

Lingua Franca - Adopting a Common Language

By Yerusalem Work

Ethiopians incorporate the concept of home in the naming of many public institutions. Bet is the Amharic word for house. A movie theater is called a cinema bet. You have an akim bet, a house of doctors. A mesaf bet, a house of books, is a library. Timirt bet is a house of education or school. From a young age, we're taught that home extends beyond sleeping quarters and includes more than our immediate family. At least, that logic is embedded in the Amharic language. Do we as Ethiopians really feel at home, especially around other Ethiopians?

Ethiopians discuss many subjects in one conversation. Often the subject is a person and a comparison is made. The SMNE <http://www.solidaritymovement.org> focuses on creating situations where Ethiopian people talk to each other and not about each other.

It is in our culture to upon introducing ourselves conduct intelligence tests more rigorous than the SAT, GRE, MCAT, LSAT - you catch my drift - and with far-reaching consequences. The initial measure of intelligence determines language comprehension, social class, and in one sentence a person will invite themselves into every stage of your life judging whether or not your parents spoke to you at home in the Ethiopian national language or if you are the product of assimilation. Without being scientific or addressing the needs of the moment, Ethiopian people pass judgements about how you were raised, your education level, your potential for social mobility, and your ability to well-represent a nation comprised of more than 94 million individuals. All in an exchange of greetings.

Social science gives us the opportunity to observe human behaviour and theorize based on different methods of classification. The categories we create influence our experience of an event. Ethiopians tend to isolate themselves from other Africans, African-Americans, and any group that may not fully identify with the complex set of paradoxes that define us as Ethiopian. We benefit from European influence, but Ethiopia was never fully colonized. Ethiopians are proud, but countless Ethiopians are disempowered and live in poverty. The national language of Ethiopia is Amharic, but not every Ethiopian speaks Amharic. We must expand our definition of what it means to be Ethiopian. Can we rely on self-definition and become more inclusive?

When we return to the feeling home brings - warmth, love, acceptance, confidence, moments of creativity, energy, and the gift of hospitality - the positive character traits this engenders is what characterizes the best of Ethiopia. We are a caring people. Instead of commenting that someone gained weight as was once culturally expected, we can empathize with each other and recognize we are all in pursuit of goals. There are immediate concerns and there are different levels of significance. If you bolster someone's strengths, they will be in gratitude to you and draw attention to your successes. You don't know why people struggle with weight.

It could be a lifelong issue with periods of accomplishment and periods of hope. If we support each other with words of loving-kindness and an attitude of encouragement, you may plant the seed for future growth. Someone may become the person they want to be. That means you would have sparked movement in the right direction: self-actualization. Let's not tear each other apart or throw the book at someone citing all their perceived imperfections. We are a family. We can build a home together where we seek comfort and solace from the storm.

Be an example of good health - spiritual, physical, financial - and invite others into a lifestyle of excellence. Do not inflict pain with your words or think it is your responsibility to be harsh. When we see someone, sometimes we believe it reflects on all of us. This can be positive or negative as our sense of self is to some degree shared.

When I see Ethiopians win awards and succeed in life, as well as people of other nationalities or of different ethnic descent, I ask, "How did the person become a success?" Ethiopians succeed in business, the medical field, community organizing, literature and architecture. Ethiopians are recognized for their outstanding contributions as lawyers, engineers, world-class marathon runners, models, moviemakers, theater professionals, poets, educators, and homemakers. The list goes on.

See the good qualities in a person and if you are blessed to be surrounded by successful people, ask them respectfully to share their area of expertise and discover what brings them joy. If you meet a retiree, inquire what life is like in retirement. But don't ask someone to impress you. Be genuine. If someone expresses discontent verbally or implicitly, don't depress, instead uplift and see how far you can take each other along the path of possibility and achievement, even if the achievement is a walk around the block, a polite observation, or a graduation.

For the youth, investigate who you are and interpret life through your own lens. Your perspective may change and if you record these changes, you'll learn gratitude. Life is lived at least twice as they say, once in actuality and the second time in remembrance. Make life worthwhile. Question. Hone your research skills. Refine your technique. Humble yourself in this vast universe or you will be humbled.

What if we like buildings could dialogue? Some of us tall. Others one story. We have commonalities. We are designed in similar ways with a foundation that lasts, hopefully, that can weather a storm. The akim bet says to the cinema bet, "What's new?" Min addis neger ale? Whatever our varied responsibilities include within each building we may call home, we must attend to our duties with our whole heart, a sound mind and a clear conscience. Part of you lives on in others. When people walk away from you, do you both leave better people with an improved perspective, with affection and with a soulful connection? Purify your intent and let's explore the world together. See what universal truth we can uncover. If you talk to someone instead of about someone, you no longer preside as judge and jury in a court of law.

You open the door to a classroom, a sacred classroom, or another type of place you feel at home and the fire that burns illuminates the heart without destroying the bond between you and another soul.

May we Ethiopians cement our ties brick-by-brick and truly find common ground. May we together make groundbreaking discoveries that improve the world we live in. The world is, after all, just a temporary home.

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