



ANUAK JUSTICE COUNCIL

Justice, Peace and Freedom

Mr. Obang Metho Addresses Ethiopian Community in Los Angeles, California: at the Little Ethiopia Fifth Annual Cultural Festival

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I want to thank the members of the community who welcomed me warmly to this communal gathering, and our moderator for that warm welcome and introduction. I also want to thank the Little Ethiopia Business Association, Ethiopian American Chamber of Commerce in Collaboration with African Leadership council and African Focus and organizing committee of this Little Ethiopia Fifth Annual Cultural Festival for inviting me to this great event.

I also thank all in the audience for coming today. It is an honor to be part of this celebration, especially because you have invited me to come all the way from Canada to be a keynote speaker to you here in Los Angeles. I hope that God gives me the right words to bring us closer together as a family in this home away from home now called Little Ethiopia. There is something unique and beautiful to celebrate in those things that unite us and this is one of them.

You can visualize the presence of Ethiopia in this place, not only by the sign on the street that says, "Little Ethiopia," but also by all of the Ethiopian shops, restaurants and people. As I walk down the streets, I can smell Ethiopian incense and the smell of freshly roasted Ethiopian coffee. I can see Ethiopian people, writing in Amharic letters, Ethiopian merchandise in the storefronts and I can hear our Ethiopian music. If I close my eyes, I can imagine I am in Ethiopia. This Ethiopia is one of many different backgrounds, languages and cultures.

As I now look out at all of you, I think how beautiful you are. I see Ethiopians, some African Americans, some whites—many different people. Something I have said before and that I will say again is that what makes Ethiopia, and now Little Ethiopia, so beautiful is that you are like a garden of not just one color of flower, but instead, one with many varieties and differences. That is why you see me as a dark man, with a bald head and white teeth among others of you who are light-skinned or medium-skinned, short or tall, heavy or light, with lots of hair or with none. You are beautiful and remind me of what is so wonderful about Ethiopia.

When some think of Ethiopia, they think of the most well known image in the world of Ethiopia and that is one of suffering and dying. But, there is much more to us than this image and we Ethiopians are the teachers who can tell the world about us. We can start by asking them about coffee! Over half the population of the world knows about coffee, but probably do not know that it originated in Ethiopia.

One of our own states, Kaffa, is where the word coffee came from as it is to this place that we can trace back the beginnings of this favorite drink of so many people. Share this fact and others with people you know and meet because the best things about our country are now being hidden by our problems, but our number one cure can be spread abroad to others, just like our coffee gained followers when we introduced it to them. The one medication we now need most to cure our problem is love, respect and caring. As we celebrate, let us celebrate not as one, but as all Ethiopians and spread this image around the world.

It can start here. Right now, this Little Ethiopia is the only place outside of Ethiopia that has been given to Ethiopians and it is something to be proud of, but it is not something only for ourselves, we can use it as a place to be a garden of diverse people, lovingly sharing our ‘Ethiopian-ness’ or African-ness’ in this new “Little Ethiopia.”

As we yearn for a cure to the difficulties we have faced these past years, I hope that this place and you people will light a spark that will help come through the window to revive a dying Ethiopia that is being led into darkness. Let this light bring new unity, love and kindness towards each other. The question to think about today is – how can we contribute to this light?

Ethiopia has lost a sense of its own identity. Who are we? In public? In private? To each other? To outsiders? What do we value? We have been sensitive people to world opinion about us, but what really matters is who are we in God’s eyes and to each other. Who do we want to become as a people? We have identified ourselves by our ethnic groups, political parties, regions, language and customs.

We have separated into factionalized groups whose identity has been shaped by who we hate, blame or don’t trust. If we are to find a national identity as Ethiopians, what will it be? Will it be the identity of one or another ethnic group or is there a larger national identity that embraces all of us? Will that identity be a mix of the worst or best of us? If we want to be known as good people, what needs to be done?

Right now, let us look at what has become our national identity? Most of us would admit to governmental oppression, ethnic division, cronyism, opportunism, racism, poverty and a general lack of everything— food, shelter, employment, clean water, health care, infrastructure, land ownership, private enterprise, free speech, free press and an independent judiciary.

On Thursday, I talked to an Ethiopian woman in Toronto who just returned from the Amhara region of our country. She wept as she told me about the desperate hunger and the deep suffering of the people, especially of the children, made worse because she could see no hope in sight. She felt so overwhelmed with grief about it that she said she wished she had never gone back home. She asked me, “When will it end, Obang?” I told her I did not know.

Today, I ask you, “When will it end?” Can we make a commitment together to do our best to bring this tragedy to an end and to help plant the seeds of change for a better future, trusting that God will nurture those seeds and make them grow?

I include all Ethiopian people in this invitation, including Woyane supporters. If this celebration today is about all Ethiopia and not just politics, we must include Woyane. I am sure there are Woyane supporters here and you are part of us as well. I welcome you. You cannot be excluded because Woyane are still fully Ethiopian and God loves you. You are part of our family, even if we do not agree with you. If we disowned those in our family with whom we did not agree with at some time, we would have no family left. Instead, what I would like to do is to tell you my opinion as a fellow Ethiopian. Some of you may disagree with my opinion and that’s alright.

I believe that Woyane supporters are holding on to a government that is destroying the country rather than creating a system that is durable, accepting and good for everyone. Some people think that Woyane supporters are opportunistic, clinging on to it in order to get or maintain good jobs, opportunity, land or other benefits, but this government will eventually come down and I urge you to think about doing the right thing. For instance, consider all of these things before investing in it like in a stock that is going to crash tomorrow. Why crash with it? Instead why not invest in a system that is good and built on a good foundation that includes everybody and is right in God’s eyes?

Life is short. A day will come when we will leave this earth and we will have to answer for how we lived our lives. This applies to all of us, me included. We can blame people, our government or other factors for our difficulties, but often these are just excuses not to do more ourselves. We should instead ask ourselves if we have made this world a better place because we are here. We often find our identity in materialistic pursuits or other ambitions that will not last once we leave this earth.

Why should we exchange short-term pleasure— at the expense of trampling on others—in order to gain what will only be lost once we die? How can we order our lives so we invest in what God values rather than in what will leave us empty-handed? What can we do instead that will prove to be a good investment, not only for ourselves, but also for others and our future children?

One way to wisely invest in our futures is to fear God and to live by His principles, not just on the outside, but authentically. Ethiopians are religious people, but religion without love, is no religion at all. Without demonstrating that love in acts of compassion means nothing at all. The people of Rwanda were said to have been “religious,” but it was not deeply embedded within them, as it did not stop them from committing horrific acts of violence against other human beings when they killed their neighbors. Really fearing and trusting God should set us free from hate, dishonesty, greed, selfishness and revenge. It should set us free to share Ethiopia with others.

For instance, whether we like it or not, all of those who live within the boundaries of Ethiopia, are Ethiopian. There are no 99.9% Ethiopians or one ethnic group which is more Ethiopian and another which is less. All of us are 100% Ethiopian. The British drew the present boundaries of our country and we have little choice in the matter.

The problem we have instead, is accepting the presence, humanity and rights of others within our country. Instead, we should really be broadening our view of humanity to include even those outside our boundaries, as God has not restricted us so tightly. Instead, if we are in God’s universe, we are in “His room.” All other boundaries are merely manmade and subject to change. However, we people tend to give up God’s bigger room for our own “tiny room.” In doing so, we wrongly justify to ourselves, not sharing or caring about others.

We are at a crossroads in Ethiopia. We are struggling to find out who we are and who we will be in the future. As we seek for our identity as Ethiopians, will we see each other from the view from our small rooms, or will we see each other from the wide open spaces of God’s universe that accepts, loves and values each in His creation? In John 3:16, Jesus spoke about how “God so loved the world that He sent His Son.” The world is bigger than our homogeneous rooms.

Many of these were simply drawn at the impulse of colonialists of the last century, mostly to disempower various groups by dividing them between countries. Look at the Anuak. Half of us are in Ethiopia and the other half are in Sudan. The same is true of groups such as Somalians and Ogadenis and Eritreans and Tigrayans. Are we drawing artificial lines to do the same thing to our fellow Ethiopians?

How can we revive Ethiopia if we stay in our little rooms, unwilling to share or open the door to others? Will we leave others behind as we advance our own ethnic groups? We need to think bigger than ever before. A new Ethiopia means putting humankind before Ethiopia. An Ethiopia whose identity is found in how we fear God and as result, how we truly value each other, is an Ethiopia that will emerge as a home to humanity. As Little Ethiopia is a reflection of Ethiopia, may Ethiopia become a reflection of God’s kingdom here on earth.

America has lost some of its original identity in this way. It was founded on such principles, but rampant materialism is competing with spiritual and moral values. The same is happening in Ethiopia. I have heard many stories about the increasing disparity between the rich and the poor. How should we respond to an Ethiopia in such need?

I contend, we must look at it from the bigger picture and share opportunities with others whenever possible. There is an African proverb that says, “If you see a good man climbing a tree, give him a push.” Sometimes, we instead knock that man out of the tree because we want the fruit ourselves. Our leaders do this very well. It is very common for them to push down other leaders in order to get ahead for themselves, but not to share the fruit with others.

There is nothing wrong with the name of Ethiopia, with the flag or the national anthem. Instead, what is wrong is with those who kill, repress, discriminate and devalue others based on skin color, ethnic group, religion, sex or other artificial distinctions between humans. It has been selfish individuals, taking power for themselves at the expense of others that stained their hands with the blood of fellow Ethiopians. Yet, even though we see these stains, we pretend as if they do not exist unless it happened to us, our families or our ethnic groups. Then it is hard to forget and we enter the endless cycle of revenge.

However, as long as we have leaders who have abandoned God—pretending to see while being blind and pretending to hear while being deaf—we will have the powerful taking advantage of the weak—sometimes to the point of stealing their lives and futures. As this continues, fellow Ethiopians, whose blood has been spilled, will want to run away from being Ethiopian. Until we change, our identity as people of Ethiopia will be damaged as we are injured, as we retaliate for those injuries and as others ignore our pain.

We can see evidence of the results of these actions if we view our people in the factories, restaurants and schools of America and Canada. You will find different ethnic groups, so alienated from each other that they will only cluster together in their isolated groups, nursing their group’s many wounds. Not only that, when one Ethiopian sees another, one of the first things they ask is their ethnicity. Next time someone asks, just tell the person you are an Ethiopian. This is a way to stop this tribal thinking.

We cannot break free from all of this without the love of God, acknowledging Him as our Creator who created everyone as equal, but all needing His forgiveness and mercy. The disease that is killing Ethiopia is contagious. As I said before, the only medication to kill the disease is to go back to reclaim the righteousness given by God that will lead us to loving action and forgiving those who have wronged us. To cure our disease, we need love, not hatred; sharing not greed; protecting not wounding others and speaking up for others instead of speaking against them.

Little Ethiopia is a place where Ethiopians can go to connect to our motherland of Ethiopia. There is no place better than home where we can belong, build up each other and learn to generously contribute to the good of all. Home is about the people. The same is true in Ethiopia—it is not about the government but about the people and how they live humanely among each other.

Our Constitution is manmade, but does fairly well reflect a higher law. However, our real Constitution is the universal law that God has given to us that tells us how we should relate to Him and to our neighbors. If we ask who are neighbors are, we might be helped by looking at how Jesus defined one’s neighbors in the Gospels.

Look at the story of the Good Samaritan in the Bible (Luke 10: 25-37). When an expert in the law was told by Jesus, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ in order to justify himself, he then asked Jesus, ‘Who is my neighbor?’ Jesus tells him a parable where a man was robbed and left for dead at the side of the road. Two leaders in the community saw him, but then passed by on the other side of the road, looking the other way.

The good neighbor ended up to be someone from outside their group who they despised as less important than they were. Yet, it was this man who showed mercy to the injured man. Without asking the man at the side of the road his ethnicity, his religion or his political party, the “Good Samaritan” took pity on him and demonstrated what it means to ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’ He bandaged the man’s wounds, took him to an inn to care for him and paid his expenses. His example is still one to follow and could liberate Ethiopia.

Who were these people who passed him by? One of them was a priest. He may have avoided him because he had an opportunity that might have been lost had the man died and he had become ceremonially unclean by touching him. According to Jewish law, he may have lost his opportunity to serve in the temple for seven days for touching someone dead. How can we apply this to our situation? How does opportunism for our own interests, prevent us from helping others or speaking out against injustice? The other man who passed by was an elite man who had his own reasons for not wanting to get involved.

Who will we be to our fellow Ethiopians? For instance, will we look the other way because we have opportunity for cheap land in Ethiopia or will we be like the Good Samaritan and help the wounded? The minute we reach out like he did, we will become different from the inside. We can become the heart of what it means to provide a home away from home—a true haven, a true “Little Ethiopian.” Little Ethiopia becomes part of who we are, not just a place. If we had many “Good Samaritans” in our community here, it could be spread to our country and Ethiopia could be changed forever.

Our new identity would be as people who shared and cared about each other regardless of individual distinctions like ethnicity, background, economic level, political views or religion. Our kindness towards each other would unite us in ways we could never otherwise achieve and Little Ethiopia could be where it all started. Ethnic communities in America used to mean places where you could feel at home and where you could find friends who could give you a boost up the tree. This could be who we are not only as new Ethiopians, but who we used to be in the past. It could spread beyond just Ethiopians to others around us in America or in the Horn of Africa and Africa. It could start here and be spread abroad to heal the sickness we have felt as a people and as a society.

As you find rest and sustenance in this home away from home, may you become the Good Samaritans of Little Ethiopia who care about the wounded among you regardless of whether you are Amhara, Tigrayan, Oromo, Ogadeni or from some other country in Africa.

Let us come out from our little rooms and show love, grace and mercy to the beggar, the homeless, the orphans, the gatekeepers, the home maids, the boys with the cattle, the women collecting water, the young girls burdened with the wood on their heads, the elderly man with no one to care for him, the poor displaced from their homes so someone from America could put up their home, the young child looking at the school from the outside, with no opportunity to go in, the woman left alone with a child whose husband died, the mother whose third baby would die because of her untreated HIV, the Ethiopian who died in the Red Sea, trying to escape from their war torn home or the refugees hiding in some foreign country, trying to get a visa to go to the West.

Think of all of these precious people and then try to do something to minimize their pain or to stop the cause of it. Reach out to those around you to help them. If you see someone working in the country to help, give them financial help or other kinds of support. If they are sending books and you have no money to help with the cost of freight, help pack them. There are many jobs and many of us. If we all do our share, the job will not be so hard for a few.

A new Ethiopia will not come through hatred or isolation, but through love, sharing, generosity and following God's principles of life. Be awakened and make change in the life of your fellow Ethiopian brother's or sister's life. It is not important which ethnic group, region, sex, religion or other background you come from. When you see a fellow human being in need of help, do something. It might be giving them material help or simply a smile of welcome that will tell that person that they are special.

If we truly follow God, we will show His love through our actions. In this way, we can discover a national identity that can stop the bleeding from our wounds that will revive our dying nation. This is a spiritual and moral battle. Everyone is chosen to be a messenger of love and caring. I urge you to go do your share.

Thank you.