

Ethiopia: A Model Nation of Minorities

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"Prejudice is a great time saver. You can form opinions without having to get the facts." E. B. White

That Ethiopia is a widely misunderstood nation, no less by its educated citizens, is a lamentable fact that finds confirmation in the current debates on the implications of the historic 2005 legislative elections. You would think that by now many of the distinctiveness of Ethiopian civilization would be widely acknowledged with great admiration. Compared with other traditional societies, the hallmarks of its heritage include the remarkable longevity of its multiethnic State, the unusually modern form of the family with an unprecedented rights extended to women, and the unusually high level of access to land enjoyed by its peasantry even before 1975.

When it comes to Ethiopia, even citing readily available census statistics seems to many far less preferable than mindless duplication of erroneous numbers from supposedly authoritative sources. To gauge the size of the pyramid of prejudice thus built, consider two familiar fanciful statistics: (1) Ethiopia is a predominantly Muslim country; and (2) The Oromo constitute the ethnic majority of the Ethiopian population.

Even the widely-quoted CIA Factbook cites the following numbers in support of the first claim: Muslim 45%-50%, Ethiopian Orthodox 35%-40%, animist 12%, other 3%-8%. Regarding the second, it reports the following distribution: Oromo 40%, Amhara and Tigre 32%, Sidamo 9%, Shankella 6%, Somali 6%, and Gurage 2%.

Irrked immensely by this sad state of affairs, I am compelled to offer this note. It has a two-fold purpose. My first purpose is to provide a statistical profile of the Ethiopian people based on the 1994 national population and housing census. My second aim is, following the dictum that the truth is more important than the facts, to tease out a couple of implications to show why we should care.

Population censuses, which are conducted at great expenses and under international standards, are the most authoritative data for any country. So far, Ethiopia has conducted two decennial national censuses—in 1984 and again in 1994. The planned 2004 census has unfortunately been postponed.

Dr. Abate Mammo, a demographer, deflated the false sense of demographic reality in his article, "Population Distribution in Ethiopia: Beyond the Myths," *Ethiopian Review* (December 1992). He poses a number of familiar questions and answers them as follows:

"Are the Oromo the majority ethnic group in Ethiopia? Is Ethiopia predominantly Muslim? Is (the) Wello region predominantly Oromo? Is the urban population in Eritrea and Gonder more literate than the urban population in Bale, Wellega and Illubabor? According to the

1984 census, the answer to all these questions is “no.” The picture that emerges from the 1984 population census reflects both conventional wisdom and surprise: Ethiopia is a largely Christian, a culturally diverse and regionally balanced ‘nation of ethnic minorities’.”

Table 1 below provides the pertinent data from the 1994 census regarding the profile of the 53 million (today 70 million) Ethiopians. How do the 1984 numbers relate to those of 1994, and what would these trends tell us about what the 2004 census might have uncovered?

Ethnic Identity: Needless to say, Ethiopia is a complex society with historical fissures along topography (highlander versus lowlander) and religion (competing states anchored in Christianity or Islam). The history of mutual invasion and assimilation among its cultural communities has, contrary to the premises of the current Constitution, precluded the emergence of exclusivist political enclaves based on ethnicity. The strength of multiple and fluid identities have, unlike many African countries with a long colonial experience, made it difficult to classify the residents of highland Ethiopian society by ethnicity. Imperfect measures such as mother tongue or subjective self-identification were used in the censuses. In any case, the numbers are rather consistent. The Oromo and the Amhara each constitute, within a reasonable margin of statistical error, about one-third of the population—up from about 29% reported by the 1984 census. *The Ethiopia of the national censuses has neither an ethnic majority nor an ethnic plurality.*

Religion: The 1984 and 1994 censuses show a remarkably stable Christian: Muslim ratio of 61%:33%. Interestingly, what is new is the rapidly changing composition of the Christian population. Insurgent Protestantism has reduced the share of the Tewahido Church. The latter claimed barely half of the population in 1994 and has probably seen its share decline below that level in the past decade. *The Ethiopia of 2005 is, in all probability, no longer a majority Orthodox Tewahido nation.* This development has much political significance especially when viewed in conjunction with the separation of Church and State since 1974.

Addis Ababa: The old Shewa province (11 million) in general and Addis Ababa (3 million) in particular are the epicenter of the country. Addis Ababa, in addition to being the primate city and the administrative capital, stands among the most diverse regions. Amhara residents, who enjoy a plurality in the city, lost 2 percentage points in their population during 1984-94. It turns out that this is exactly equal to the gain by the underrepresented Oromo residents. The only qualification to this generalization of high diversity is that Addis Ababa is an overwhelmingly Tewahido city.

Why care about these numbers? It would suffice to mention two implications:

First, these numbers underscore the incredibly high and ever-changing nature of Ethiopian diversity. The Ethiopian genius for creatively synthesizing different traditions into a national mosaic is a product of this reality. With the emergence of a strong multiethnic state and an economic system that permits high mobility, Ethiopia has a great potential to build an egalitarian democratic society.

Second, this potential can be realized only if the intelligentsia shows respect for objective reality. For a nation of minorities, cultivating a tradition of coalition building is paramount for avoiding costly political and economic strategies based on mythologies or imagined communities. It is long overdue for the *real* Ethiopia to stand up and be (accurately) counted.

Table 1: A Profile of Ethiopia Based on the 1994 Census

Population size: 1984/1994/2004	37/53/70 million
I. Nation-wide as % of total 1994 Population	
Ethnic Group by Self-identification:	100.0
Amara	30.2
Oromo	32.1
Tigrawi	6.2
Somalie	6.0
Guragie	4.3
Sidama	3.4
Others	17.8
Ethnic Group by Mother Tongue:	100.0
Amara	32.7
Oromo	31.6
Tigrawi	6.1
Somalie	6.0
Guragie	3.5
Sidama	3.5
Others	16.6
Population by Religion:	100.0
Christian	61.6
<i>Orthodox</i>	50.6
<i>Protestant</i>	10.1
<i>Catholic</i>	0.9
Muslim	32.8
Traditional	5.6
II. Killil-wide 100.0	
Amara	27.1
<i>Amara</i>	91.3
<i>Oromo</i>	3.0
Oromiya	34.8
<i>Amara</i>	9.1
<i>Oromo</i>	85.0
SNNP	19.5
<i>Guragie</i>	15.8
<i>Sidama</i>	17.6
<i>Wolayta</i>	11.7
Addis Ababa [2.1 million in 1994]	4.0
<i>Amara</i>	47.8
<i>Oromo</i>	19.2
<i>Guragie</i>	17.5
<i>Others</i>	15.5
of which: <i>Christian</i>	86.5
<i>Muslim</i>	12.6
Remaining Regions	14.6

Source: C.S.A., *The 1994 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia*, Vol. 1, June 1998, Tables 2.14, 2.16, and 2.20.