

Ethiopia, Where Humanity Began Its Long March¹ And where millions will keep walking... until a new Berlin Conference

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It all started in Africa. It all started in Ethiopia. It all started with Lucy.

At the dawn of humanity

3.2 million years ago Lucy, our first known ancestor, was born of a simian mother differentiating herself from her thanks to the evolution of her genes that allowed her to stand on two feet and start walking. This happened in Africa, in Hadar in the Awash Valley, 159 kms from Addis Ababa, in today's Ethiopia. We all descend from Lucy, including the slavers, colonialists and white supremacists of yesterday and today.

Her remains, excavated in 1974 by the American paleoanthropologist Donald Johansson, are preserved in the museum of Addis Ababa, where I had the opportunity to meet the relatives of this *Australopithecus afarensis*. The descendants of Lucy continued to walk, crossed continents and their genes evolved to what is today our species, the *homo sapiens* or "wise man"; so "wise" that we even have the ability to eliminate the entire human species, and we seem to be in a frantic struggle to destroy the planet. This evolutionary history of the human being could be much more beautiful if only the differences between the descendants of Lucy were minor. While today in the developed world, few are still obliged to walk, in most of Africa human beings continue to walk great distances; carrying water and grain on their backs due mainly to poverty, which has its explanation in the history of this continent subjected and exploited by colonial powers, along with wars, ethnic conflicts, religious struggles, lack of institutional presence, weakness of the political systems and last but not least, climate change.

Ethiopia, with an area of 1,104,300 km², equivalent to 36 times the area of Belgium, concentrates just over 100 million inhabitants. According to demographic projections, they will reach 188.5 million in 2050. The majority of its population, 41%, is under 14 years old - a percentage that in Germany only reaches 13%. The 4

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main ethnic groups (Oromos, Amharas, Somalis and Tigray) make up just over 70% of its population which in total houses 140 different groups where 83 languages and about 200 dialects are spoken.

Faith is the only future

Christians, Muslims and Animists live together with other minor creeds. In fact, the vast majority practices atavistic animism in addition to their religion, the belief in the soul or spirits. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo (word that means “unit”) Church is the official religion since the year 330 approximately under the kingdom of Aksum (4th century BC until 7th century AD), and therefore the second oldest of the world after the Armenian. It is practiced fervently by 61.56% of the population – a figure that includes both Protestants and Catholics, that is, more than 60 million people.

In Rome, this Christian variation is qualified as “primitive Christianity” or Paleo-Christianity, probably because its rites are closer to the origin itself or because they practice an effective Lent with fasting from the time of dinner until 3 pm each day, with abstention absolute of products of animal origin and alcohol. Actually, the question arises whether there is a religion that is not primitive. What explanation would our grandmother Lucy have every time she woke up from a dream? I believe that animism was born there, the good and bad spirits that helped or harmed us in the daily struggle for survival, along with the belief of another life after death. In fact, animism is still present through the tradition and superstitions that accompany people every day.

Sunni Muslims are the second most followed religion by Ethiopians with 34.4%. Then come the Animists with 3.7%, and other minors. It is interesting to note that 99.8% of the population declares themselves as believers. In Germany that percentage reaches only 67.1%. Until now in Ethiopia there has been a wonderful tolerance and religious coexistence for centuries; there are no ghettos, no neighborhoods, no cities that identify a religion. The problems in Ethiopia are born of belonging to a certain ethnic group, and that is where things get complicated. The rivalries between Oromo, majority, and Amharas, minority, are perceived cyclically, causing clashes and deaths.

The tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea began a few years after the latter country reached independence in 1993. Between 1998-2000 a war broke out – with continued belligerence until the signing of a peace treaty and the recognition of the borders in 2018. The victims are calculated in around 100,000 deaths and more than 600,000 refugees.

Unlike the other African countries, Ethiopia has never been a colony. In the division of the continent, at the Berlin Conference¹ in 1884-85, the territory which was known as Abyssinia was assigned as a Protectorate to Italy, a country that maintained an active presence in Eritrea. However, the Italian forces were defeated by the Ethiopians in 1896 in the Battle of Adwa - celebrated every year as a great military victory, and which laid the foundations of their independence.

Mussolini managed to occupy Ethiopia for his ephemeral personal glory between 1935 and 1941, creating the province of Eastern Italian Africa that included Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia. He moved the symbolic fourth century-obelisk of Aksum to Rome

to be installed as a war trophy at the entrance of the Ministry of the Colonies (current FAO headquarters), until it was returned to Ethiopia in 2008. Emperor Haile Selassie is recognized and revered with such respect that the main university of Addis Ababa bears his name and houses a museum in his honor.

The odious but necessary comparisons

The economic and social reality of Ethiopia is dramatic even though people say they are better off and have confidence in the future. For the first time there is a woman President and a pacifist Prime Minister, who enjoy broad support and are committed to creating better living conditions for people. However, in every corner of Addis Ababa, cars are surrounded by women with babies in their arms, old people and children begging. At night you can see groups of people sleeping in the streets. In 2017, 27.3% of the population lived with 1.9 dollars per day, 23.5% were below the poverty line, and corrected GDP per capita (PPP) reached US \$ 1,890 – whereas in Germany, the GDP reached US \$ 51,680. According to the World Bank, 80% of the Ethiopian population lives in the countryside, but young people begin to migrate to cities attracted by cell phones and the opportunities to start a new life. In 2017, around 900 thousand Ethiopians lived outside their country, mainly in the United States and Saudi Arabia - an important source of remittances.

Like in most African countries, the estimated infant mortality rate reached 49.6 out of every thousand children born alive in 2016. In Germany and other developed countries, the same rate reached 3.4 per thousand. The life expectancy of an Ethiopian newborn is 65.4 years, while that of a German reached 81 in 2017.

Just as we recognize that the differences between rich and poor have increased within each country, it is worth remembering that the gap between developed and developing countries also continues to increase. The dramatic comparisons between income and quality of life should make us reflect on what we are doing to reduce them effectively.

A new Berlin Conference

The fate of the Africans was sealed by the powers in the nineteenth century Berlin Conference. The borders were created according to the strength of each empire. There was no free will for their people or a divine hand to protect them. Projections of United Nations population growth for the world show that while in Europe in the year 2050 the population will decrease by 4.3%, that of Africa will increase by 1.300 million - that is, it will double its current population.

What future awaits those generations to be born? One thing is sure: they'll keep walking, same as all subsequent generations to our grandmother Lucy. Most likely, many will try to emigrate, to Europe or the United States, to seek a better future if the current conditions of countries like Ethiopia do not improve substantially. Neither the independence achieved in the 60s nor the fact of never having been a colony, make the difference in real terms, despite the good intentions of many leaders. It is time for a "new Berlin Conference" even with the same powers that enslaved, looted and divided the

continent. When reviewing the Minutes of said Conference, dated February 26, 1885, one can read: ... to regulate the most favorable conditions for the development of trade and civilization in certain regions of Africa and to assure all nations the advantages of the free navigation of the two main rivers of Africa that flow in the Atlantic Ocean.

After 135 years we know the civilizatory results very well. Therefore, a sense of realism should summon these same countries to seek global solutions that go beyond the demographic threat and develop a large investment plan with shared responsibility to avoid the misuse of resources and strengthen multilateral organizations so that they can accompany a process that will be long-standing. It is time to invest in earnest to protect the future, and therefore the participants of the Berlin Conference should once again meet to seek to realize the dream of generations of Africans who hope for a better life in their countries, without having to go and look for it in the countries of their ancient colonizers.

References

- 1 The Berlin Conference, led by the great empires, changed the destiny of Africa forever. Summoned by England, France and Germany, Holland, Portugal, Austria, Italy, Russia, Belgium, Spain, Sweden, Norway, Turkey and the United States also participated. The greed was reflected in the attitude of King Leopold of Belgium who personally claimed the Congo, to carry out a genocide in an estimated at least 10 million Africans.