

PolicyPennings by Daryll E. Ray & Harwood D. Schaffer

The African slate is not blank: Taking democratic traditions and indigenous knowledge seriously

In the talk of William Easterly at the World Affairs Council of Northern California that we wrote about last week, he ended his talk by declaring that the principles of development have been wrong. “It’s a myth that the technocratic solution is a solution. It’s a myth that the blank slate is blank. It’s a myth that benevolent autocrats are benevolent.” He then said, “If the ideas are wrong, we have now a battle of ideas” and called for a debate.

We’d like to engage in the debate by first agreeing with his myths for the most part and congratulate him on his courage to so openly discuss them. We will focus on the first two myths—the technocratic solution and the blank slate. Only we would put them in the reverse order and start with the myth of the blank slate, because we have a slightly different take on Easterly’s blank state characterization with regard to Africa’s experience with democratic decision making and structures.

Let’s start with Easterly’s “favorite example of a technocratic dictator.” Using the example of Ethiopia, working backward from Meles, Easterly said, “Why is Ethiopia so poor? Could it have something to do with Meles Zenawi’s 20 years of autocratic rule, preceded by 30 years of a previous autocratic ruler, preceded by Haile Selassie, preceded by other indigenous autocrats, preceded by the slave trade which oppressed Ethiopia for so long? It’s all a very long history of autocracy [which] is part of the reason that Ethiopia is poor. The autocrat is not the solution to Ethiopia’s poverty; he is the cause of Ethiopia’s poverty.”

Later on in his talk, Easterly said, “One sad thing about autocracy is that a history of autocracy often leads to more autocracy. So a long history of colonial autocracy set the stage for indigenous autocracy by the new rulers of Africa. There was no democratic tradition to go on and so the new rulers of Africa were also autocrats.”

That statement is the Easterly’s blank slate problem with which we want to respectively disagree. There is a long democratic tradition in the Ethiopian Empire, just not among the Abyssinian (Amhara and Tigray) national groups that have ruled the country since Menelik’s colonization of more than 70 other nationalities as a part of the Scramble for Africa in the late 19th century. Today, Ethiopia is the only empire in sub-Saharan Africa that has not been decolonized. In fact, Ethiopia has been a neocolonial state since its inception.

It is true that the Abyssinians (constituting 1/3 or

less of Ethiopia’s peoples) do not have a tradition of democracy. But the largest nationality within Ethiopia is the Oromo. And the Oromo have a democratic tradition that can be traced back to at least the 14th century. They were governed by a democratic tradition called *gadaa/siqqee* long before Christopher Columbus “discovered the New World” and four centuries before the American Revolution. And it is not only the Oromo who have a long-standing democratic tradition, similar traditions can be found among many of the other non-Abyssinian nationalities in what today is called Ethiopia.

Under *siqqee/gadaa*, the Oromo established their laws and selected their leaders every eight years at a representative national assembly called *gumi gayo or caffee Oromo*. The leaders who were selected lead the Oromo for a period of 8 years at which time the *gumi gayo* reconvenes, reviews the laws, and selects a new leader. Many Oromo groups were democratically governed in this manner until they were conquered and colonized by the Abyssinian ruler, Menelik II, who colonized the Oromo and others with the help of European colonial powers during the Scramble for Africa

Like US society until relatively recently, women were not included in the male leadership cycle called *gadaa*. Instead they had an institution called *siqqee* that provided them with significant economic control over their lives and protection from spousal abuse. Together the two institutions represent the democratic principles of Oromo society which Asafa Jalata and Harwood have called *gadaa/siqqee (siqqee/gadaa)*. Without going into the details of this tradition, it is important to note that Oromo democracy included the election of leaders, the separation of powers, the involvement of the representative assembly in establishing of laws, and the right to recall leaders who abuse their power: all activities that were denied most Europeans of the time.

So when the representatives of European companies and monarchs arrived in the Horn of Africa in the 16th and 17th centuries, they recognized the monarchical traditions of the Abyssinians while characterizing the democratic traditions of nationalities like the Oromo as anarchy. They could make deals with a monarch or a warlord, but dealing with a democratic assembly was a much different proposition.

After the conquest of Menelik II, the Abyssinians did their best to suppress *siqqee/gadaa* among the Oromo because it represented a threat to their

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autocratic rule. Many have thought that the autocrats of the Ethiopian Empire had been successful over all but the hinterlands which were occupied by pastoralists. As the Oromo have talked about replacing the current autocratic government with one patterned on *gadaa/siqqee*, the question has often been one of the likelihood of being able to revive a tradition that has been suppressed among most Oromo groups.

A generation of young scholars has just begun to show that *gadaa/siqqee* has not died out, even in populous regions where the Abyssinians have sought to suppress anything Oromo—names, religion, language, culture, *siqqee/gadaa*—for over a century. While not having governmental functions, *gadaa/siqqee* has thrived in the social arena, even to the extent of maintaining an eight-year rotation of symbolic leaders.

So, most of the peoples of Ethiopia are not bereft of a tradition of democracy. It is just that Western powers have supported the autocrats who have kept the empire at the top of the list of those with the highest level of hunger and malnutrition in the world. Usually, only Eritrea has a greater level of hunger.

And it is not only in Ethiopia that the colonial powers failed to recognize democratic traditions because various Haalpulaar groups also democratically elected their local chiefs. Though the democratic traditions were not as robust among some African ethnolocalities as among others, they are widespread and provide a foundation from which to start. The slate is not and was not blank. There are/were democratic traditions across the continent, just as there have been hereditary rulers like those in Europe.

One key is to pay attention to what Easterly said when he told his audience that we, in the West, need to stop praising and funding autocratic leaders.

We also need to give up the myth of the blank slate when it comes to development and indigenous knowledge. Harwood found a rich slate of knowledge

among the people in Guédé Chantier Senegal during his visit last February. That realization reminded him of the experience he had as a young pastor. Based on his seminary training, Harwood assumed it was his task to get his parishioners to do what he thought best, after all he was the “expert.”

A member of his first church quickly disabused Harwood of that idea by saying, “Reverend, we are going to be here long after you are gone.” He soon learned that the task of leadership was to listen to people and their needs and with that knowledge enable them to live up to their full potential.

And that was what happened in Guédé. Harwood actively listened to people and reflected back to them what he heard and how they might make connections among various ideas they had shared with him. He also shared some of the knowledge he has access to at the university.

The result of his 2 week visit is a new mudbrick classroom in an elementary school, the revitalization of the local genetic resource center, interest in reviving the use of indigenous crops that are better suited to the conditions of the Sahel, and a desire to continue to move forward. Most of the resources needed were already present among various people in the community. And they have carried out and continue to work on projects well beyond anything that Harwood had in mind. They are looking forward to his return.

The slate is not blank and those of us who work in development need to be humble enough to accept that fact.

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