

Steven W. Thomas
Global Ethiopia Conference
St. John's University
March 17, 2012

Opening Remarks and Overview: What's Global? Whose Ethiopia?

I want to take this moment to express my gratitude to Joe Rogers for all the encouragement and support he has given me, not only for this conference, but ever since my very first year teaching at this college. He has been amazing.

I got the idea for this conference over a year ago when I discovered there were a lot of people at this school who had some sort of relationship to Ethiopia, each in very different disciplines and each interested in Ethiopia for very different reasons, but we weren't talking to each other. So, in its most basic terms, this conference is simply a way for us to talk with each other and also to showcase our different areas of expertise to the public. Towards this goal, there are a lot of people who helped make this conference happen and deserve our thanks. Financial support comes from the Center for Global Education, St. Ben's Student Development, the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library, the Communications Department, and the English Department. In addition, in the English department, our administrative assistant Bev Radaich and her student worker Hannah put in a lot of time, as did Joe's student worker. Lastly, David Malone and Matt Heinzelman have put together a brilliant display of our library's resources on Ethiopia. If you haven't had a chance to take a look at it upstairs, I strongly encourage you to do so. It graphically illustrates the complexity of Ethiopia, its diversity and the long history of its relationship with the rest of the globe.

Let's step back for a second and think conceptually. What do I mean when I say "global Ethiopia"? Why did I call the conference that? What's global, and whose Ethiopia are we talking about? Considering today's weather, you might be thinking that it means Ethiopia's climate has come to Minnesota. But to be serious, meditating on an answer to that question, I'd like to begin my opening remarks with a little story. Two years ago, I visited Ethiopia, and I gave a lecture to the theater and literature departments at the national university in the capital city Addis Ababa. My lecture was about the symbolic significance of Ethiopia for African-American theater during the Harlem Renaissance. During the first half of the twentieth century, oppressed by one of the most viciously racist systems of apartheid known in human history, African Americans in the United States were inspired by Ethiopia, the only country in Africa to successfully resist European colonization. Ethiopia had beaten back the Italian invasion in the famous battle of Adwa in 1896. In addition, Ethiopia was the example of a Christian civilization older than Europe's. The idea that human civilization began in Africa was powerful. Hence, symbolically, Ethiopia played a significant role in the early years of the civil rights movement in the United States. The day after my presentation I met with the Gudina Tumsa Foundation that was created by the daughters of an Oromo Lutheran minister in Ethiopia who was assassinated by the Derg government in the 1970s. This organization helps pastoralist tribes adjust to the forces of globalization. Pastoralists once used the land and the rivers for their cattle, but that land and water has been taken by large multinational corporations. I visited these regions and saw lush green sugar plantations owned by Dutch, American, and Saudi Arabian companies, and less than a mile away, the pastoralists scratch out a meager existence in almost desert conditions, living in huts of thatch and mud. The disparity of wealth and climate is painful to see. The Gudina

Tumsa Foundation builds schools in places where no schools existed before and promotes micro-lending and micro-financing to help the pastoralists find other means of income so that they don't starve or end up begging in the streets of the cities. One of the schools I visited was built with money donated by people in Japan, Germany, and Canada. I met one of the first graduates of that school, a young man named Roba Bulga. After getting his degree at the national university in Addis Ababa University where I had given my lecture, Roba worked on behalf of his people, a pastoralist Oromo tribe called the Karayu, as they struggle to survive. He also writes poetry in three languages, Amharic, Afan Oromo, and English. When I met him, he was on his way to graduate school in Italy, where he was going to study new environmentalist methods of agriculture as part of the global "slow food" movement. Recently he was interviewed on the Voice of America, a radio program sponsored by the U.S. State Department. These days, on FaceBook, he sometimes sends me pictures of himself attending conferences all over the world on the subject of indigenous agriculture.

So, my story comes full circle, from the battle of the Ethiopian nation against the Italian nation in 1896 to a young man studying in Italy in 2012 to innovate new ways of living for his people in a remote corner of Ethiopia. We might call this "global" but it is clearly not an easy or ideal situation. Roba's relationships to his local Karayu tribe in which he was raised, to the larger Oromo ethnic group that sponsored his education, to the nation of Ethiopia of which he is a citizen, and to the international slow food movement are all difficult and pull him in different directions, present different obligations and affiliations, and inspire different avenues of ethical engagement.

I hope this anecdote has give you some ideas of many different forms of worldly connection that we might call global. But I think this concept of the global needs to be questioned. What does this new word "global" really mean and how is it any different from other, older words such as "international" and "world"—as in "international relations" and "world literature"? Is globalization just a euphemism for a new form of neo-colonialist imperialism, as some scholars argue? Is Ethiopia global now simply because so many people from Ethiopia have immigrated to Minnesota? Or is it the reverse... that Minnesota has finally entered the global system of which Ethiopia has already been a part for over two millennium? These days many colleges and programs around the United States have gotten on the globalist bandwagon, creating centers of global education, global business, and global citizenship. The concept of the global may have positive effects. As we think globally and act locally, as the slogan goes, we may discover new business opportunities or more successfully fight injustice, address world poverty, and solve environmental problems. That's all well and good, but the ideal of global citizenship may conceal some of the real conditions of everyday life and complex relations among peoples. For instance, simply put, global citizenship does not give me the right **to vote** globally or protect any of my rights. What secures these sorts of citizenship rights is not some abstract fantasy of the global or any natural affection between peoples of different cultures. Rather, it is the nation state and the treaties between nation states. Likewise, the well-meaning feeling of charity of Americans may not actually help the people they believe they are helping. This is a long debate involving many examples and counter examples, but it should be obvious that generously donating huge amounts of food or manufactures will negatively affect the ability of the local market to buy and sell those things. When America sends its recent graduates to poor countries such as Ethiopia, we should admit to ourselves that this helps us deal with our own unemployment problem by giving our young people something to do, but does it really help Africans deal with their unemployment problem? In some ways, global citizenship and the

growth of multinational corporations and transnational non-governmental organizations undermines the position of national governments such as Ethiopia's and makes it harder for these governments negotiate with global capitalism for better terms for its own communities. In some ways, this is a bad thing. In some ways, it might be a good thing, as many ethnic groups in Ethiopia have gained the confidence to question the unjust policies and practices of their governments through their affiliations with global organizations.

Point being, it's complicated. In my view, as I hope you can see from my opening anecdote, what the word global inspires us to do is to think of the world in terms of its margins and the marginalized. I began with my story not with the Ethiopian national government or its dominant culture, but with a story of two historically marginalized and oppressed groups of people: African-Americans in the United States and the Oromo in Ethiopia. Hence, thinking about Ethiopia globally suggests that we look at the margins and multiple lines of intersection between various groups of people. The very name "Ethiopia" suggests this marginal perspective, as it was originally a Greek word for "land of burnt faces." The Greeks also considered Ethiopia to be a land of milk and honey, which contrasts sharply with the image of Ethiopia that Americans get from their televisions today. But, even now, milk and honey is a ceremonial beverage in many Ethiopian cultures. Considering the long view of its history, we notice that some of the ancient artifacts of its culture are geographically not in the modern state of Ethiopia, but in its neighbor Eritrea. Unlike the rest of Ethiopia, however, Eritrea's culture has been affected by the Turks and Italians who colonized it. Although Ethiopia is rightly proud of the fact that it was the only African country never colonized by Europe, this idea is somewhat misleading when analyzed from the point of view of the margins—from the point of view of Ethiopia's other ethnic groups. In the late nineteenth century, Ethiopia was supported by England and France who sold it guns and built its railroad. And this should not be underestimated; there were so many guns. A traveler in the region in the late nineteenth century remarked that there appeared to be more guns than people in the region, and it was with these guns that the Abyssinian kingdoms eventually unified and expanded into the modern state we now call Ethiopia. One of those conquered ethnic groups was the Oromo, and significantly, in their language, the word for landlord derives from the phrase "gun holder." Eventually, after World War 2 when the decolonization of Europe's many colonies was the order of the day, the land of Eritrea was given to Ethiopia by the United States. But its culture had become too different. It gained its independence in 1993 shortly after Ethiopia's second revolution in less than two decades. Ethiopia's second revolution led to a remapping of Ethiopia as a federalist state, organized along ethnic lines. Significantly, this revolution and remapping of the Horn of Africa, including neighboring Somalia's civil war, all happened in the early 1990s, exactly the historical moment that many cultural theorists identify as the beginning of the new global world order. Other key historical events signifying this new global world order include the first Gulf War and the disintegration of Yugoslavia and its subsequent ethnic conflict.

I am giving you a glimpse into the long history of Ethiopia to illustrate my point about viewing Ethiopia from the margins and its long history of relations with Europe and other countries. Obviously, I don't have time to go into detail. I am giving you the fifteen minute version of a three hour lecture. The rest of this conference, I hope, will fill in some of the details and present very different perspectives from mine. The conference begins at the beginning and ends at the end. The first panel focuses on the ancient Ethiopia, both the origins of the human species and the much later development of the Orthodox Christian culture there. It includes a guest from Southern Connecticut State University, Mike Rogers, who we are lucky to have here

thanks to his personal connections to St. John's. It also showcases the incredible Hill Museum and Manuscript library, which is a phenomenal institution that preserves manuscripts and books from all over the world, including Ethiopia, thanks to the diligent efforts of scholars such as Father Columba Stewart and Adam McCullum.

The second panel shifts focus to America, and what that ancient Ethiopia meant for African-Americans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This panel ends with the twenty-first century, now that so many immigrants from Ethiopia live right here in Minnesota. Joining Professor Aric Putnam of St. John's University, we have two guests: Roy Kay, up from the Cities, whose book on this subject was published just a few months ago, and which you can see upstairs in the exhibit, and Mohamed Webo, a community organizer in St. Cloud. The last panel features my former student Angela Mathis and one of the most famous scholars of Ethiopian languages and literature, Getatchew Haile, who will meditate on the role of education in Ethiopia before and after the revolution of 1991. After these panels, if you registered for the dinner, several Ethiopian students from the College of St. Benedict will give a presentation about the Ethiopia few Americans ever get to see. Lastly, after the dinner, there will be a screening of new documentary film produced in Italy that hit the film festivals just last fall. Its subject is the young man I told you about at the beginning of my talk, Roba Bulga.

I want to end my introduction with a personal reflection that I think illustrates why thinking of Ethiopia globally is both challenging and important. My ancestry is Welsh, and my field of expertise is early American literature. I am writing a book about how American literature imagines Ethiopia. My own connection to Ethiopia is in some ways accidental, as my wife happens to be ethnically Oromo, and so many of my friends are part of the Oromo nationalist movement that emerged in the 1960s. Coincidentally, the HMML library here where I work mostly preserves and values the heritage of the Abyssinian culture, which happens to be the culture that conquered, oppressed, and exploited many Oromo people. If my friends are Oromo nationalists, does that mean, then, that politically I am opposed to the very institution that employs me and sponsors this conference? Likewise, I am a United States citizen, but the foreign policy of my government led to Ethiopia's ineffective invasion of Somalia in 2006 during which the friends of my friends were persecuted. So am I against my own government too? But as a scholar, I am committed to the engaged dialogue, open questions, and the enduring value of archives such as HMMLs and I am committed to supporting its devotion to quality research. I have happily used HMML for my own research on this and other topics. Point being, it's complicated.

This conference might raise some politically difficult questions, and given the diversity of our audience today, I know for a fact that you all come to the conference with many different points of view—and I know this since I helped make all your name tags. But my hope is that we can all learn from each other and come to respect each other even more as we explore these questions and think carefully about them. In a way, the only thing more global than global is the university, which is named after the whole universe. The imagination of the global is limited by the world we live in, but here at a university, our horizon for what's possible is larger. I hope this conference will expand your horizons not only on what is, but what could be.