

A History of Sport in Ethiopia

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This paper studies sport, in this case soccer, and its role in the lives of Ethiopians, at home and abroad, especially in the U.S. This paper also elucidates how ethnic, regional and generational differences among Ethiopians affected soccer in Ethiopia and among Ethiopians in America. Since the 1950s, more than 100,000 Ethiopian's have immigrated to the United States. Every year, on July 4th weekend, Ethiopian immigrants and refugees have hosted a soccer tournament in one of the American cities. This tradition has been in force since 1984.

It is indeed difficult to describe games, public events and entertainments of pre-colonial Africa as "leisure" or "pastime" for it implies pre-conditions set by labor-capital relations, which, however, did not exist in Africa prior to the imposition of colonial rule and capitalism.² It is, therefore, prudent to examine Ethiopian/African pastimes outside of the "free" and "non-free" time frame. In Africa in general, and in Ethiopia in particular, there were and still are indigenous variables that defined and controlled space, time and the nature of games, public events and entertainments that were conducted. For instance until the 1974 revolution, Ethiopians were strictly obliged to honor the many saints and holidays of the Ethiopian Orthodox church which was highly influenced by Judaism and incorporated many Judaic practices. Due to this, it was on market days than holidays that many of the outdoor games and entertainments were held. The choice of market days also entails convenience. In those days people—who were also participants as well as spectators—from near and far—gathered on market days to exchange commodities, information, witness litigation, socialize with friends and relatives, elope with the future wife/husband, have drinks or pick fights. Here, one might also factor in the absence of a sophisticated means of communication that could summon large congregations as markets do in Africa. Therefore, markets were and to some degree still are the public spaces, the public square.

Seasons are other variables that determine the types of games played and the times they were organized. A closer look at Ethiopia's holidays attests this. Almost all outdoor games, wedding ceremonies and major holidays (ቅዱስ ዮሀንስ (ኦንቁጣጣሽ) New Year, ጳጳስ ገብርኤል Finding of the True Cross, ገና Christmas, ጥምቀት Epiphany, ትንሳኤ Easter) were/are held after the rainy season (May-September), especially between December-January and March-April. The latter are also seasons of plenty where harvesting is over and the ጎተራ (*gotera*), silo, is full. This season was not only a time of celebration but also of war.

Within the context of the aforementioned variables, peoples of pre-twentieth century Ethiopia had various ways by which they entertained themselves. These "pastimes"

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² For problems associated with defining leisure in Africa and the role of capitalism and colonialism in effecting and redefining entertainment in Africa, See; Emmanuel Akyeampong and Charles Ambler, "Leisure in African History: An Introduction," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 35, No., 1 (2002), pp.1-16.

include but are not limited to ፈረስ ጉግሥ (*feres gugis*, horse racing), ዱላ-ምክኛሽ (*dula-miktosh*, somewhat similar to fencing), ግብግብ (*gibigb*, wrestling), ዋና (*wana*, swimming), ገና (*gena*, hokey), ሠንጠረዥ (*senterej*, Ethiopian chess), and ገበገበ (*gebta*, Mancala). Except for *senterej* and *gebta* which are board games where one's ability as a tactician and strategist are tested, the rest of the games are physically demanding and require a fine skill and agility to partake in them. *Senterej* and *Gebta* have another unique aspect in that both were played only among peers that entail the same class, gender and age difference and affiliation.

The origin of Ethiopian chess is attributed to Persia and the Ethiopian name for the game, *sentreji*, is a corrupted word from the Persian, *Chatranji*. Historical records indicated that Emperor Libna Dingel (1508-1540) was an avid player of *sentreji* and that the game was popular among the Ethiopian nobility and the upper class.³ *Gebeta* can be played by simply digging two or three rows of six holes in the ground or on a board made of wood, stone or other materials. The upper class was noted for using intricately designed wooden boards to play *gebeta*. The game, though very ancient and played throughout Ethiopia, was avoided by the followers of the Ethiopian Orthodox sect during the fast of the Blessed Virgin, ፍልሰታ (*Filseta*), and on Good Friday.⁴

From among the remainder of the games, *gena*, as its name implies, is a game played during Christmas. It is one of the oldest and most popular outdoor sports, predating the introduction of Christianity into Ethiopia. Some trace the name of the game, *gena*, to the Geez word, *ge'na*, which in turn was allegedly derived from the Greek word, *genos*, meaning birth. Legend has it that shepherds were playing *gena* when angels announced the birth of Christ. Thus, it is always played during Christmas season to commemorate the event. Another Ethiopian legend, however, associates *gena* with the beheading of John the Baptist. The ቁር (*Qur*), sometimes also referred to as ሩር (*rur*), which is made of ball shaped solid wood, symbolizing John's head, with which his executioners played.⁵ Because of its religious background and annual appearance, the game was played by anyone who was interested regardless of class—hence the adage, በገና ጩዋታ አይቆጠሩም ገታ (*begana chewata ayqotum geta*): “The master will not get angry in a game of *gena* [if he was mistakenly hit].”

The rest of the games such as *feres gugis*, *dula-miktosh*, and *gibigb* are, more or less, related to and reflections of the warrior traditions of Ethiopians. All involve the skillful handling of weapons such as ዱላ (*dula*, stick), ጎራዳ (*gorade*, sword), ጦር (*tor*, spear) that also include hand-to-hand combat, for which pre-Italian occupation Ethiopian warriors were noted for.⁶ Except for *feres-gugis*, we do not have written records of the aforementioned games. The latter, however, appears to be the most favorite sport among Ethiopians. As Richard Pankhurst noted "raiding ability and prowess on a horseback

³ Sylvia Pankhurst, "A Note on Ethiopian Chess," *Ethiopia Observer*, Vol. V, No. 1 (1961), pp. 94-96

⁴ Richard Pankhurst, "Gabata and Related Board-Games of Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa," *Ethiopia Observer*, Vol. XIV, No. 3 (1970), pp.154-206.

⁵ Leah Nienderstadt, "Of Kings and Cohorts: The Game of Genna in Ethiopian Popular Painting," *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (March 2002), pp. 57-71; For the game of *gena* and the *gena* festival as depicted in some of the Ethiopian paintings, see R.K.P.P., "Ethiopian Christmas Cards" *Ethiopia Observer*, Vol. XII, No. 1 (1967), pp. 19-30

⁶ In the 1980s, I watched *dula-miktosh* in Chilga (Gondar province) and in Chanco, a few hundred miles northwest of Addis Ababa (Shoa province). In the latter instance, so much harm was done as the result of the exercise and probably fearing the potential use of the *dula* by counter-revolutionaries and the *Shifta* (bandits), the officials of the *Derg* regime (1974-1991) forbade the locals from bringing *dula* to the market of Chanco. If anyone was found carrying a stick, he was "disarmed" before entering the market. For pre-20th century Ethiopian military, See Richard Pankhurst, "The Ethiopian Army of Former Times," *Ethiopia Observer*, Vol. VII, No. 2 (1963), pp. 118-142.

have been traditionally rated by an essentially warrior people as among the highest of manly virtues, and some of the most daring and highly honored acts of sportsmanship were carried out on a horseback, rulers and important personalities being indeed frequently referred to by the names of their horses."⁷

However, at the turn of the twentieth century the introduction of modern and rapid firing weapons and western military tactics into Ethiopia slowly subdued these traditional "war-games." They also increasingly ceased to serve as standard measures of manhood, **ወንድነት** (*wendinet*). The establishment of Western modeled schools in the imperial capital, Addis Ababa, and in some of the regional capitals, and where European and other expatriates served as instructors, the traditional "pastimes" were absent from the curriculum. Instead, a curriculum of physical education, **ኦስፖርት/ጅምናስቲክስ** (*esport/jimnastics*), as the corrupted and borrowed words signify, was introduced; and the late emperor Haile Sillassie was noted for hosting "the festival of all schools" in which school children from Addis Ababa and the surrounding areas come and exhibit their gymnastic skills, once a year during Christmas.⁸

The Introduction of Football in Ethiopia

Football, **ኦፍፊርቱዎብ**, was among the newly acquired "pastimes" in twentieth century Ethiopia. Unlike the rest of Africa where football was imposed with colonial rule, the history of football in Ethiopia is different. It was the victory of Emperor Menelik II (r. 1889-1913) against the Italian invaders at Adwa in 1896 that brought football into Ethiopia. The defeat of the Italians convinced the rest of Europe to acknowledge Ethiopia's independence and send emissaries to seek favors from the Emperor. It was these European diplomats and their dependents who introduced football into Ethiopia. The first football game was held between these foreigners in Addis Ababa in 1924. Though there were indications that football clubs existed at the Teferi Mekonnen School as early as 1927, the participants remained foreigners such as Armenians and Greeks, who had been granted refugee status by Ethiopia.* In one of the "international" football games held in Addis Ababa in 1935, the Ethiopian team, primarily comprised of European refugees and asylum seekers, beat the French team (members of the French Navy from Djibouti) 3-1. Yervant Abraham, an Armenian, scored all three goals. In that same year an Ethiopian football club, St. George was established with Ydneqatchew Tessema, as one of the founding members, who is regarded as the father of Ethiopian football.

During the Italian occupation of Ethiopia (1936-1941), in accordance with the Fascist racial policy, Ethiopians were barred from playing football with Europeans. A separate sport office for the natives, "Sport Office for the Indigenous," was set up and the already established Ethiopian football clubs were renamed: St. George became *Littorio Wube*, Qebana team became *Villa Italia*, Sidist Killo renamed *Piazza Roma* and Gulele named *Consolata*. The irony was that on the immediate aftermath of the Italian defeat, a football match was held between an all-Ethiopian team, expatriate teams and an Italian football team, *Fortitudo*, in Addis Ababa in 1942. The Ethiopian team St. George faced the Italians. The latter was defeated at the football field as well.

⁷ Richard Pankhurst, "The Horsemanship of Old-time Ethiopia," *Ethiopia Observer*, Vol. XIII, No. 1 (1970), p.2 (2-7)

⁸ Sylvia Pankhurst, "The Festival of All Schools," *Ethiopia Observer*, Vol. III, No. 1 (1959), p.30. For school curriculum and physical education, see Sylvia Pankhurst, "Education in Ethiopia II—Secondary Education," *Ethiopia Observer*, Vol. II, No. 5 (1958), pp. 162-189; Marvin J. Ludwig, "Positive Physical Education," *Ethiopia Observer*, Vol. II, No. 7 (1958), p. 255

Soon after, Ethiopia established the Ethiopian Football Federation in 1943. The budget for the Federation was a mere \$127.00. Since then, the Federation hosted the "Ethiopian Cup," which was contested between football clubs of the Ethiopian armed forces, known as Army, the British Military Mission (BMME), football clubs of Italian stragglers who stayed in Ethiopia after the war, *Polisportiva*, St. George and the Imperial Body Guard football club, Body Guard. The BMME and *Polisportiva* won the 1945 and 1947 Ethiopian Cup finals respectively, while Army dominated the remainder of the 1940s and 1950s.⁹ Given British racist attitude towards Ethiopians and the not so long colonial aspirations of the Italians, these matches must have been arenas where Ethiopian patriotism and nationalism was expressed vis-à-vis colonialism and racism.

With the establishment of the African Nations Cup in 1957, which included Ethiopia, Egypt and the newly independent Sudan, Ethiopian football attained additional momentum. In the 1962 African Nations Cup that was held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia won beating Egypt 4-2. Since then, though Ethiopia had never won an African Nations Cup, football evolved into one of the most popular pastimes in Ethiopia. Wherever there is an educational establishment such as a university, college or even a high school, there were football clubs were formed; even at Ethiopian military bases, there were football clubs that represented the military. In this regard, the Imperial Ethiopian Armed Forces and Ministry of Education and Fine Arts played a dominant and pioneering role in the development of football in Ethiopia. Parallel with this, one has to note that these were also "modern" institutions through which Western ideas seeped through into much of Africa. Even today, the African armed forces and educational establishments remain relatively modern and well-organized institutions; and in this regard, Ethiopia is not an exception.

In a country where freedom of speech and association is curtailed or does not even exist, football matches provided venues for expressions of discontent. This was particularly true during the era of the *Derg*. The latter, despite its claim of popular support and Marxist rhetoric, the populace, besides other things, regarded the *Derg* as a soldiers' party or government. Hence, the public associated many of the football clubs that were drawn from and represented the army and police such as አሜዲላ (Omedla), ጠቻጭ (Mechal), and ኦርሞጃችን (Ermejachen) as affiliates of the *Derg*. Thus, almost all football matches between one of the civilian clubs and the army/police in the Addis Ababa stadium became symbols of struggle between the civilians and the military, opponents and supporters of the *Derg*. There were times when the defeat of one of the aforementioned football clubs by the civilians such as Buna (ቡና) or St. George would result in army-police violence against the civilian spectators. If one of the army-police teams won the game, then taxi drivers would exhibit their dissatisfaction and protest by refusing their service to the soldiers/police officers while serving only civilians. Civilian-military confrontation at the football stadium was not uncommon in Addis Ababa in particular and in Ethiopia in general during the imperial era. For instance, in 1965 there were several disturbances and fistfights that involved civilians and the military-police teams (Mekuria, Mechal, Omedla). They were readmitted to the football

⁹ "Obituary: Statesman of African Sport," *Olympic Review*, No. 240 (October 1987), p. 510; "History of Ethiopian Soccer," < <http://www.ethiosports.com/History.html> > Accessed April 16, 2007; Tadele Yidnekachew Tessema, *In The World and in the World of Sport*, (Addis Ababa: United Publishers in 1998); "Ydnekachew Tessema," <<http://www.ethiosports.com/Ydnekachew.html>> Accessed April 16, 2007

match in 1975, a year after the seizure of power by the *Derg*. What makes the civil-military confrontations of the 1970s and 1980s unique was its politicization.

Though in most cases, the annual football matches between teams of the provinces and from within the provinces became venues for loyalties that transcended ethnic and religious differences, it also began mirroring ethno-nationalist aspirations. This was so, especially after the rise of secessionist movements in Eritrea in the 1960s. A football match between one of the Eritrean clubs such as the Red Sea (ቀደግቢር) or Eritrea Shoe (ኤርትራ ጫማ) and one of the non-Eritrean clubs, most often Ethiopian Navy or one of the clubs of the Second Division Army stationed in Eritrea, became highly political. In such occasions, the audience in the Asmara stadium was roughly divided between supporters of Eritrean secessionism and Ethiopian nationalism, while the football field became the battlefield for competing nationalisms. If the Eritrean clubs scored a goal, the stadium was electrified with Tigregna beats which is always accompanied with a drum and a claps. Supporters of the army or navy, who were mainly drawn from civilian government employees, members of the armed forces and some Eritreans, would chant, አማራሽ (Amaressa), a well-known battle cry of the Ethiopian army.

Despite this, any football match between the Ethiopian national team and another country, whether the national team wins or not, the public supports the team. The Addis Ababa stadium (sometimes the federation also uses the Diredawa stadium) was usually transformed into an arena where one celebrates and observes the depth and bounds of Ethiopian nationalism. Singing patriotic songs, waving the Ethiopian tri-colors, or wearing a bonnet with the tri-colors and coming to the stadium adorned with Ethiopian cultural dresses were and are some of the symbols of expressions of nationalism.

Football and the Re-shaping of Ethiopian Identity in America

Studies of immigrants in America, pre and post-1965, reveal that sport played a tremendous role in the process of adjustment, in the preservation of group identity and the immigrants' culture in America. Sport or athletic associations were one of the first immigrant institutions to be established in the new country.¹⁰

Like immigrants in America, Ethiopians felt alienated, and one of the areas that they thought so was in the domains of recreation and sport. While the most popular American pastimes are baseball, American football and basketball, Ethiopians only had knowledge of basketball. In fact, not only do they have difficulty in understanding these games, they often confuse American football for soccer; and get disappointed when they discover that football is not really football the way they knew it back home. To overcome this sense of isolation and thereby carve their own social and cultural space within American society, Ethiopians established the Ethiopian Sports Federation in North America (ESFNA) sometime in 1984. When begun, the Federation had only four

¹⁰ See Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973); John E. Bodnar, *The Transplanted* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Steven W. Pope, "Ethnicity and Race in North American Sport," *Sporting Traditions*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (May 1995), pp. 99-106; Gary Ross Marmino, "The Playing Fields of St. Louis: Italian Immigrants and Sports, 1925-1941," *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Summer 1982), pp. 5-19; Gerald R. Gems, "The Prep Bowl: Football and the Religious Acculturation in Chicago, 1927-1963," *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Fall 1996), pp. 248-302; Samuel O. Regalado, "Sport and Community in California's Japanese American 'Yamato Colony,' 1930-1945," *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Summer 1992), pp. 130-143; Steven A. Riess, "Professional Baseball and Social Mobility," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Autumn 1980), pp. 235-250

clubs from Houston, Dallas, Atlanta and Washington D.C.; and the attendance was no more than a couple hundred.¹¹

By establishing their own federation, Ethiopians were able to use sports, like every other immigrant in America, as “a point of solidarity . . . in an alien environment.”¹² The bylaws of the Federation, Article 3.1 and Article 3.7, state the principle: “. . . to promote Ethiopian culture in North America . . . [and] to establish close relationship with Ethiopian community and other organizations of similar objectives and interest.”¹³

The Federation's choice of the 4th of July weekend for hosting the event seems to entail more than convenience. By honoring the 4th of July, it appears, Ethiopians were expressing their appreciation for the opportunity accorded to them by the host society. It can be also a statement indicating that Ethiopians in America, most of whom are political refugees and exiles, also cherish freedom and value the sacrifices made to attain and protect this freedom. It might also mean that by hosting their event on that day, Ethiopians are expressing their enthusiasm and willingness to be a part of the new home while retaining something of their own, football, which is barely an American sport. Football, compared to baseball, American football and basketball, is the less favored game in America. In fact, until the 1990s, one can safely say that it had never been an American sport.¹⁴ Hence, Ethiopians have used football as “a vehicle, in many different ways, for the construction of individual, group and national identities”¹⁵ in America.

The event has become an annual occasion in which Ethiopians display and share their rich cultural tradition with Americans, and pass it on to the second generation Ethiopians, the Ethiopian-Americans. The tournament also maintains the bond between the Ethiopian communities in America and the country of origin. Since its inception, the Federation has brought guests of honor from Ethiopia as keynote speakers at the event. The guests of honor have included well-known Ethiopians such as former players of the Ethiopian National Soccer team, famous Ethiopian long distance runners, playwrights, performers etc. Bringing prominent Ethiopians as keynote speakers in the tournament was also intended, besides maintaining the bridge between Ethiopia and America, as a way to provide role models for the young generation Ethiopian-Americans generation so that the latter could emulate; and be proud of their Ethiopian heritage.¹⁶

¹¹ Wondimu Elias, “Interview: ESFNA President Shemelis Assefa,” Ethiopian Review, Vol. 6, No. 6 (June 1996), 20.

¹² Elliott J. Gordon, “Sports Through the Nineteenth Century,” in S. W. Pope, ed., The New American Sport History: Recent Approaches and Perspectives (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 47, 33-57.

¹³ See Article 3.1 and 3.7 of the Bylaws of the Ethiopian Sports Federation in North America, January 1993 and January 2000 Revision. (Mimeographed).

¹⁴ James Deacon, “Soccer Comes to America: The World Cup Begins this Week in the Sport's Final Frontier,” Maclean's, Vol. 107, (Je 20, 1994), pp. 40-42. For the history and significance of baseball and football in America, see the collections of works S. W. Pope, ed., The New American Sport History: Recent Approaches and Perspectives (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

¹⁵ Mike Cronin and David Mayall, “Sport and Ethnicity: Some Introductory Remarks,” in Mike Cronin and David Mayall, ed., Sporting Nationalism: Identity, Ethnicity, Immigration and Assimilation (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd, 1998), 1-2.

¹⁶ So far, ESFNA had brought the following prominent Ethiopians as keynote speakers: Dr Aklilu Habte (1985), Mengistu Worku (1986), Tesfaye Seyoum (1987), Ydinekachew Tessema (represented by his son, Taddele Yidnekachew) (1988), Mamo Wolde (1989), Adamu Alemu (1990), Getachew Abebe (Dulla) (1991), Luciano Vassalo and Italo Vassalo (1992), Derartu Tullu/ Kebede Metaferia (1993), Awad Mohammed/Lauret Tsegaye Gebre Medhin (1994), Getachew Wolde/Kagney Kitachew (1995), Tadesse G/Medhin (1996), Miruts Yifter (1997), Fekade Multeta (1998), Prof. Asrat Woldeyes/represented by his family (1999), Negusse Gebre (2000), Germaw Zergaw/Zewde Samuel (2001), Wami Biratu/Asrat Haile (2002), Engdawork Tariku (Sebeta) and Teka Gebratsadik (2003)

It became a ritual among Ethiopians to attend the soccer tournament every year during the 4th of July weekend in one of the American cities.¹⁷ During this time, although soccer dominated the events, other games and cultural festivals were also held, often depending upon the resourcefulness of the host city Ethiopians. For instance, the 1993 host of the game, Walia, the San Francisco team, for the first time included children's short distance run, women's 800 meter race and a 1500 meter contest for men. Not only this, it also introduced a "Miss Ethiopia Beauty Contest" and a theatre, የጭገላ ሽርሽር (*Yechagula Shirshir*, the Excursion of the Honeymooners) and other plays. The Federation also pledged to financially help the dismissed Addis Ababa University professors and orphans in Ethiopia.¹⁸

The annual soccer tournament therefore, has transformed itself to become more than a mere event in which Ethiopian soccer teams compete against each other. It has become a scene of competing cultures where hotdogs and burgers vie against Ethiopian *አቲቶ* (*Kitfo*) and *ጎረታ-ጎረታ* (*gored-gored*) or complement each other—a reflection of the immergence of dual identities. It is also here that one observes the process of transformation in business transactions among Ethiopian immigrants in America. Price bargaining, the traditional Ethiopian way, and fixed prices, the American style, are witnessed. The tournament is a place where Ethiopian identity is negotiated, recreated and modified.¹⁹

The items sold, in addition to food and beverages (both Ethiopian and American), include video and audio tapes and CDs, articles of clothing with clever Ethiopian quips, books, magazines, souvenirs etc. Almost all merchandise has something of Ethiopia, especially the national flag, or the images of the late Emperor Haile Sillassie. The latter is, most often, carried and sold by Ethiopian-Rastafarians, whose presence indicates an attempt to bridge the cultural gap between being Black and Ethiopian. As the Ethiopian Jewish immigrant experience in Israel indicates, embracing Rastafarianism could be a sign of protest against white domination and racism.²⁰ The whole vista reflects the oriental bazaar combined with the American mall that generating more than \$3 million in a single week.^{21*}

See Dagnachew Bezabeh, "The 1994 Ethiopian Soccer Tournament," *Ethiopian Review* (March 1994), 59; see also ESFNA website <http://www.esfna.org/history/gustsofthonor/>

¹⁷ So far, the following cities had hosted the soccer tournament: Huston (1984), Washington DC (1985), Atlanta (1986), Los Angeles (1987), Washington DC (1988), Dallas (1989), Boston (1990), Seattle (1991), Toronto-Canada (1992), Oakland-CA (1993), Tyson's Corner-VA (1994), San Diego (1995), Largo-MD (1996), Los Angeles (1997), Atlanta (1998), Dallas (1999), San Francisco/San Jose (2000), Toronto-Canada (2001), Hyattsville-MD (2002), Houston (2003), Seattle (2004). See Wondimu, "Interview," 20; ESFNA's website: <http://www.esfna.org/history/tournamentvenues/index.htm>

¹⁸ Fikre Tolossa, "Ethiopian Soccer Games in North America," *Ethiopian Review*, Vol. 3. No. 6, (June 1993), 15, 18, 21.

¹⁹ For the role of sport in either maintaining ethnic and national identity or accelerating assimilation see Roy Hay, "Croatia: Community, Conflict and Culture: The Role of Soccer Clubs in Migrant Identity," in Mike Cronin and David Mayall, ed., *Sporting Nationalisms: Identity, Ethnicity, Immigration and Assimilation* (London: Frank Cass & Co Ltd, 1998), 49-66; Joseph M. Bradley, "Sport and the Contestation of Cultural and Ethnic Identities in Scottish Society," in Mike Cronin and David Mayall, ed., *Sporting Nationalisms: Identity, Ethnicity, Immigration and Assimilation* (London: Frank Cass & Co Ltd, 1998), 127-150.

²⁰ Steven Kaplan, "Can the Ethiopian Change His Skin? The Beta Israel (Ethiopian Jews) and Racial Discourse," *African Affairs*, Vol. 98, No. 393. (Oct., 1999), pp. 535-550; Durrenda Ojanuga, "The Ethiopian Jewish Experience as Blacks in Israel," *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 2. (Dec., 1993), pp. 147-158.

²¹ Fikre Tolossa, "Behind the Soccer Scene," *Ethiopian Review*, (August 1993), pp. 49, 51-52.

* The figure should be taken with caution: Despite a repeated demand and criticism against ESFNA due to its lack of transparency, it did not make its financial dealings public until 2002. Hence, although it does not show the income from all the transactions, it had posted a net profit of \$352,348.14 for 2001;

Ethiopia Day is the climax of the event. Traditional musicians and modern singers, adorned with Ethiopian cultural attire and hairstyles will perform traditional Ethiopian music that reflects the ethno-national composition of the country but none would surpass a song or a dance that contains the word Ethiopia. On that day, the stadium is adorned with the Ethiopian tri-colors and the American flag, an assertion of the new identity, Ethiopian-American.

Ethiopia Day is also a day that Ethiopians in America showcase their might by inviting members of American congress, mayors and governors. The latter will address the spectators and pledge many things to court Ethiopian votes, in their constituents—an indication that Ethiopians, like other Americans, have learned to use their vote while the soccer field was transformed into a political arena where they negotiate.

Aside from being an annual bazaar, the soccer tournament also provides an opportunity for Ethiopian singles to look for potential partners or dates—a phenomenon that is increasingly attracting more of the younger generation and bachelor Ethiopians to the tournament. The issue of finding an Ethiopian partner is very important for Ethiopians of both generations, but for varied reasons. The older generation Ethiopians were impeded due to cultural reasons such as “extreme shyness on the part of ladies, pride, fear of rejection and stage fright on the part of men.”²² Most of them have not accepted the permanency of their residence in America. They have always thought that they will go back one day and thus taking a ፈረንጅ (*frenj*, foreign) spouse to Ethiopia is unthinkable. They also encourage their offspring to marry an Ethiopian hence a reason for the second generation. The other reason is racism. America is a highly race conscious society. In this respect, it is imperative to have a partner from the same cultural background than from an outsider, a non-Ethiopian.

Side by side with the soccer tournament and partying, many political parties and prominent Ethiopians also organize forums and fundraisers and invite Ethiopians to attend. In all these, the Federation is not directly involved. It tries to keep its distance from entanglements with political parties and politically prominent personalities. As the president of EFFNA indicates:

The Federation’s bylaws clearly states that the organization is neither political nor religious. We . . . tried to keep the organization independent of any covert or overt political or religious influences so far . . . Political and religious leaders often challenge our position. Our response has been, and will continue to be, that the Federation is instrumental in bringing a large number of Ethiopians in one location every year and it is up to the various organizational entities to take advantage of this opportunity without having to jostle with us in the stadium.²³

By taking such a stance, the Federation not only has kept its integrity and survival as a nonpartisan organization, but also succeeded, unlike the rest of the Ethiopian community and political organizations in America, in bringing Ethiopians together. As a result, the 4th of July event has become a showpiece of Ethiopian nationalism at its best. The event has evolved to become one of the single most important transactions that brings Ethiopians from all walks of life, age and background. Consequently, the few

\$265,541.96 for 2002; \$262,930.12 for Jan. 1 through April 3, 2003. See its website: <http://www.esfna.org/aboutus/finacialstatement/>

²² Tesfaye Ketsela, *Away From the Soccer Field*, *Ethiopian Review*, Vol. 3. No. 8 (August 1993), 48; for the difficulty surrounding finding an Ethiopian soul mate see Helen Hailu, “The Dating Game,” *Ethiopian Review*, Vol. 4, No. 11 (November 1994), p. 38

²³ Sophia Bekele, “Interview With Berahnu Woldemariam, President of the EFFNA,” *Ethiopian Review*, Vol. 3 No. 9 (September 1993), p. 44.

hundred spectators of the early 1980s; and the three to five day event has grown to become a ten-day event with more than 20,000 spectators, an average of 2000 participants per day. In barely a decade, the participating sport clubs grew from four (4) clubs to 26 teams while more clubs are waiting admittance.²⁴ Since 1998, due to the large number of participating clubs, the Federation has divided the teams, based upon their performances, into two divisions, Division I and II. While Division I has four groups each with four teams, Division II had nine clubs divided into three groups. Inclusion into 1st Division or 2nd Division is not permanent. After each tournament, the teams that performed poorly slide down to the 2nd Division while those teams that proved worthy are promoted to 1st Division.²⁵

Encouraged with its success in the 20 or so years of its existence, the Federation has plans to include other sports events and diversify its participants in the annual event. It plans to host regional tournaments and make the 4th of July weekend a play-off weekend between regional winners. In addition to the soccer tournament, which so far is the main event, the Federation also intends to include track and field, volleyball for women, cultural activities for children and a bicycle race.²⁶ Moreover, to encourage participation in the soccer game and appreciate the players, it has allocated a college scholarship fund, \$2500 for the soccer players. The requirement to receive the Federation's college scholarship fund is that the applicant "must be a good standing player/member of a current ESFNA team . . . must have a 3.2 or above GPA . . . [and] must complete and submit an essay online on how the applicant intends to be part of Ethiopia's development efforts."²⁷ Once selected, the money will be sent to the college where the successful applicant is attending. ESFNA has also allotted a large sum to be used as a matching scholarship fund for deserving young Ethiopian-Americans.

Identity Politics and Football Nationalism: Eritrean vis-à-vis Ethiopian Nationalism & the Annual Football Tournament in America

So far, the Federation has proven to be one of the longest surviving Ethiopian community organizations in America. However, in spite of its efforts to be apolitical, the Federation was/is not immune from the state of affairs that affects the Ethiopian community in America. One such instance, which endangered both clubs and the Federation, was the Eritrean independence in 1993. Prior to the official secession of Eritrea from Ethiopia, many Ethiopian-born Eritreans or Eritrean-born Eritreans were members of one or the other Ethiopian soccer clubs in America. But, after the independence of Eritrea in which most of the Ethiopian-born soccer players were witnessed for voting for Eritrea's independence, some clubs decided to purge the former Ethiopians, now Eritrean nationals, out of their teams while other clubs preferred to disregard this new development, the independence of Eritrea, and continue in the old way.

Nevertheless, member clubs began to increasingly accuse other teams who had Eritrean players for enlisting foreign nationals while teams who took action against their Eritrean teammates were sued by the latter. This divided the Ethiopian community that financed the soccer clubs between accepting and rejecting the Eritreans. What further exacerbated the situation was that while Ethiopians were willing to forgo what they

²⁴ Tesfaye, "Away From," pp. 47-48.

²⁵ Telephone interview with the current Public Relations Officer of ESFNA, May 12, 2004.

²⁶ Wondimu, "Interview," p. 20.

²⁷ Both the criterion and the application forms are available at the ESFNA website: <http://www.esfna.org>

considered Eritrean betrayal and kept on accepting Eritrean players on their teams, the Eritrean teams and their federation, Eritrean Sports Federation in North America, were not willing to reciprocate.* The Eritrean Sport Federation was established in Atlanta in 1986. Its founding soccer clubs were Atlanta, Dallas, Miami, Houston and Orlando. The timing of the establishment of the federation doesn't seem accidental. The Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front guerilla fighters were scoring resounding victories against Ethiopian government forces in Eritrea. It was also on the same year that Issayas Afewoqi made his official visit to America. These events were harbingers of the Eritrean independence of 1991.

Unable to resolve the problem, the Ethiopian clubs brought the subject to ESFNA. The latter, after seriously debating the problem, took the following stance. As the then ESFNA President, Berhanu Woldemariam, stated:

It is clear that most Ethiopians (including many of our members) feel betrayed by what Eritreans have done in choosing to separate from Ethiopia. While they recognize that this is Eritrean prerogative, they feel that independence entails responsibility and as such Eritreans cannot [sic] relinquish their Ethiopian nationality and still insist on taking advantage of abrogated rights while denying Ethiopians similar license . . . Given the complexity of the issue . . . it was agreed that individual clubs may take any such action as they see fit or necessary.²⁸

By empowering clubs to decide on their own, the Federation successfully disentangled itself from political involvement. The Federation's decision also provided the opportunity for teams to decide for themselves, which was also important in that there were Ethiopian soccer clubs that had Eritrean players among them. Had the Federation's decision been to the contrary, it could have offended those Eritreans, (both players and members of the Ethiopian community), who were also proud Ethiopians.

²⁸ Sophia, "Interview," *Ethiopian Review*, Vol. 3, No. 9, (September 1993), p. 46.

* The Eritrean federation was established in Atlanta. What makes the Eritrean soccer tournament different from the Ethiopian is that it is an annual reminder of the declaration of Eritrean independence from Ethiopia and a proclamation of an Eritrean identity in America. The ERSFNA officials always invite Eritrean embassy officials in America to attend and address the opening and closing ceremony of the soccer tournament. So much so the Eritrean opposition is blaming the Federation for being a propaganda instrument of the Eritrean government.