የሀገር ካስማ: The Women Who Anchor the Nation

The Song — a Way Out of the Monkey Habit of Ethnic Entrepreneurship

The Same war-drums the Song pleaded to stop in 2021 are being Beaten Harder.

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Preamble : The Anchor We Ignored

For six months I have written, in this newspaper, as a nationalist and not as a partisan, returning again and again trying to articulate the need for peace and understanding, and to prioritise the four singular interests held in three layers [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9]. *Unity* and *Red Sea sovereignty* are the constitutive **foundations** of the Ethiopian state; *broad-based economic development anchored in democracy* is the **sustaining means**; and the *Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam*, with the urbanisation and industrialisation it must feed, is the **engine** that makes the means feasible. **Foundations → Means → Engine.** I have argued each layer in the registers I practise as a defence expert using engineering, mathematical logic, economics, philosophy, psychology, governance, and management. Because, almost universally in most nations, the military is the only credible institution to safeguard and lead a nation in the absence of civil government. I therefore have concluded that if there is anything worth fighting for in Ethiopia, it is these four singular interests—in three layers and in no particular order. However, the fight for *Red Sea sovereignty* must be articulated clearly and waged by **Peaceful Priority** though not by **Peaceful Exclusivity**.

This essay is different, and I write it gladly. It began not with a defence strategy article but with a song—*Yehager Kasma*, "The Nation's Anchor," conceived and led by Sayat Demissie—its principal architect, and in collaboration with her sister Betelhem Demissie as director—released on 4 May 2021 by Lomii Media, with UNDP and UN Women as executive producers [10, 11, 13], and sung by a remarkable company of artists including the veteran Kuku Sebsebe. Its argument is simple and total: women are the anchor of family, of society, and of nation; their disposition is toward peace and harmony. It was released as the country slid into the worst of the northern war, and it was, in effect, a plea from women for both sides to stop. *Yehager Kasma* is a neutral song vying to be heard for love and unity through the power of women as complemented by the male singers. Remember, everyone is the child of a woman. However, it garnered only 1.7 million views on YouTube in five long years. For comparison, Teddy Afro's *Dass Ta'al, Ansaw* track has 33 million views in just a few months. I am not here to stage a competition for stardom, but I would like to draw the reader's attention to the messaging—to where the nation's focus lies at large. The women called for peace and understanding and wanted to be heard so that they could neutralise the grudges within us — because they are also the most affected by war. **As a nation, we failed miserably to listen to our anchors.**

What followed is among the most shameful chapters of our recent history. This article makes a single claim across its sections: that the quiet wisdom these women carry—articulated with unusual clarity by Hanna Demissie in a subsequent interview [12]—is not a sentimental supplement to the four interests but the human substrate without which none of them can stand. I will set that wisdom in the long company of peace-making women in Ethiopia and the world; I will argue that women's wisdom, precisely when it does *not* seek power, can serve as the lubricant that lowers the friction in a divided body politic; I will count the cost of spending our young generation in war, particularly in this age of the *AI race*, when the engine of the nation needs them skilled and alive. And I will argue that the route out of the quagmire of resentment is not another faction's victory but *collective intelligence*—large-scale collaboration of exactly the kind the song itself embodies.

> *A nation is held by its anchor, not driven by its quarrels.*
> *The anchor is the wisdom of its women, and we abandon it at the cost of the Nation's future.*

Let me close this preamble with Hanna's conclusion — We have learned, across our common history, to let go of pain for the sake of one another, and that letting-go is the only reason we have come this far as a nation. We have been there before. Ethiopia has the capacity to remain peaceful, united, sovereign and prosperous.

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1 Method: why a nationalist listens to a song

Let me restate the method, because it governs everything that follows and because it is repeatedly misread. I write as a **nationalist**, by which I mean that my loyalty is to the Ethiopian nation as a whole and to the citizens who compose it, of every language and faith, and not to any faction, party, region, or office-holder. I write as a **non-partisan**, by which I mean that I owe no allegiance and bear no brief for any of the contending political organisations, and that I am as ready to praise a good act by an adversary as to criticise a bad act by an ally. These two commitments are not in tension; they are the same commitment seen from two sides. A nationalist who is also a partisan is merely a factionalist with a flag, which I am not. I have been scorched from left and right alike by those with the monkey habit of ethnic entrepreneurship—who are, in reality, one another's allies. I am accused of being a defender of the Prime Minister, even as I have invariably criticised him; I have resisted those who equate him with the Messiah or with Moses, yet I agree with those who consider him, by some distance, the best we have. And, strangest of all, there are those who label me a *Sha'bia*. Indeed, one of the singular interests I have argued most passionately concerns the injustice in the manner of Eritrea's independence and the loss of our *Red Sea sovereignty*—which Ethiopia has the legal and historical right to reinstate, again through **Peaceful Priority**, though not **Peaceful Exclusivity**. As the Prime Minister once quipped, there is no reason for the men of Ethiopia to fight at all if not for the Red Sea. I wholeheartedly agree.

From that standpoint the four singular interests are not a menu from which one selects according to taste; they are one proposition in three layers, and no layer is severable. You cannot have the engine without the foundations, because a dam in a disintegrating state is a strategic liability rather than an asset; you cannot have the means without the engine, because broad-based development without cheap, abundant power is a slogan; and you cannot have any of it without unity, because a country whose centre is contested by armed movements cannot defend a single one of its interests against any pressure worth the name. I have made these arguments at length elsewhere [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9], and I will not rehearse them here.

What I want to add in this essay is the layer *beneath* the foundations—the human disposition without which even unity is only a word. For unity is not a structure you can pour like concrete. It is a daily practice of accommodation, forgiveness, shared burden, and care, conducted in tens of millions of households before it ever reaches a constitution. And that practice, in Ethiopia as nearly everywhere, has been carried disproportionately—quietly, gracefully, and at great cost—by women. To ignore this is to build the foundations on sand. So when a nationalist hears a song in which the country's best-loved women singers declare themselves the anchor of the nation, he does not change the subject. He recognises the subject. He recognises that the artists have stated, in five minutes of melody, the precondition that his eight or nine articles of analysis were circling all along.

A note of restraint, stated once and meant throughout

I am acutely aware that the people who made *Yehager Kasma*—Sayat Demissie, Kuku Sebsebe, Zeritu Kebede, Fikreaddis Nekatibeb, Rahel Getu, Asge Dendasho, Lij Michael, and their colleagues; the director Betelhem Demissie (with special credit to Yewubrist); and the family whose upbringing produced them—are artists and citizens, not politicians, and that the surest way to dishonour their work is to drag it into the very partisanship it was made to dissolve. I will therefore quote their *art* and their *ideas* and leave their persons out of politics entirely. If anything in these pages is read as conscripting them to a faction, I have failed, and the reader should discard that reading. The wisdom is the citation; the people are owed only gratitude and privacy.

2 *Kasma*: the anchor, the peg, the thing that holds

The Amharic word *kasma* is humbler than "anchor" and more exact. A *kasma* is the peg, stake, or wedge that is driven into the ground or into the joint of a structure to hold it fast—the tent-peg that keeps the shelter standing in the wind, the wedge that keeps the beam from slipping, the stake to which the whole is tethered. It is not the ornament on the roof; it is the unseen thing at the base and the joint, doing the load-bearing work that no one admires because no one sees it. To call women *Yehager Kasma*, "the nation's peg," is therefore not flattery. It is a structural claim. It says: this is the element that holds the assembly together; remove it and the assembly comes apart; and you will not notice how much it was carrying until it is gone.

That is the claim the song makes, and it makes it with deliberate craft. *Yehager Kasma* is not the work of one star; though it was conceived and led by Sayat Demissie—its architect, working in collaboration with the United Nations—it was performed as a collaboration of nine of the country's most loved voices across generations and styles—from Kuku Sebsebe, whose career reaches back decades and who is a living institution of Ethiopian song, to younger artists in pop and hip-hop registers—woven into a single piece by a team of composers, lyricists, arrangers, and a director, and co-produced by UNDP and UN Women [11, 13]. The form is the message. A song about women as the binding element of a fractured society is itself an act of binding: many distinct voices, which the politics of the moment was busy setting against one another, made to sing one line. The melody carries it; the lyric, which I will paraphrase rather than reproduce, has a woman declare herself the anchor of the nation—one who has lived an honest life, made strong by her people—and asks, in its gentlest and most pointed moment, that we stop quarrelling and follow the lead of those whose instinct is to heal rather than to win. Everyone, the song reminds us, is the son or daughter of some woman; that is mere nature; but there is more to it than the biological fact, for women, on the whole, seek peace and harmony, and a society that listens to that instinct survives the storms that a society deaf to it does not.

The date is the indictment. The single was released on 4 May 2021 [10]. Read that date against the calendar of the northern war. Within weeks the conflict would enter its most catastrophic phase; by the following months hundreds of thousands would be dead—credible academic estimates of the war's total mortality run into several hundred thousand, with some approaching six hundred thousand [32]—and the litany of massacre, mass rape, and the killing of children would lengthen on every side. The women who made this song were, in plain terms, pleading with both belligerents to stop before that happened. They used the only instruments they had—voice, melody, language, the new technologies of recording and distribution, and the convening power of two United Nations agencies—to put a non-violent appeal in front of the whole nation at the precise moment it was needed. **The nation ignored it.** The men with the guns sang their own songs. And the cost of ignoring the anchor was paid, as it is always paid, first by women and children: every person killed in the months that followed was the son or the daughter or the brother or the sister or the husband or the father of a woman. We failed the women who warned us, and we should be ashamed, and the shame is useful only if it teaches us to listen the next time the anchor speaks. **It is speaking again now, at a moment when the same war-drums are being beaten harder.**

I will add a personal word, because the song reached me before the argument did. I was raised by a strong mother, as many of us were, and I will not pretend to neutrality about what that formation does to a person. It collapses the distance between the abstraction "women hold the nation together" and the specific women who held one's own family—in my case, my own among them. This is, I think, the song's method working as intended. It does not argue the thesis; it makes you remember the woman who is your own evidence for it. That is a more durable kind of persuasion than any op-ed, mine included, can manage.

3 Women's articulation: the thing Ethiopia needs

If the song is the feeling, the clearest statement of the idea came later, in an interview given by the family and media house behind the project [12]. The lead singer was not present; the work was represented by, among others, Betelhem Demissie—a lawyer by training and the project's director—and her sister Hanna Demissie, whose few minutes of reflection did more to clarify my six months of *academic* writing than I had managed to do for myself. I will set down what she articulated, as I understood it, in paraphrase.

Hanna directed the credit away from herself and her own celebrated generation and toward the foremothers and forefathers who formed them. She recounted her own upbringing in a large, shared household—composed of both blood relatives and those bound by no blood at all, living together, her parents raising children in common, dividing both the joy and the hardship. That communal life, she suggested, was the workshop in which character is made: a child learns to share happiness, to absorb difficulty without resentment, and to find in the welfare of others a portion of her own. Then came the sentence that I have not been able to put down. Paraphrasing: *most of our society, given the chance, still has this woven relationship of love and care for one another readily available within it*—it is not lost; it is latent; it waits for the conditions in which it can act. She illustrated it with a popular Amharic television drama, *Eregnaye*, whose hold on the public she attributed not to spectacle but to its portrayal of **sacrifice for those we love**—an asset, she said, intrinsic to our country and indeed to all cultures. And she located the mechanism precisely: we have come this far as a nation because we have, repeatedly, **let go of our pain—and instead chosen to forgive rather than to nurse our rage**—and a people unable to carry that burden of accommodation for the sake of the greater good would not have survived as one country at all.

The articulation, compressed: *the capacity for communal love and shared sacrifice is not gone from Ethiopian society; it is latent and abundant; we have survived as a nation precisely because, again and again, we chose to let go of pain and forgive rather than to drown in it; and the people who carry and teach that capacity, from the earliest years and at every later step, are disproportionately our mothers.*

I want to be exact about why this is not a soft consolation but a hard strategic claim. The entire architecture of ethnic entrepreneurship—the monkey habit I have denounced throughout this series—runs on the opposite proposition. It requires that pain be *kept*, curated, inventoried, and handed down; that yesterday's wound be the charter of today's mobilisation; that forgiveness be recast as betrayal and accommodation as weakness. The political entrepreneur of grievance with the monkey habit needs a population that cannot let go, because a population that lets go has nothing left to sell him. **Forgiveness is the act of letting go of the desire to remain bound to an injury, without erasing the memory, lesson, accountability, or necessary boundaries. It is the precise antidote for rage and war, and it is empirical, not merely moral.** The women are asserting that the social capital required to defuse this war machinery already exists in the country, distributed through ordinary households and conserved chiefly by women, and that the task of statecraft is not to manufacture it but to *stop destroying it* and let it do its work. That is a claim a defence analyst can use. **It says the centre of gravity of national cohesion is not in Addis Ababa's institutions alone but in the formation of character in tens of millions of homes, and that the cheapest, most durable counter-insurgency a state can run is to protect, rather than inflame, the communal disposition that the foremothers built.**

This is the thing Ethiopia needs, stated more humbly and more truly than I had stated it. Hanna and Betelhem Demissie came across as two eloquent and very modest women. *Hanna, perhaps declining the credit*, **appears to have described, in a few sentences, the human foundation that I badly needed beneath the four singular interests in three layers:** that *unity* is not enforced but practised; that the practice is forgiveness and shared burden; that the practice is taught, mostly by mothers, from a child's first years; and that we have done it before and can do it again. Therefore, everything else in this article is an attempt to honour that articulation by giving it the company, the evidence, and the consequences it deserves.

4 Women's wisdom as tension-lubrication

Permit the engineer his metaphor, because it is more than a metaphor. In any loaded structure or mechanism, two distinct failures destroy it: *tension*, when forces pull a joint apart faster than the joint can hold; and *friction*, when surfaces that must move against one another grind, overheat, and seize.

Engineers solve the first with an anchor—the *kasma*, the element that ties the assembly to a fixed point and carries the pulling load—and the second with a lubricant—the thin medium that lets necessary movement happen without the grinding that would otherwise wear the parts to failure. A society is a loaded structure with moving parts. It has tension: the centrifugal pull of competing groups, regions, and ambitions. It has friction: the daily abrasion of people who must live and trade and govern across difference. And it requires, to survive, both an anchor and a lubricant.

My claim is that women's wisdom—of the kind the song celebrates and Hanna Demissie described—is uniquely suited to both roles, and that it is suited to them *because* it characteristically does not seek power. Consider why this matters. The actor who seeks power cannot serve as a neutral lubricant in a dispute, because every party correctly suspects him of positioning for advantage; his mediation is read, often rightly, as manoeuvre. The actor who is visibly *not* a candidate for the spoils—who wants the fighting to stop more than she wants to rule what remains—can do what the ambitious cannot: she can carry a message between enemies without it being read as a move, and both sides can yield to her without yielding to each other. This is not a claim that women are incapable of power or unfit for it; many have wielded it superbly. It is a claim about a *disposition*, widely cultivated in women by the work of holding families together, that prioritises the survival and flourishing of the whole over victory within it—and that this disposition is, in the strict sense, a strategic asset a wise state would deploy rather than waste.

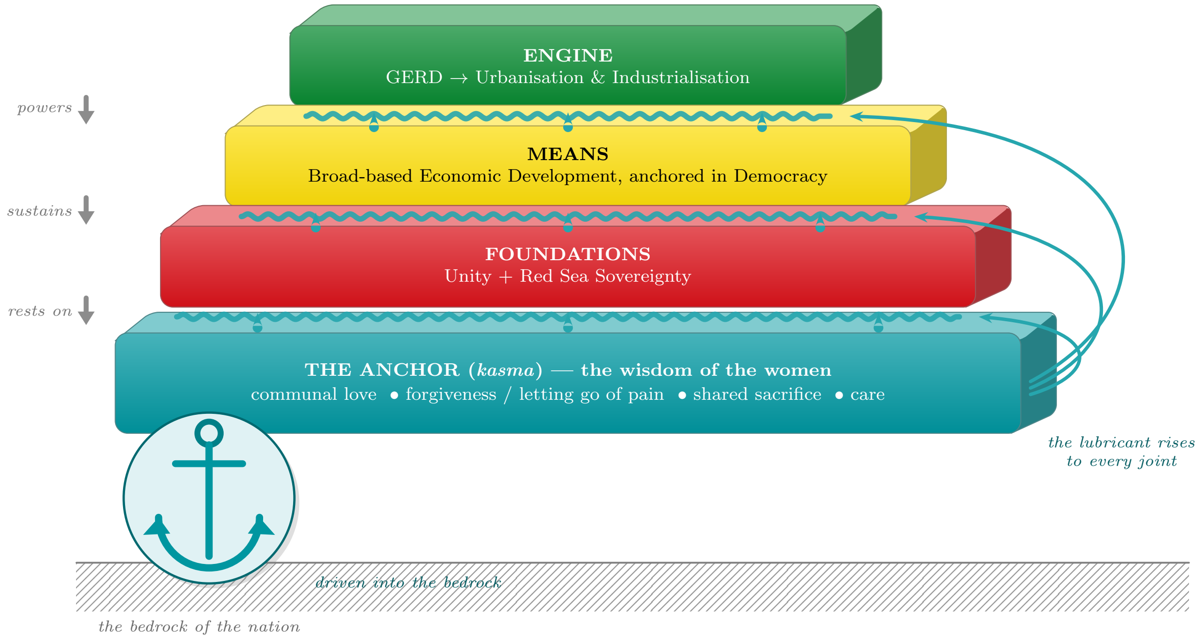
The lubrication principle

In a divided polity, the most effective de-escalators are precisely those with the least stake in who wins. Their credibility is a function of their disinterest. Women acting as mothers, elders, and community guardians have, across cultures, occupied exactly this position—near enough to every household to be trusted, far enough from the contest for office to be believed—and have used it to stop fighting that no armed party could stop without appearing to surrender. **To exclude women from peace-making is not neutrality; it is the deliberate removal of the only lubricant the machine has.**

Ethiopia's own traditions encode this principle with a precision that modern peace-building is only now rediscovering—and they encode it not in one people but across many, which is the first thing to say plainly. Among the Oromo, the *siiqqee* (or *siinqee*) institution gives married women a thin ritual staff—received, in custom, on the wedding day—that is at once an emblem of authority, justice, and protection and a recognised instrument of non-violent intervention [14, 15, 16]. Women bearing *siiqqee* function as an organised civic force: as the literature records it, when *siiqqee*-bearing women interpose themselves between warring parties, the fighting is expected to cease at once, after which the wounded are helped, the dead are found, and the slow work of reconciliation begins [15]. The women serve, in the scholarship's own terms, as symbols of peace, as peace educators, and as peace envoys [16]—which is to say, as anchor and lubricant together, institutionalised.

This is not an Oromo culture peculiarity. The same disposition is institutionalised, in different idioms, across Ethiopia's peoples, and the honest account names several. Among the Somali of the east, including the Issa and Gurgura, a woman's structural position is itself the mechanism: because the clans marry outward, a married woman belongs to two clans at once—her father's and her husband's—and so becomes the one person who can carry a message across a line of blood that no man may safely cross. The scholarship records her as the first channel of dialogue between parties at war and a recognised intercessor when fighting must be stopped [17, 18]. In the Christian highlands of the Amhara and Tigrayan north, the moral standing of mothers and senior women within the customary mediation of *shimgilina* has for centuries been marshalled to halt blood-feud: a woman interposing her own body, or casting her shawl between drawn weapons, carries an authority that custom makes it shameful to defy. The staff, the bridging marriage, and the shawl are three forms of a single instrument. To honour these cultures is to notice a thing that is true of all of them, and that our politics has been busy forgetting in every region at once.

Nor is the pattern Ethiopian alone—which is the second thing worth saying to anyone tempted to read "women and peace" as a foreign slogan smuggled in under a United Nations banner. Societies on


ENGINE
GERD → Urbanisation & Industrialisation
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rests on
THE ANCHOR (kasma) — the wisdom of the women
communal love ● forgiveness / letting go of pain ● shared sacrifice ● care
the lubricant rises to every joint
driven into the bedrock
the bedrock of the nation

Figure 1: **The four interests in three layers, and the substrate beneath them.** The engine powers the means; the means sustain the foundations; and the foundations themselves rest on a human substrate—the *kasma*—that no constitution can pour and no army can impose: the communal disposition conserved chiefly by women. The layers carry the national colours; the substrate is rendered in turquoise, and it does two jobs at once. On the left, the *anchor* is driven through the substrate into the bedrock, carrying the centrifugal pull of a plural society down to a fixed point. On the right, the same turquoise rises out of the substrate into every joint of the assembly—the wavy films between the layers—as the *lubricant* that lets the nation's parts move against one another without grinding or seizing. One substance, two duties. Remove it and the whole assembly loosens.

other continents, which never met ours, built the same machinery on their own. The Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy of North America, whose Great Law of Peace bound warring nations into one polity centuries before the United States existed, vests foundational authority in its *clan mothers*: in the tradition's own telling a woman was the first to accept the Peacemaker's vision, and the clan mothers to this day nominate the chiefs, hold them to account, may depose one who leads the people toward ruin, and serve as the standing arbiters to whom disputes are brought [25]. Among the Igbo of West Africa, the *Umuada*—the assembled daughters of a lineage—are summoned to mediate the quarrels that ordinary authority cannot settle, and on many matters their judgement is final [26]. The staff of the Oromo, the bridging marriage of the Somali, the shawl of the highlander Amhara and Tigrayan, the clan mother of the Haudenosaunee, and the Umuada of the Igbo are not a coincidence of unrelated customs. They are the same discovery, made again and again by peoples who never compared notes: that the surest keeper of the peace is the one who is structurally disqualified from seeking the prize. That a truth so nearly universal should be dismissed in Ethiopia as an imported fashion is a measure of how far the entrepreneurs of grievance have estranged us from our own inheritance. It is older here than the imports, and everywhere it was tried, it worked.

5 The four singular interests—read through the anchor

It is worth making the structural claim concrete, layer by layer, because the wisdom in the song is not a vague benevolence floating above the four interests; it bears directly and differently on each of them. Read through the anchor (Figure 1), the proposition I have argued for six months acquires a human floor it did not have when I argued it in the language of strategy alone.

Unity, the first foundation. Unity is the layer the wisdom touches most obviously, and the touch is not metaphorical. A federation does not cohere because a document says it must; it coheres because, in tens of millions of daily transactions across difference, people choose accommodation over rupture. That choice is a learned disposition, and it is learned first at home, where a child either absorbs the lesson that the people unlike her are nonetheless her people, or absorbs the opposite. Hanna Demissie's account of the shared household—blood and non-blood under one roof, joy and hardship divided in common—is a precise description of the school in which national unity is actually taught, decades before any citizen casts a vote. The state cannot run that school. It can only protect it or destroy it. Every policy that scatters households, criminalises a language at a checkpoint, or rewards the entrepreneur of grievance is a strike against the only institution that manufactures unity at scale; every policy that lets the household stand is a subsidy to the cheapest counter-insurgency the country has.

Red Sea sovereignty, the second foundation. The connection here is less obvious but no less real. I have argued that secure access to the sea is a matter of self-defence before it is a matter of commerce [1, 8, 7]. But sovereignty is defended at the negotiating table by states that are internally credible, and internal credibility is, again, a function of cohesion. A country whose own citizens are at war with one another negotiates from weakness with every neighbour and every power; a country that has kept its internal peace negotiates from strength. The wisdom of the women therefore underwrites the second foundation by way of the first: the disposition that keeps the country whole is the same disposition that lets it speak to the world with one voice. And it is women, overwhelmingly, who pay the price when sovereignty fails and conflict floods in—displaced, widowed, assaulted—so that the constituency with the clearest interest in a securely defended, internally peaceful nation is precisely the constituency we have been least willing to seat at the table.

Broad-based development and democracy, the means. Economists have a name for the largest sector of the Ethiopian economy that appears in no national accounts: the care economy—the raising of children, the keeping of households, the tending of the old and the sick, the unpaid labour without which no paid labour is possible. It is performed overwhelmingly by women, and it is the literal precondition of every figure in the GDP. A development strategy that treats this substrate as free and inexhaustible is making the same error as an engineer who forgets that his structure needs a foundation because he cannot see it. Broad-based development means, among other things, ceasing to extract this labour for nothing—through schooling that reaches girls as far as boys, through health systems that keep mothers and infants alive, through the recognition that the highest-return investment available to a poor country is, by a wide margin, the education of its women. And democracy, the qualifier I attach to development, has its own dependence on the disposition the song commends: a democracy is the institutionalised agreement to lose elections without reaching for a gun, which is to say it is forgiveness and accommodation written into procedure. A people that cannot let go of pain cannot run a democracy, because every defeat becomes a grievance and every grievance a cause.

GERD, urbanisation, and industrialisation, the engine. The engine runs on people—specifically, on a young population converted into a skilled workforce fast enough to turn cheap power into shared prosperity. I develop the demographic stakes in Section 9; here I note only the dependence in the other direction. The women who form the young are forming the engine's fuel. A girl educated to her capacity is not only a future engineer or entrepreneur in her own right; she is, statistically, the mother of healthier, better-schooled, fewer, and more prosperous children—the multiplier on which every demographic-dividend strategy in the development literature depends. The engine, in short, is fuelled twice over by the same wisdom: once because the workforce must be alive and skilled rather than dead or radicalised, and again because the women who raise that workforce are the difference between a demographic dividend and a demographic disaster.

The layered conclusion. The wisdom of the women is not a fifth interest competing for room beside the four. It is the substrate on which all four rest: it is the micro-foundation of unity, the constituency of sovereignty, the unpriced foundation of development, the procedural temper of democracy, and the multiplier on the engine's fuel. To honour it is not to be sentimental. It is to stop building the house on the one part of the ground we have been busiest digging away.

6 The anchor in Ethiopian memory

If we are honest about our own past, the women who held the nation together are not a modern discovery; they are a thread that runs the whole length of the chronicle, and we have been ungrateful to it.

Begin with the founding memory itself. The narrative that has, for millennia, supplied Ethiopia with a sense of itself as a single polity is organised around a woman: Makeda, the Queen of Sheba, whose journey and whose son Menelik I are made, in the *Kebra Nagast*, the origin of the Solomonic line and thereby of the idea of a continuous Ethiopian sovereignty. Whatever the historian makes of the legend, the cultural fact is unambiguous: the country narrates its own unity through a founding matriarch. The anchor is in the foundation story.

It is also in the hard political record. **Empress Taytu Betul**, consort and counsellor to Menelik II, was a central figure in the diplomacy and resolve that produced the victory at Adwa in 1896—the victory whose spirit I have argued must still carry us [1]—and her firmness in resisting the encroaching treaty terms is part of why there was a sovereign nation left to defend. **Empress Zewditu**, who reigned from 1916 to 1930, was the first woman to rule the modern Ethiopian state as sovereign in her own name, holding the centre through a turbulent regency. There is a chapter between the crowns and the hearth that deserves its own sentence, because it answers in advance the lazy charge that the peace-making disposition is mere passivity. When Fascist Italy invaded in 1935, Ethiopian women were not bystanders to the resistance; they were among its organisers and, in cases, its combatants. **Shewareged Gedle** ran the clandestine supply-and-intelligence networks that kept the patriots (*arbegnoch*) fed and armed around occupied Addis Ababa, and helped coordinate the underground that the occupation never managed to break. **Kebedech Seyoum** took up arms after the fall of her husband and led fighters in the field. **Lekyelesh Beyan** and countless unnamed women carried weapons, messages, and the wounded across a country under occupation. The point is not to recruit them as pacifists—they manifestly were not—but to mark what their example proves: that the disposition I am describing is not the absence of courage but a particular direction of it. The women who held the resistance together were holding the *nation* together, against an enemy who wished it erased; the same instinct that binds a household against dissolution bound a country against conquest. When the cause is the survival of the whole, the anchor does not merely steady; it fights. It is only against the suicide of internal faction—the tearing of the whole by its own parts—that the anchor’s instinct is, rightly, to refuse the quarrel.

Empress Menen Asfaw, consort of Haile Selassie, anchored in another register entirely: through the founding of schools and the welfare institutions that bore her patronage, she modelled the conversion of standing into care—the quiet, infrastructural work of building the things a society leans on, which is the anchor’s labour in peacetime as resistance is its labour in war.

None of these were women who shrank from power; but the deeper point for this essay is that the country has repeatedly turned, in its moments of fracture, to the steadying authority of women, and has been held together by it. Below the level of crowns, the same function was discharged in every district by the mothers and grandmothers who sat, by custom and by force of moral standing, within the *shimgilina*—the elders’ mediation by which Ethiopian communities have for centuries settled blood-feud, repaired marriage, and stopped vendetta before it spread. The anchor was not only on the throne, and not only in the field. It was at every hearth.

What we did to the anchor. Set that inheritance against the most recent years. The northern war and the conflicts that have followed it have fallen with particular savagery on women: mass rape was used as an instrument of war by multiple parties; mothers buried children; the very households that conserve the communal disposition Hanna Demissie described were scattered, burned, and bereaved. A nation that for three thousand years narrated its unity through a queen and kept its peace through its mothers spent the early 2020s assaulting the anchor it was built on. No accounting of the period’s strategic folly is complete without this entry: we did not merely fail to deploy our most effective peace-makers; we made them the war’s first casualties.

7 The anchor in the world: women who saved nations

Lest this be mistaken for a parochial sentiment, set the Ethiopian thread inside the wider human record, where the same pattern recurs with the same force: when a nation has come to the edge of disintegration, it has, with remarkable frequency, been pulled back by women who wanted peace more than they wanted power.

The clearest modern case is **Liberia**. After fourteen years of civil war that killed on the order of a quarter of a million people, it was **Leymah Gbowee** and the *Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace* who broke the deadlock [19, 20]. From 2002, Gbowee assembled an interfaith coalition—Christian and Muslim women together—who dressed in white, prayed and picketed in the markets and before the seats of power day after day, refused to be ignored, and finally pursued the warlords to the peace talks in Accra, where they sat down across the doors of the negotiating hall and would not let the men leave until they reached agreement [20]. The war ended weeks later. The same mobilisation then carried **Ellen Johnson Sirleaf** to the presidency—Africa's first elected woman head of state—and Gbowee, Sirleaf, and Yemen's Tawakkol Karman shared the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize for, in the committee's words, their non-violent struggle for women's safety and women's full participation in peace-building [19]. Note the mechanism, because it is exactly the lubrication principle: the women succeeded where every armed faction had failed, and they succeeded *because* they were manifestly not competing for the spoils. As Gbowee put it, they were the conscience of those who had lost their consciences in the quest for power.

The pattern is not African alone. In **Northern Ireland** in 1976, after three children were killed in the Troubles, **Betty Williams** and **Mairead Corrigan** founded the movement that became the Community of Peace People, drew tens of thousands of Catholic and Protestant women into the streets together against the violence, and were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for it—decades before the Good Friday Agreement made their cause the official policy of two states [21]. In **Argentina**, the **Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo**, walking in silent circles before the seat of a murderous junta with the photographs of their disappeared children, became the moral solvent that the regime could neither answer nor suppress, and helped end the dictatorship's licence to kill [22]. The cultural memory reaches back much further: the Greek imagination gave us Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, in which the women of warring cities combine to force their men to make peace; the Roman foundation legend has the Sabine women throw themselves between their fathers and their husbands to stop the slaughter and, in doing so, fuse two peoples into one city. These are stories, but stories a civilisation tells itself about who stops its wars, and the story it tells is consistent.

The closest analogue to Ethiopia's predicament, however, is not a peace movement at all but a reconstruction, and it sits on our own continent. After the 1994 genocide, **Rwanda** was a country in which the murdered and the maimed had been overwhelmingly men, and the survivors charged with rebuilding a shattered society were therefore overwhelmingly women—at one point an estimated majority of the adult population. What that emergency forced into being, Rwanda then chose to keep: a deliberate constitutional commitment to women's participation that has given the country, for two decades, the highest proportion of women in any national legislature on earth [23]. One need not endorse every feature of Rwandan governance to read the lesson plainly, and it is the lesson most relevant to us: a nation that has torn itself apart along the lines of identity recovered fastest precisely by placing at the centre of its reconstruction the constituency whose disposition runs against the tearing. The reconstruction was load-bearing women's work, formalised. There is also a quieter African precedent in **Kenya**, where **Wangari Maathai**—the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize—built the Green Belt Movement by organising rural women to plant tens of millions of trees, and in doing so demonstrated that the work of repair, whether of a forest or of a fractured civic fabric, characteristically begins with the patient, unglamorous, collective labour that women's movements have specialised in [24]. And the lineage is older still than any of these: the very first Nobel Peace Prize awarded to a woman went, in 1905, to **Bertha von Suttner**, whose novel *Lay Down Your Arms* and tireless organising helped build the modern peace movement in Europe, while the American reformer **Jane Addams** carried the same conviction into the twentieth century's wars. The thread is long, it is global, and it is unbroken.

The cross-cultural regularity. From the *siiqqee* staff of the Oromo to the white robes of Monrovia, from the Plaza de Mayo to the streets of Belfast, the historical record yields a stable finding: women organised for peace have repeatedly halted conflicts that the armed and the office-seeking could not halt, precisely by occupying the one position no combatant can occupy—the position of the party that seeks no prize. The United Nations codified the lesson in Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), which made the inclusion of women in peace processes a formal obligation rather than a courtesy [27]. The lesson is not that women are gentler ornaments to a male enterprise. The lesson is that they are load-bearing, and that excluding them is an engineering error with predictable consequences.

8 Against the easy objections

A careful reader will have assembled several objections by now, and a serious argument is owed serious answers. Let me take the four strongest in turn, because each, properly addressed, makes the case sturdier rather than weaker.

First: "Is this not essentialism—the claim that women are naturally peaceful, naturally nurturing, naturally apolitical?" It is not, and the distinction matters. I make no claim about nature. I make a claim about a *disposition* that is overwhelmingly *cultivated* in women by the social fact that the work of holding families together has, across nearly all societies and certainly in ours, been assigned to them. A disposition produced by a division of labour is not a biological destiny; it is a sociological reality, and it would be no less real if the division of labour were different, and no less worth deploying while the division of labour is what it is. Indeed, part of the agenda I will set out is to stop treating that disposition as the unpaid and unrecognised birthright of one sex and to value it properly. The claim is not "women are like this by nature." The claim is "this disposition exists, it is concentrated where the care-work is concentrated, it is strategically valuable, and we waste it."

Second: "Women have also led wars and committed atrocities; your peaceful matriarchs are a selective fiction." True, and I have not pretended otherwise—I have cited Empress Taytu, who was anything but a pacifist, and Empress Zewditu, who held a throne through force as well as faith. The argument does not require that all women are peaceful or that no woman makes war. It requires something weaker and better-evidenced: that movements of women organised *as women, for peace*, have a documented record of halting conflicts that armed and office-seeking men could not halt, and that this record is explained by their structural position—their disinterest in the spoils—rather than by any claim about female nature. Liberia, Northern Ireland, the Plaza de Mayo, and the *siiqqee* are not a sentimental anthology; they are data points for a precise mechanism, and the mechanism would work for any actor who occupied the same disinterested position. It is simply a fact of our social arrangements that women occupy it most often.

Third: "Is this not a romanticisation of tradition—of the very communal, hierarchical past that constrained women in the first place?" This is the sharpest objection and deserves the most candour. The shared household Hanna Demissie describes, and the indigenous institutions I praise, coexisted historically with real subordination of women, and nothing in this essay should be read as nostalgia for that subordination. But the answer to a tradition's injustices is to extend its virtues to those it excluded, not to discard the virtues along with the injustices. The communal disposition is worth conserving; the inequities under which it was extracted are worth abolishing. A modern Ethiopia can keep the *kasma* and discard the cage. To do so, it must value the care-work it has always relied on, educate the women it has always leaned on, and seat at every table the constituency it has always sent to the back. That is not romanticising the past; it is redeeming it.

Fourth: "Is this not instrumentalising women—valuing them for their usefulness to the nation rather than as ends in themselves?" The charge has force, and I accept its discipline. Women are owed dignity, education, safety, and full participation because they are persons and citizens, full stop, and not because they are useful. I have framed the argument in the strategic register partly because that is the register I work in and partly because the strategic case is so overwhelming that even a reader who cares nothing for justice should be moved by it. But the two cases point the same way. The thing justice demands—that we stop assaulting women, educate them fully, and include them in the decisions that govern their lives—is the identical thing strategy demands. When the moral and the strategic argument converge so completely, the honest course is to make both and to act on whichever the listener will hear.

The objections, net

None of the four objections defeats the argument; each, answered, sharpens it. The claim is sociological, not biological; it rests on a documented mechanism, not a flattering generalisation. It conserves a tradition's virtues while discarding its injustices. It is underwritten by a moral case and a strategic case that, unusually, point in the same direction.

9 The generation we are spending in the fire

Now to the cost, stated in the only terms that should matter to a state: the future. Ethiopia is one of the youngest countries on earth. By the official projections I have used throughout this series, close to two-thirds of the population—on the order of **86 million people—are under thirty** [30]. This is, depending entirely on what we do with it, either the greatest asset any Ethiopian government has ever held or the greatest liability. The engine layer of my four interests—GERD-led urbanisation and industrialisation—is, at bottom, a bet that this young population can be turned into a skilled industrial workforce fast enough to convert cheap power into shared prosperity. That bet cannot be won by a generation that is dead, maimed, traumatised, or radicalised. There is no industrial policy that survives the destruction of its own labour force.

The arithmetic of spending the young in war

Every young Ethiopian killed in these conflicts is not only a son or a daughter mourned by a mother—though that, on the song's logic, should be enough. He or she is also a unit of the very human capital on which the engine of the nation depends: a future welder, nurse, coder, machinist, agronomist, teacher, or entrepreneur, in whom the family and the state have already sunk eighteen years of food, schooling, and care, and from whom the return was to come over the next forty. To spend that life in a war between factions is to destroy the principal *and* forfeit the interest. To leave a young person disabled or traumatised by such a war is, in cold economic terms, to convert a productive asset into a lifelong liability while inflicting the human catastrophe besides. A nation that does this at scale is not merely cruel; it is liquidating its own future to pay the debts of its grievances.

What the young generation needs is therefore the exact inverse of what the entrepreneurs of ethnic grievance offer them. The ethnic entrepreneur with a monkey habit offers a young wo/man hatred, a grievance to inherit, an enemy to define her/himself against, and a gun—and calls it identity and purpose. What the young actually need, and what the foremothers' disposition supplies, is love, education, training, skill, patient guidance, and a unity large enough to give their ambitions somewhere to go that is not the trench. The choice is not abstract. It is being made, household by household and policy by policy, right now. A young person guided toward a trade, a university, a start-up, or a farm improved by cheap GERD power is an addition to the nation's strength; the same young person handed a rifle and a list of enemies is a subtraction from it, and frequently a subtraction from several other lives as well. **The women of *Yehager Kasma* were singing, among other things, for the first of these futures and against the second. They were singing for their sons and daughters to be educated rather than buried.**

10 Collective intelligence: the way out of the quagmire

How, concretely, does a nation move from the second future to the first? Not, I have argued for six months, by the victory of one faction over the others, which only relocates the quarrel. The route out of the quagmire of resentment is what I will call **collective intelligence**: the deliberate, large-scale collaboration of many minds and hands toward shared ends that no faction could reach alone. And here the song is not merely an illustration of the thesis; it is an instance of it.

Look again at how *Yehager Kasma* was made. Nine leading artists, of different generations, regions, languages, and musical styles, who in the ordinary run of a celebrity economy compete with one another, were convened into a single work. Behind them stood composers, lyricists, an arranger, a mastering engineer, a song producer, a director, a media house, and two international agencies, each contributing a specialised competence—and the technologies of multitrack recording, video production, and digital distribution let the result reach the whole nation at once [11]. The song is a small, perfect model of collective intelligence: many distinct excellences, coordinated by a shared purpose, producing something none could have produced alone and which is, not by accident, an artefact *about* the value of being woven together. The medium enacts the message. That is why it moves people who cannot follow a word of the lyric: they are watching cooperation made audible.

Ethnic entrepreneurship is the negation of collective intelligence. The two are exact opposites, and seeing why clarifies the whole national choice. Collective intelligence is *positive-sum*: it assumes that the more competences are coordinated, the larger the result for everyone, and it therefore seeks to include. Ethnic entrepreneurship is *zero-sum* by construction: it assumes that one group's gain is another's loss, that trust across the line is naivety, and that the path to advantage runs through the subtraction of rivals—and it therefore seeks to divide. A society running on collective intelligence builds dams, universities, factories, and songs that nine artists sing together. A society running on ethnic entrepreneurship builds militias, checkpoints, and graves. The same young population, the same rivers, the same talent, produce opposite nations depending on which logic governs. The wisdom of the women is, in this exact sense, the wisdom of collective intelligence: the instinct to weave rather than to cut, to include rather than to subtract, to let go of the pain that the dividers need us to keep.

There is, moreover, a genuine science behind the phrase, and it is not soft. Research on collective intelligence finds that the problem-solving capacity of a group is predicted only weakly by the average intelligence of its members and rather strongly by the group's social attributes—the evenness with which members take turns, the diversity of perspectives admitted, and, strikingly, the group's average social sensitivity, the capacity to read and respond to others. Groups that listen, that include, and that distribute their attention outperform groups of cleverer individuals who do not [29]. Translate that finding to the scale of a nation and it reads almost as a paraphrase of the song: the country that does best is not the one with the strongest faction but the one that takes turns, admits difference, and is socially sensitive enough to hear the quiet voice before it becomes a scream. The disposition the women carry—attentive, inclusive, turn-taking, allergic to the zero-sum—is, in the literal terminology of the field, the disposition that raises a collective's intelligence. Ethnic entrepreneurship lowers it, by design, because a group optimised for the subtraction of rivals has thrown away exactly the social attributes that make groups smart.

The policy translation is not mysterious. A state committed to collective intelligence discharges the fundamental duties of government impartially—security, the rule of law, the protection of citizens' rights, the honest management of public goods—so that no group has a credible reason to seek its safety outside the common roof; it invests in the broad-based education and skilling of the young so that the engine has fuel and the young have futures; it builds the GERD-led infrastructure of power, urbanisation, and industry as a shared national project rather than a factional trophy; and it makes a genuine, credible federal offer in which difference is protected by, rather than pitted against, common citizenship. None of this is soft. All of it is the hard, unglamorous, load-bearing work of the anchor. And all of it is easier to sustain in a society whose communal disposition—latent, abundant, and conserved chiefly by its women—has been protected rather than burned.

11 What listening would look like: a modest, non-partisan agenda

It is fair to ask the columnist who counsels listening what, concretely, listening would change. The agenda below is deliberately non-partisan: every item could be adopted by any government of any composition, because none of it advantages a faction and all of it strengthens the nation. It is also deliberately modest, in the sense that none of it requires a constitutional revolution; it requires only that we stop digging away the ground we stand on.

1. **Seat women at every peace table, as obligation rather than courtesy.** The United Nations codified this in Security Council Resolution 1325 a generation ago [27], and the Liberian and Irish records show why it works: the parties with the least stake in the spoils are the parties most able to broker a settlement that holds. Every ceasefire negotiation, every local reconciliation, every disarmament process in the country should include, by rule, the women of the affected communities—not as observers, but as participants whose assent is required.

2. **Treat the protection of households and the ending of gender-based violence as a strategic priority, not only a humanitarian one.** The household is the factory of national unity; assaulting it is a strategic self-wound. A state that wishes to dissolve the recruiting environment of insurgency should protect, above almost all else, the social unit that teaches accommodation—and should prosecute wartime sexual violence not merely because it is a crime against women but because it is an attack on the nation's cohesion.

3. **Make girls' education the flagship of the development programme.** The economics are not contested: in poor countries the education of girls returns more, across more dimensions—child survival, health, fertility moderation, household income, the next generation's schooling—than almost any other public investment. It is the engine's fuel and the anchor's reinforcement at once. A government serious about the demographic dividend would treat the schoolgirl as its most valuable strategic asset, because she is.

4. **Recognise and revive the indigenous machinery of peace.** The *siiqqee* of the Oromo, the *shimgilina* of the highlands, and the comparable institutions of every Ethiopian people are not folklore; they are tested conflict-resolution technologies that already command local legitimacy [14, 16]. A wise state would map them, fund them, formally recognise their mediations, and connect them to the modern legal order rather than supplanting them with a brittle officialdom that no village trusts.

5. **Fund the arts as the soft infrastructure of unity.** *Yehager Kasma* did more for national cohesion in five minutes than many a ministry achieves in a year, and it did so because art crosses the lines that politics has drawn. A nation that spends on tanks and nothing on the songs that make people want to live together is mis-allocating its security budget. The cheapest unity programme available is the one that lets the artists do what they already want to do.

6. **Practise, at the top, the disposition we ask of households.** The most consequential listener is the executive. A prime minister who governed as a national executive rather than as the patron of a faction—discharging impartially the fundamental duties of government, making a credible federal offer, and reconstructing the security forces on professional rather than political foundations—would be applying, at the scale of the state, exactly the wisdom the foremothers applied at the scale of the home [9, 6]. I have argued this case at length elsewhere and will not repeat it; I note only that it is the same case as the song's, in a different key.

The agenda in one breath

Seat women at every peace table; protect the household as strategic infrastructure; make the schoolgirl the flagship of development; revive the indigenous machinery of peace; fund the arts as the soft infrastructure of unity; and practise at the summit the accommodation we ask of every home. None of it favours a faction; all of it strengthens the nation.

12 If we must fight, fight only for the foundations, peacefully

Let me not be misread as a pacifist, because I am not one, and the four interests do not permit it. There are things worth fighting for, and a nationalist names them plainly. They are the **foundations**: the *unity* of the country, without which nothing else stands, and the *sovereignty* of the nation, of which secure access to the Red Sea is, as I have argued at length, a question of self-defence before it is ever a question of commerce [1, 8, 7]. A nation may rightly defend its existence and its access to the sea on which its survival depends. These are not factional prizes; they are the conditions of there being a nation at all. For these, and only for these, force may ultimately be justified.

But notice the two disciplines the song's wisdom imposes even here. First, the *ranking*: the things worth fighting for are exactly the things that are *not* the property of any faction. No internal political contest—no party's hold on office, no region's advantage over another, no ethnic entrepreneur's grievance—belongs on the list. The moment the fighting is for a faction rather than for the foundations, it has left the category of the justified and entered the category of the squandered, and it is spending the young generation in the fire for nothing the nation will keep. Second, the *means*: even for *Unity* and the *Red Sea Sovereignty*, peaceful means come first, and force is the last resort, not the first reflex. Sovereignty is most cheaply and durably secured by diplomacy, by economic leverage, by the patient construction of alliances and the credible institutions that make a state worth negotiating with—and only where all of these have genuinely failed does the legitimate use of force arise. This is not weakness. It is the precise lesson the peace-making women teach: that the strong party is the one that exhausts every non-violent instrument before reaching for the violent one, and that the appearance of restraint is, more often than not, the substance of strength.

So the rule, stated for the record: *Fight, if you must, only for Unity and for Red Sea sovereignty—never for a faction. And even for those, prioritise peaceful means, and treat force as the last resort it is. Everything else is to be settled by the anchor: by accommodation, by the rule of law, by collective intelligence, and by the wisdom of the women who would rather we did not fight at all.*

This is the synthesis the whole essay has been building toward. The four interests in three layers tell us *what* to secure and in what order. The wisdom of the women tells us *how* to secure it and at what human cost—and warns us, from the founding matriarch to the *siiqqee* staff to a song released in May 2021, that the nation is held by its anchor and not driven by its quarrels. Ethiopia will be a great nation. It has the people, the rivers, the history, and the talent. What it must stop doing is fighting itself, because every round of that fighting destroys the very generation and the very communal disposition on which its greatness depends. The dividers profit from our kept pain. The builders, by contrast, weave us together—and the women have always been among the chief builders—and now *Hanna Demissie* is articulating it to us with unmistakable clarity **for us all to learn how to let it go**, not because the **pain** was not real, but because the **future** is more real, and because **we have done this before.**

13 The War Drum Reverberates: Let's bow to *Yehager Kasma*

When I call this song a warning, I do not mean a warning only about 2021. The war drum it tried to still then is reverberating again—in fact louder and harder. The soberest defence analyst who charted the Abraham Accords, the US-Israel-Iran wars, the June 2026 election, and Arsi [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9] now argues not over *whether* the next war comes but over *when* and *how* [33]. A whole region has been strangled—salaries withheld, medicine and fuel choked off, the young pressed into uniform on pain of severe punishment—and strangulation, as the colder strategists understand, does not relax a crisis; it concentrates it, until a leadership convinced it faces extinction reaches for the one instrument that still promises survival. That is the precise mechanism by which a war nobody admits to wanting nonetheless arrives. The women sang to interrupt that mechanism. We are, once again, standing exactly where they sang.

And the shape of the danger is now specific enough to name. Ethiopian officials have a word for the alignment they fear—*Tsimdo*—a coordinated, Asmara-tied entanglement that would oblige the national army to fight on three fronts at once: against Eritrea, against a remilitarised faction in the north, and against the Amhara insurgency, all at the same time [33]. On my reading as a defence analyst, the

Tsimdo design is not, at root, a Tigrayan or an Amhara project at all; it is most plausibly driven from *outside*—by an Egypt that has never reconciled itself to the dam, and an Eritrea that means to keep Ethiopia landlocked and bleeding—using Ethiopian factions as the cheap and expendable instruments of a strategy whose authors will never themselves bury a son. **This is the senseless war.** It is, precisely, the war the anchor exists to prevent: Ethiopian against Ethiopian, highlander against highlander, the young of every region fed into a fire lit by patrons who profit whichever way our blood runs. To be baited into Tsimdo would be to do our adversaries' work for them—with our own children, on our own soil. No faction's grievance, no border *woreda*, no leader's survival is worth a single kilometre of that road.

Here, however, I must be equally plain about what is *not* senseless, because the call for peace is not a call for surrender, and the four singular interests do not permit pacifism. The Red Sea Sovereignty is being argued, by the government, friends of Ethiopia and its adversary, in precisely the wrong register. It is framed as an *economic* question, a matter of port fees and transit corridors, an incongruity even a schoolchild can see: no people ever sent its sons to die for a discount on container handling. **The recovery of sovereign access to the Red Sea is the one cause for which, all peaceful means exhausted, force may finally be legitimate.** The true register is *self-defence*, and self-defence is not a favour granted by benefactors, nor a concession to be traded against commercial considerations. It is, in the language of Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, the *inherent right* of every sovereign state [28]. A land-locked nation of a hundred and thirty million, whose single outlet can be shut by one neighbour's decision, has—in the strict military sense—no autonomous defence posture at all; its deterrent is mortgaged to whoever holds the off-switch on its only door. **That is not an economic inconvenience. It is an existential vulnerability, and a nation is entitled to cure it.** Ethiopia has a legitimate war to fight, and at this time, any internal war is not for Ethiopians to fight.

> **The anchor's warning, in plain operational terms.** A nation drawn into a three-front internal war—against its own north, its own Amhara, and a neighbour—loses twice: it spends the generation it needs to build, and it hands its external rivals the disintegration they could never achieve by their own hand. The strangulation of a region is not peace; it is war by other means, and it manufactures the desperation in which open war becomes thinkable. The first duty of statecraft this year is therefore not to *win* the Tsimdo war but to refuse to fight it—to break the strangulation, restore salaries and medicine, and deny the patrons the Ethiopian-on-Ethiopian catastrophe they are banking on. To those who hold the instruments of force—the ENDF, the regional commands, and the men in the bush alike—the message is one line: *Tsimdo is the trap, not the test. Refuse it.*

Because, here is the part the comfortable forget. **There is no 999 to dial, and no 911, when a nation's sovereignty is at stake.** No constable comes when a state is strangled or a coastline is foreclosed. International law is a real and valuable thing, but it is not a guarantor of survival: at its best it *penalises* the bad actor after the fact, which is a feat of diplomatic acrobatics, not a shield. The penalty, if it arrives at all, arrives for the historian to record; the nation, meanwhile, must have survived long enough to read it. Every sovereign people is therefore the first and the last guarantor of its own sovereignty. This is not a doctrine of aggression; it is the oldest fact of the state, and pretending otherwise—outsourcing one's survival to a convention or a court—is how nations are quietly strangled while their advocates file briefs.

I have argued elsewhere, as a defence strategist, that the pivotal window for Ethiopia to secure sovereign Red Sea access along the Doumeira–Beilul corridor opens around 2027, and that the sound approach is *hold and negotiate*: to establish an unanswerable strategic fact and then bargain from it, rather than to gamble on a war of movement [7, 1]. The Tsimdo design is, among other things, a bid to foreclose that window—to mire Ethiopia in internal wars with Eritrean backing precisely so that 2027 finds it too exhausted to act. Since the Tsimdo war will happen, I will go public with what I consider, on my reading, to be a miscalculation—and a revealing one at that. For if Eritrea or its patrons were to strike first to pre-empt Ethiopia's claim, they would not nullify it; they would *vindicate* it. An unprovoked assault on Ethiopia would convert a contested aspiration into a textbook case of the Article 51 right, hand Addis Ababa the moral and legal high ground it has so far lacked, and unite a fractious nation behind the one cause that genuinely transcends its factions. Such a strike would be strategically suicidal for its author and a boon to Ethiopia's claim. I would be surprised if serious Ethiopian defence strategists—soldiers of the calibre of General Tsadkan Gebretensae among them—read the arithmetic any differently. The worst outcome for Ethiopia's adversaries is a patient, united, internally peaceful Ethiopia that secures its right by holding and negotiating. The Tsimdo trap exists precisely to deny it that patience. Ethiopia must be fully ready for reactive self-defence or interceptive self-defence with sweeping and non-proportionate power and hold the dwindling state of Eritrea confined outside historical Ethiopia.

So the two messages of this section are, in the end, one. *Refuse* the senseless war—the Tsimdo war, the war among ourselves and with a neighbour that our rivals are paying for—because it spends the anchor generation for nothing and gifts our disintegration to those who could never otherwise win it. And *secure* the one right that is not senseless—sovereign access to the sea, as self-defence and not as commerce—by peaceful priority: by diplomacy, by alliance, by the patient construction of an unanswerable position, treating force as the genuine last resort it is. **Peaceful priority, however, is not peaceful exclusivity.** The reinstatement of Ethiopia's Red Sea sovereignty is, in the long run, inevitable, because a nation does not indefinitely accept a mortal vulnerability it has the means to cure; the only open questions are whether it is secured wisely or recklessly, peacefully or at ruinous cost. The wisdom of the women does not forbid the defence of the nation's life. It forbids the squandering of the nation's children on everything that is *not* its life. Between those two disciplines lies the whole of sound statecraft.

14 Conclusion: for the foremothers, and for the ones still singing

I set out to write a strategic article as always but found myself writing a thank-you note to our women, to our anchors. That is the song's doing, and I will not resist it. In my nine sequential articles I have covered a large subject and also achieved much larger readership than I initially expected. The majority of emails flooding in express, of course, very polarised views, and come from people who did not assimilate the subject matter, or are not capable of assimilating such a subject matter despite claiming scholarship. Very few are high-calibre comments, showing not only intellectual depth but genuine thoughtfulness. I will continue to stay engaged positively, and trust I shall provide some hope of a peaceful and prosperous Ethiopia for the most disaffected. The worst part of being Ethiopian at this moment is how enslaved and polarised we have become through the monkey habit of ethnic entrepreneurship. How do we come to convince ourselves to give up our individual liberty for group identity and ownership of a region we still do not own? It is also a question of ownership—by individuals or groups. This is communism in disguise, and most forget that the Ethiopian student movement of Wallelign Mekonnen was rooted in the failed and discredited communist Nation and Nationalities philosophy of the Soviet Union. It was defeated fair and square by capitalism, whose emphasis on individual liberty—whatever its other faults—won the war.

Notwithstanding, *Yehager Kasma* did what eight or nine of my own articles could not: it stated the human substrate of the four singular interests in a form that a child, a soldier, and a head of state can each understand, and it stated it in the one register—music—that crosses every line the politics of grievance has drawn. The women who made it asked us, in 2021, to stop quarrelling and to follow the lead of those whose wisdom bends toward peace. We did not, and we paid. They are still singing. We can still listen.

So let this article stand as a small act of listening. To Hanna Demissie, who reminded a nation that its capacity for shared love and sacrifice is not lost but latent, and that we have come this far only because we have, again and again, let go of our pain: you have articulated what this country needs more clearly than its analysts have—*we need a refined mind like yours for all our lives; save us from being lost.* To Betelhem Demissie and the company of artists: thank you for making the argument singable. To Kuku Sebsebe: thank you for forty years of holding up, in song, the country some of its sons were busy tearing down. And to the foremothers—the queens and the grandmothers, the *shimgilina* elders, *siiqqee*-bearers and the women of the markets, the ones in white in Monrovia and the ones in silence in the Plaza de Mayo, and most of all our own strong mothers—thank you for being the *kasma*. The peg no one sees. The thing that holds.

Ethiopia, I am coming full circle. In my first article, I argued that *When a New Generation Speaks, a Nation Must Listen*[1]. Now, I speak even more forcefully. **Ethiopia ought to listen to its women—they are the nation's *kasma*.** It is the cheapest, oldest, and wisest counsel you will ever be offered, and it is being sung to you, free of charge, by the best voices you have. **We cannot go to more senseless wars.** Let's learn how to listen to our anchors.

The argument in five lines

(1) Women are the *kasma*—the anchor and the lubricant—of family, society, and nation, and their wisdom is the human substrate beneath the four interests. (2) That wisdom is effective in peace-making precisely because it does not seek power. (3) History, Ethiopian and global, repeatedly shows women pulling nations back from disintegration when the armed and the ambitious could not. (4) Spending the young generation in factional war liquidates the nation's future; what the young need is love, education, skill, guidance, and unity. (5) The way out of the quagmire is collective intelligence—weaving, not cutting—and if we must fight at all, it is only for Unity and the Red Sea, and even then by peaceful means first.

And so the last word should not be mine; it should be hers. When the question is what this country most needs, *Hanna Demissie* did not reach for a policy or a slogan. She said, in effect, that the thing we need is already among us—that the woven relationship of love and care for one another is not lost but *latent*, waiting only for the conditions in which it can act; that we have come this far as one nation for a single reason, that again and again we chose to let go of our pain rather than be ruled by it; and that **with the plea and the wisdom of our women—our mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters—Ethiopia has every capacity to remain united, sovereign, prosperous, and at peace.** That is the whole of it, stated more clearly than any analyst has managed.

> *The capacity for communal love and shared sacrifice is not gone from Ethiopia. It is latent and abundant. We have come this far only because, again and again, we chose to let go of our pain. With the wisdom of our women, we can do it again—and remain united, sovereign, prosperous, and at peace.*

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