals or as a community. We are much more militaristic and hierarchical than we imagine. However intensely we bring up the subject of democracy in most of our discourses, it is yet mostly superficial and has no firm grounding in the lives of those of us who incessantly talk or write about democracy. One great exception may well be Teodros who is consistently devoted to the democratic model. Having said that, I should mention some disagreements I have with Teodros in the history of the development of “democracy.” Teodros concentrated on Plato and Aristotle in discussing democracy. [Teodros-1, ppxxi-xxiv, 1-19] It seems to me that is a choice of personalities rather than fact based reflection. It is a curious choice for Teodros to associate democratic political ideas with Plato or Aristotle unless we equate rationalism with democracy.

I am quite sure from historical records that Cleisthenes is the one person credited to have reorganized Athenian society into a system that is the precursor of a representative democratic political structure. Especially considering the fact that Cleisthenes was from a powerful aristocratic family in power, it was a great achievement then moving an aristocratic land based power structure into some form of a representative political structure. This must be considered in stark contrast to Plato who was in support of an elitist political hierarchy rigidly structured by class that resembled a caste system. Aristotle favored too an aristocracy. Neither philosopher could be considered a democratic thinker. It is clear, for example from the Apology of Plato that the statement of Socrates was not in any way indicative of any ideation of democracy. Socrates was accused of corrupting the youth of Athens, in essence euphemistically speaking for corrupting the then existing system of government, which was a democratic one that had lapsed momentarily into a dictatorship. The injustice Socrates suffered does not in anyway transform him into a democratic thinker. He was all his life against the common man, an elitist in his ideology and a sophist in his method of argument.
There is the possibility that I might have misread the trajectory that Teodros grounded his perception/evaluation in according prominent places to Plato and Aristotle on the subject of democracy. To me both philosophers were detractors rather than promoters of “democracy” as a system of government. At any rate, Teodros explained to us that the democratic form or structure of a society is not uniquely Western but also practiced all over the world at one point in past human history. This is all true, because it is supported by anthropological and sociological studies and findings by numerous experts and researchers.

Teodros is not a rigid or inflexible thinker. He adjusts his ideas with flow of time that reflects his constantly evolving mind. There is nothing more satisfying to see a man of great talent constantly struggling to perfect his craft and his ideas changing and adjusting his conclusions as a result of critical self examination and honesty. I quote here a very illustrative statement by Lewis Gordon in his Preface to Teodros-1, “In writing to his Ethiopian sisters and brothers with the call to critical reflection on democratic participation and justice through drawing upon their creative resources and reflective judgment, Kiros is engaging in that radical reflective spirit of universalizing praxis. In this sense, in all his homes—in Ethiopian and North American thought—he exemplifies the value of fearless speech, and in so doing, speaks to us all.”

IV. Contractarians and the Birth of Modern (Liberal) Democracy

Even with all the pitfalls in generalizing a complex people and with the risk of drawing a simplified identification, I do not think of us Ethiopians as uniquely African, for we are foremost Ethiopians, an identity forged by thousands of years of pounding by the hammer and anvil of history shaped into a tempered distinct people (singular). Teodros’s discussion of our current political situation and thinking is grounded in the works of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Hume, and Madison. This part of his work constitutes the first half of his entire book. [Teodros-1, 21-54]. The core ideas of those philosophers as expounded by Teodros suggest that they were not all cut from the same philosophy-cloth. True, all of them seem to be contractarians, but that is the extent of their similarity. For example, Hobbes thinks that man in the state of nature is beastly, whereas for Rousseau man in nature is at his natural best and that it is civil society that is responsible for all individual deformities.

Teodros admires Rawls, which is wonderful. I had also the good fortune of meeting Rawls at Harvard. I met him at a time when he looked emaciated in his declining health, but Teodros had a meaningful discourse and real feel of the great philosopher over an extended period. Thus, I paid much more attention to the sections where Teodros discussed Rawls. [Teodros-1, Sec 23, Sec 25] I was most intrigued how Teodros related the concept of “justice” as foundational rights for distribution of privileges. In this regard I draw comparisons and differences between Teodros’s treatment of Rawls and the criticism of Rawls in an article by Professor Andreas Eshete [hereafter Andreas], “Contractarianism and the Scope of Justice,” in Ethics, 85, 1 (October. 1974), 38-49. In discussing the views of Teodros and Andreas, I have in mind also my own rather clumsy effort on Rawls in graduate school as well. Of course, it will not be fair to compare or
contrast brief synoptic statements with Andreas’s full fledged critical analysis on an aspect of Rawls’s idea of distributive difference principle.

I am bringing in the article by Andreas into focus in order to contrast the views of Teodros even though he may seem to be inclined towards Marxist thoughts to the Hegelian of Andreas. This is how Andreas framed the issue for his criticism of Rawls: “Since the conception of justice is jointly defined by the two principles, if the difference principle lacks invariance the conception as a whole fails to capture an eternal perspective. The attraction of contractarianism for social theory stems, in part, from the claim to eternity; I hope to show that this source of the doctrine's attraction is illusory.”

What is interesting for me for the purpose of this review is why both philosophers stressed or focused on the distributive rule (difference principle) first and foremost as opposed to Rawls’s first principle on rights that need be satisfied first in order to consider the second distributive principle. In other words, the group or communal interest is given priority over and above the rights of individuals. Does not this ground the subject of democracy in a loop? Despite the fact that I am not sure whether the introduction of “temporality” as a serious question by Andreas in discussing the invariance of the difference principle is a valid one, for eternity can be a difficult concept to resolve in context of any statement or assertion of principle. [I hope my readers would realize that my criticism of Andreas is not personal; as matter of fact, I admire his writing skill, his careful choice of words, and his structure of meaning and context. It is his political and moral commitment that I am appalled with that he could not muster the common decency to see the harm and devastation Meles Zenawi has brought about on Ethiopia in the last eighteen years.]

As far as I can tell, when Rawls discussed “eternity” he seems to be using the concept of the eternal categorematically, whereas Andreas uses the term “eternity” syncategorematically. On the other hand, considering the literature of temporality or relativism, it seems to me there is a persistent confusion between statements that are eternal in content as opposed to their temporal structural expression—a difference in metaphor and metonymy. Andreas’s discussion is forcefully ontological in the sense that it goes against the stated statement of Rawls that his idea is simply hypothetical; thus, testing it under the metaphysical issue of “being” with existence as measuring tool simply miscasts the issue.

A far more interesting challenge to the “eternity” idea in Rawls is argued in a small book by Professor William Soderberg [hereafter Soderberg] where Soderberg saw the problem leading to the age old problem of heresy vs. orthodoxy that would result, as it has done countless times in the past, in some form of persecution. “The ‘perspective from eternity,’ or Rawls’ cards-down perspective, can pose a major problem: it can deteriorate into a tyranny of orthodoxy. People may begin to argue over who is adopting the perspective and who is not. When people claim to adopt the perspective, they are sometimes subjected to proofs of fidelity and proofs of orthodoxy. Those unwilling to adopt the timeless perspective—and who prefer to follow inclinations, for example—may be viewed as infidels and on
occasion may be subjected to inquisition and persecution. Battles can break out over who is orthodox and who is not.” [William Soderberg, *The Game of Philosophy*, University Press of America, 2000, 57.]

My own preference is to think of the question of “eternity” as a non-question or as a silly question; however, if pressed I would consider the question of “eternity” as the eternal “present” that has no beginning and no end, or as the ancient Greeks would have it that which cannot be traversed. From the perspective of the individual—what other perspective can there be—eternity as a subjective concept is a non-starter.

At any rate, I challenge both philosophers that the hierarchy they attempted to edify with Hegel or Marx in the background should be revaluated, and the hierarchy should be modified with the rights principle on top and the difference principle as secondary or of much less importance. To put it in ordinary language, I put spirituality first and material convenience second. After all, what is uniquely human is our spirituality, for we share in our base appetites what is true with all the animals and the beasts of the jungle.

There is no doubt in my mind that Teodros considers philosophy as substantive, at least in its significance to the ongoing human discourse across disciplines overcoming and transcending nominalistic limitations. What I find surprising is the fact that there is no discussion of “cause and effect” temporizing events as would in Hume. There is no recognition of the direction of the arrow of time either. In simpler philosophical term, we are never safely tucked and immune to all the pervasive process of decomposition or dealing with the process of entropy. Needless to say, all principles dissolve with increased entropy that also indicates that time is not just a state of mind but a dimension of reality no matter how crudely understood by human beings.

I really do not give a hoot what individuals think in their private moments or lives. I get involved out of concern when their philosophy affects social order and the public good. Andreas's view on the difference principle and the maximization of privileges is shaped by his predetermined outlook on the role of the individual in a community, formed already in his mind while young living under trying circumstances (family situation) in an Ethiopian culture of the 1940s and 50s. The tragedy of Ethiopian current political situation, in the main is due to such distortions and corruption of the individual in those formative years. The radicalization of Ethiopian students in the 1960s is reactionary to such extent that its focus being individual lives of the students themselves even though the surface explanation and agitation is all about the Ethiopian “Masses.”

If we reflect for a moment on the history of Imperial Ethiopia, we note that the Emperor and his order of Government structure cannot be that easily delaminated from the people of Ethiopia. The Ethiopian family structure was, in fact, the target of rebellion by the students of the time. Ethiopian students mainly fought for their own liberation from the tyranny of their fathers and the family hierarchy, and not, as often claimed, for liberation of Ethiopia’s “masses,” to use a favorite term from the literature of the student movement of the time. Such psychological Oedipus-complex in turn had a disastrous effect on our Ethiopian political life to this date. In a way, Messay Kebede had discussed such a process in his outstanding book: Messay Kebede, *Radicalism and Cultural Dislocation in*
In December of 2008, I wrote in my consolidated book review and commentary of Messay’s book that summarized Messay’s primary points, which are often provocative because they go against the grain of accepted evaluations of the Ethiopian student movement. The question he raised and answered dealt with how the question of psychology vs. historical dialectics resulted in a distorted revolution. Messay contend that the student movement was not a consequence of economic hardship, but a movement born out of social alienation due to the education bubble created by Haile Selassie’s education policy. [Messay, 48-49, 95-97]. Furthermore, he contended that the radicalization of Ethiopian students was not due to rational or dialectical process but psychological of deeply felt feeling of guilt for rebelling against inapt “fathers.” [Messay, 143-154, 165-186] To me that bubble is simply an accidental setup, but the revolt of students and citizens alike was and still is against the authoritative father figure, the Oedipus complex (symbolized by the Emperor then, and every leader hence). Teodros did not try to explain the cause of social discontent resulting in political rebellion in terms political forces.

Unlike Teodros, Andreas is a truly tragic figure because of his weakness in accepting the patronage of Meles Zenawi, the current Ethiopian Government, in his appointment as President of the University of Addis Ababa. What a loss of talent in Andreas’s choice of work, for he betrayed his academic calling for an administrative profession for which he is badly prepared. The depth of loathing even by élites, including his contemporaries, is terrible. Any association with Meles Zenawi continues to be a kiss of death. By contrast, Teodros remained committed to philosophy, to the love of wisdom, and has produced numerous articles and several books that definitely benefit his fellow man. Along with Messay Kebede, Teodros is the great Ethiopian scholar who is productive and nurturing to all.

V. Elitism, Ethnicism, Federalism, and Social Consciousness
I apologize to my readers for this section for I have expanded it to include what may look unrelated subject, but in fact is. In order to understand the ramification of elitism in the Ethiopian context and how it had affected our lives/ethos, I have taken to task as my point of diversion Professor Andreas’s work. By his own admission, Andreas was one of the most influential voices that brought about the current “Federal” structure of the State of Ethiopia thereby causing the ever deepening fractures across ethnic lines of Ethiopian communities. In an interview with Callaloo, Volume 33, Number 1, Winter (2010), (102-116), Andreas affirmed his involvement in the incorporation of “a federal” state structure for Ethiopia in the 1995 Constitution. Who could defy and challenge what could only be described as the avalanche of graduates of Yale University including Fasil Nahum, the drafter of the 1995 Constitution, who were giving credibility to Meles Zenawi and his supporters in the EPRDF undermining all those who had far more unifying programs for the battered nation of Ethiopia?
Here is an extract from the incredulous interview of Andreas Eshete published in *Callaloo*, Volume 33, Number 1, Winter (2010):

“WOUBSHET: You’ve argued that federalism is the most viable option for governing and holding together Ethiopia. Philosophically and historically, why is federalism the better constitutional option for Ethiopia and Ethiopians?

ESHETE: I think there are both reasons of history and reasons of theory if you like—practical theory—why this is important. The reasons of history are of course the fact that there were millions of Ethiopians who were completely marginalized, who didn’t feel they were Ethiopians or who felt they could not be Ethiopians unless they gave up their own identity, hid it, or withheld it. So federalism of course got rid of this necessity. It also made all religions, all cultural communities in Ethiopia, equal and sovereign. So Ethiopia now is going to be a free union of these sovereign peoples who now could retain their identity while becoming full-fledged Ethiopians and in fact the makers and sovereign architects of the new Ethiopia.”

Andreas is living in a dream world, a few months back he declared that he is still a socialist. Such is his anachronistic view: “So I am still a socialist and socialism still has a future for good reasons. I don’t gloat at the failure of capitalism, but I do enjoy the idea that what is supposed to be the enduring according to our Western friends, the enduring social form, the only one that fits our best theoretical knowledge and our best views about evolution, is not working.” It is hypocrisy of the worst kind for anyone who is greatly benefiting from a brutal dictatorial Government to be speaking of socialism let alone federalism. But that is exactly what Andreas is doing. The ongoing celebration of federalism in Ethiopia, which coincided with the 5th International Conference on Federalism that opened on December 14 at the UN Conference Center in Addis Ababa, is a show to behold on the folly of egotistical leaders, who have butchered innocent people, and even some accused of genocide and at least one indicted by the International Criminal Court, congratulating each other for a system that had not been implemented anywhere but used as an excuse to divide and rule citizens of such victim countries. Those same people at the Celebration are the dispossessed of millions of hectares of their fertile land by Meles Zenawi and their land leased out for a century.

The “Federalism” that both Andreas and Fasil are talking about is the worst kind and the most primitive type, for it is based on ethnicism and racism that totally undermines and subordinates all individual fundamental rights to the ethnic group rights. Ethnicism is the single most destructive tool in the ongoing balkanization of Ethiopia and its ultimate destruction of Ethiopia. It was absolutely irresponsible of Fasil and collaborators to have given a cover to Meles Zenawi to pursue his anti-Ethiopia destructive program in the guise of Federalism. It is disconcerting if not unhinging to hear Fasil Nahum talks about the virtue of ethnic based “federalism” in Ethiopia as a program to saving Ethiopia from disintegration in 1991. Such talk coming from Fasil Nahum is Kafkaesque in the extreme. He claimed, in a video interview with Walta of a couple of days ago, that there never was an Ethiopian government that respected human rights as the current Government of Meles Zenawi. Such are the statements of shameful lies of dishonorable men of learning. Or is this inexcusable stupidity or naïveté?
Rather than pontificating about the “feudalism” of traditional Ethiopia, in trying to discredit Ethiopia’s tradition and great Emperors, if Fasil had paid some attention to his scholarship, he would have realized that the concept of “Federalism” is not something new for Ethiopian rulers, for most of our history the “King of Kings” presided over autonomous territories governed by local leaders. It was only during Haile Selassie’s reign that serious centralization took place with some success. Traditional Ethiopia was not like feudal Europe. One must really be careful in making generalized statements about historical Ethiopian system of governments.

Fasil Nahum is a man who served Mengistu Hailemariam as an insider and close collaborator, and he used to sing the same kind of song he is now belting out trying to convince Ethiopians about the virtue of the “Federalism” of Meles Zenawi’s regime as he had done for Mengistu’s regime and his 1984 Constitution. Fasil is not even an Ethiopian by ethnicity, if we use his own criteria of testing for the identity of individuals: he is an Eritrean on his mother’s side and a Jew on his father’s side. Now, he has continued to lead his charmed chameleon life hurting Ethiopians once again collaborating with another brutal and savage leader and his Government that has committed large scale murder, incarceration of tens of thousands of people, and is still torturing and detaining Ethiopians as we speak. Such people also tried to portray the opposition as anti ethnic groups, which is an absurdity, for the opposition is far more supportive of individual rights which is the very base of ethnic identity. That approach is far more authentic and respect all Ethiopians without having to label them like caged animals.

There is also another serious error that is often glossed over by most people who claim that only a federal structure would insure the ethnic equality of the diverse “Peoples” of Ethiopians. This form of claim is based on false premises because it seems to equate the humanness of an individual with the culture of that individual. It confuses ethnic identity with the fundamental human rights a human being innately has irrespective of race, ethnicity, skin color, or gender. The over emphasis of ethnicity in the Ethiopian version of federalism has at its base the notion of cultural equality as its foundation. It is perceived by many supporters of “ethnic federalism” as the basis of all human rights. This is where the fallacy starts. Human beings are ends whereas culture is a means to an end, thus culture cannot be equated in any form with the foundational rights attributable to the individual nor can it be placed above or equal to such individual rights.

Whether it is Andreas or anybody else who is collaborating with the current Government of Meles Zenawi is selling his or her soul to the Devil. Such individual is walking on stilts. He or she is the quintessential elitist who is floating high above everyone, never engaging anyone unless one has political or financial power or is from an elite school or thereabout—a true deformity of character—that ought to be evaluated for the degree of harm he may have caused Ethiopia. By contrast Teodros has repeatedly written challenging the ethic based federalism of the current Ethiopian Government and Ethiopian State structure. [Teodros-2, 207-218] The concern of intellectuals, the likes of Andreas and Fasil, is the structuring of power; if they speak of the people of Ethiopia, it is in terms of words like the “masses” that is an undifferentiated blob, incidental to their main goal of acquisition of power or serving such a god. Without doubt the people of
Ethiopia are the main concern of Teodros. For example, Teodros devoted over fifty pages, almost a third of his book to the problem of famine in Africa in general and in Ethiopia in particular. [Teodros-2, 108-150] Rather than declaring that he is still a socialist or some such hypocrisy/thing, Teodros came up with a creative solution that does not bow down to either socialism or capitalism. He called his system of economy the “moral economy” and offered it as an alternative system to both capitalism and socialism. [Teodros-2, 113-121] The concept of “moral economy,” Teodros tells us, is based on the Pharonic Maat, which fact grounds that concept in our African Continent.

We see often in Ethiopian intellectuals, especially in those who were born in Addis Ababa or vicinity, such pronounced and incapacitating elitist attitude that has infected even those that are of recent vintage who lived most of their lives in foreign lands. The blocking off or alienation of Ethiopians outside of that pernicious group even in the arts is quite comical, if it were not devastating to our unity. The recent production in Callaloo, Volume 33, Number 1, Winter 2010 on the state of the arts in Ethiopia is such a disappointing attempt of elevation of few individuals by whom Ethiopian art and artists are to be measured. The individuals involved in that project are painfully green, and yet they set themselves arrogantly as arbiters and as paragons of virtue as standard and trend setters for the arts in Ethiopia.

As expected, in Callaloo painters Gebrekiristos Desta and Skunder Boghasian are edified as pioneers in developing the Arts in Ethiopia. Afework Tekle is noticeably absent in that name dropping in Callaloo. As a matter of fact, I believe the two painters Gebrekiristos Desta and Skunder Boghasian, from a certain perspective had hindered the development of home-grown painting/art form by distorting the normal flow of creative impulses of young aspiring Ethiopians by subordinating such minds to their hyphenated art forms in full imitation of Western modernist paintings. The awarding of the Haile Selassie I Prize to such painters was a mistake. At any rate, the value of art as a reflection or expression of ones own culture need not be recognized through awards and accolades, for it is forceful enough to impose itself on society. Once upon a time I was also an aspiring painter with plenty of native talent. I stopped painting because I realized that to survive as an artist in the West after I relocated my venue, I had to imitate the cultural trends of the society and produce art works that embodied the pictorial sensibilities of the West, its style, theme, execution, even philosophy. I chose to remain authentic and stopped painting altogether and shifted my creative energy to reading and writing.

I understand intimately the mind of the artist, his sacrifices and aspirations far more accurately than any of the imitators and cultural vandals and mercenaries. It is a misunderstanding to think of Ethiopian traditional art form anything but abstract. What could be more abstract than the non-representational supra-natural art form of Ethiopia whether it is expressed in religious thematic form or in secular decorative art expressed in all kinds of utensils, clothing, hair style, food presentations et cetera. Thus the issue per se is not the so called “modern” art form but the authenticity and respect to ones own cultural heritage. Every Ethiopian who grew up in our Ethiopian culture but reinvent himself as some form of modernist in the style of Western studio based trained painter is a charlatan and a fake.
In my couple of decades of close scrutiny of the lives of our intellectuals what I have
discovered is the fact that Teodros is the least elitist intellectual. Teodros wrote several
articles wherein it was clear that he was inviting all to participate in scholarly discourse.
He instigated discourses on topics as varied as the choices for Ethiopia’s future systems
of government, the ethical and moral issues involving famine et cetera. Almost none
responded to his noble effort. I find such absence of interest, or even worse, neglect,
unacceptable. For example, the individuals involved in the Callaloo fiasco did not even
bother to contact such distinguished scholar like Teodros, but limited themselves to their
incestuous relationships of their groupies both here in the United States and in Addis
Ababa.

Attending an Ivy League school need not be used as a measure of distinction, after all it is
not our Ivy League, and such distinction is not our attribute either. Teodros knows who
he is and writes affirming his identity as an Ethiopian. He is very comfortable as an
Ethiopian unlike a number of Ethiopian scholars who seem to be in perpetual search for
an identity. There is no need to seek for some identity in any culture, even more so in a
culture that has as its base slavery or minority subculture. After all we never had been
anybody’s slave or colony. It is tragic that elitist Ethiopians in the forefront writing on
Ethiopian art are such individuals who seem to be in total awe of such subcultures and
look down at our own world class culture that they hardly give attention to or know
about. The pursuit of “modernity” since the time of Emperor Minilik II and in full throttle
during the fifty years reign of Emperor Haile Selassie resulted in distorting and
corrupting our cultural identity.

Those transitory migrant Ethiopians from the margins of our Ethiopian social structure
totally succumbed to such influences and paid back our main stream society with
contempt and disdain of our great culture. Their aspiration for some other cultural outlet
is understandable by taking into account the development of all pseudo cultures from
main stream cultures. There is literally nothing we need in terms of culture from the
outside world. We are a universe to ourselves. If at all the opposite is true. Rather than
seeking to affirm Ethiopia’s indigenous cultural achievement, our elites try to find
validation in some other cultures and subcultures. What is the relevance of Jazz or a
Jackson Pollock dripping to us that we are supposed to pursue as some kind of talisman?

The assertion by quite a number of art critics and art historians that art is a universal
language is a very shallow and pedantic idea. In case of the United States, the type of art
criticism that promoted abstract expressionism or “modern art” in general was as fake as
the works thus promoted by the likes of Clement Greenberg, a CIA hired-gun paid to
counter Soviet proletariat art form. Art is a far complex endeavor of human beings that is
often very subjective and also subjectively appreciated in context of ones culture and life
conditions at a given time. The universalization of any art form is truly very simplistic. I
wrote this particular point just to remind people that even in main stream America what
goes as “Modern Art” is infested with lies and human frivolity.
One must not forget that the arts in general are considered by biologists, for example, as non-adoptive changes/activities in human evolution—in other words, of very little intrinsic value to mankind. Of course, it will be foolish to think of the creative process and the culture of artistic production as totally solipsistic. If only such hyphenated Ethiopians know the greatness of the core cultures of Ethiopia that are still intact in Lasta-Wag, Debre Tabor, Menz, Amara-Sa’int et cetera they will cut off symbolically their feet that led them astray. We can still start to rebuild from there and restart the whole experiment from the source of our great civilization and sink “modernity” with all its hyphenated sellouts and with all its alien and corrupted subculture.

Messay Kebede’s admonishment is on point on our tragic lose of our identity due to our disassociation from our core culture because of a distorted approach in using modern education system that replaced or supplanted our Orthodox Church based education. Here is where one facet of the academic lives of scholars like Messay and Teodros could/should intersect where great collaborative work could result in books of immense value to all of us.

More than any other Ethiopian intellectual, Teodros has extended on several occasions his invitations, through his several articles, for discourse with any Ethiopian. A few may have taken him up in his offer. However, what is tragic is that his peers, Ethiopians in academia, had not responded to his calls. It is tragic that the affectations and the vanity that many Ethiopians in academia suffer seem to be incurable. Speaking of Teodros, even his recent books in their totality are a form of invitation for discourse. Teodros is not only a brilliant and hard working philosopher but also a person who has humility and genuine respect of his fellow man. He has the great depth of personality to know that no one person has a monopoly on knowledge or wisdom and that through discourse and dialogue much can be achieved.

VI. Moral Economy and Conclusion
My criticism of Andreas is not an attack on “Shoa Amharas,” as few would jump to such conclusions as was the case in the past. First of all Endreas is not a “Shoa Amhara” even though he grew up in a decent household of Amharas in Addis Ababa. Another fact that should be taken into account is the fact that I have been often accused falsely by ill-informed or ignoramus bloggers, of drafting or designing the setup of the “Federal” structure even though I had already left the country and never dealt with the 1995 Constitution drafting Commission headed by Kifle Wodajo. Although Kifle Wodajo, for whom I had great admiration for his diplomatic abilities and sublime writing skills, was my boss at one point in the early 1970s, I will not mince words now in my criticism when I consider his activities as the Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Commission. He betrayed the Ethiopian people and the State of Ethiopia and its history heading a Commission that is instrumental in the destruction of Ethiopia. I have never supported federalism based on ethnicism or on language for Ethiopia. I believe in a “Unitary” system with local autonomous provincial administration and with incorporated urban structures as needed.
The fact remains that a handful of Ethiopian Yale graduates created the disastrous socio-political experiment and not some people from Harvard. I too, along with very many Ethiopians, wrongly had blamed Samuel P. Huntington from Harvard for the type of “Federalism” as practiced in Ethiopia. However, recently published material vindicates Huntington, for he had warned Meles Zenawi and his Government the risk of basing a political structure on ethnicism. Endreas, Fasil, Meles and Sebhat on the first ring and sycophants the likes of Seyoum Mesfin and the Members of the Central Committee of the TPLF in toto as second fiddles were responsible for the Federal structure adopted in the Constitution. To some extent, the career oriented go-betweenes, the likes of Addisu Legesse, Dawit Yohannes, Kassu Illala et cetera helped the establishment of the current federal structure that is tearing Ethiopia apart.

It is quite unusual to see in the history of any nation that its successive leaders have some psychological incapacitating problem of being bastards, or too short, or too ethnic, or too illiterate, or too rustic, or too fearful, or too banda et cetera. One may naively think that such features are irrelevant to the determination of good leadership. But such holistic assessment of leaders is necessary in order to appreciate the intricacies of what goes in to constituting a person—even the size of ones fingers matters, and in case of a woman some such physical attribute. Everything about a person has some role in shaping that person. Leaders are no exception to that universal human becoming. Every Ethiopian leader for the last one hundred fifty years had some such problem.

As I stated above, Teodros came up with a wonderful concept to counter the human degradation due to lack of resources and diminished productivity in Ethiopia. He called his system “moral economy” and offered it as an alternative system to both capitalism and socialism. [Teodros-2, 113-121] It is not a situation where we have discourse and dialogue between Ethiopian academicians except for the biannual get together of the Ethiopian Studies conferences. But that is not discourse or dialogue but a form for those who seek to preach from a rarefied pulpit.

It is not an exaggeration when I state that there is much animosity and hate in the lives of Ethiopians, especially in the political lives of Ethiopians back home and/or in the Diaspora. Teodros’s essays are like a breath of fresh and clean air wafting down the stale and stinking writings of bloggers and chat-room intellectuals and those who write ad nauseam with a single theme of “I hate Tigrayans or Woyanes,” in hundreds of variations. Writing in the best interest of the public without biases or prejudices is a mark of a wise person, but it requires also moral courage and excellent academic training and native intelligence.

Raw egollibido won’t work in turning what is essentially a rustic and vulgar brain into something that is wise no matter how often and how long one writes. An objective, intelligent, and polite manner of writing is not an easy task to carry out consistently and as successfully as Teodros has done over the years to date. Especially considering the fact that he spent his productive years as an exile during the brutal government of Mengistu Hailemariam and after, and yet maintaining that level of integrity is by itself a
monumental achievement. Professor Teodros, thank you for two marvelous and educational books, and thank you also for all your countless articles and commentaries. Ω

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Washington DC
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