

The Calling of the Church in Ethiopia: A Conflicted Society

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Abstract

The current Ethiopian government established the 'Identity and Boundary Affairs Commission' in order to solve the conflicts that arise from identity and geographical boundary quests. It is believed that these conflicts are the effects of lack of real and holistic transformation. The word transformation has been put into use by various secular and faith-based organisations. However, real and holistic transformation is characterised by two qualities: True identity and true vocation of humanity. It is the lack of a clear understanding of identity and vocation that has affected the Ethiopian Kale Hiwot Church to witness the hope and new life in Christ. Furthermore, their eschatological position contributes significantly to their weak socio-economic involvements. The impact of these factors – identity, calling (vocation) and eschatology – influence the maturity of the church as well as their participation in the *missio Dei* to proclaim and establish the Kingdom of God.

Keywords

Transformation, identity, vocation, Kingdom of God, eschatology, reconciliation

Introduction

The aim of this article is to discuss the participation of the evangelical churches in Ethiopia in the reconciliation of a conflicted society. The goal of holistic reconciliation is the consummated Kingdom of God, and its driving force is the eschatological restoration of the whole creation as per the original plan of God. This article is written from the framework of an evangelical theological perspective employing a qualitative research method. This article makes an interdisciplinary contribution to the theological discussion within African churches from the perspective of systematic and practical theology.

Background

Ethiopia is a country comprised of around 86 ethnic groups forming a cultural and religious mosaic. Although these people groups have for the most part been living together in harmony, there has

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been times that inter-communal violence has taken place in various parts of the country, especially in recent years. On the one hand, some documents (cf. Taye, 2017) attempt to show that the reason for these outbreaks of violence is partly due to the quest for identity. On the other hand, the challenge of managing the diversity of religions and ethnicities also takes a significant share. In this regard, Dagnachew's (2018) article published in the *International Journal on Peace and Development Studies* records that recent events (in the past 15 months) indicate a rising tension between the state and Islam on the one hand and Islam and Christianity on the other. Furthermore, the quest for identity has been a serious issue since the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) resumed power, and it has become critical in recent years. An excerpt from a study carried out by the Norwegian Church Aid in collaboration with the Embassy and Church of Sweden (Omni Consult, 2020) shows that a series of either interreligious or inter-communal violence has occurred in different parts of Ethiopia since 2018, claiming the lives of many and causing much damage to property. The document mentions multiple instances of such cases. One of them was the violent incident that occurred between the Somalians and the Oromo ethnicities on 4 August 2018 in Jijiga, the capital city of the Somali Regional State. According to this document, the mentioned conflict claimed the lives of 58 civilians and injured 266 others. During this time, several valuable properties worth around 421 million birr were destroyed. The conflict began with a small number of Somali young men who looted several businesses, which eventually turned into a religious conflict and resulted in the burning of churches and the killing of priests.

A little over a month later, on 15–16 September 2018, a new round of violence occurred in Burayu, a town on the outskirts of Addis Ababa – the country's capital. When a big rally was held in Addis Ababa on 15 September 2018 to welcome the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) leader, Dawud Ibsa and others from their long-lasting exile abroad, minor clashes occurred as *Qeerroo* (an Oromifa word for 'youth') entered the capital the day before. The rally itself was a peaceful event; however, violent attacks broke out in the non-Oromo groups in Burayu when people left the city again. In this clash, at least 23 people lost their lives, numerous were wounded and thousands fled to temporary shelters where they took refuge for their lives. Not only this particular place, but also in other parts of Addis Ababa, similar but less fatal events occurred during this incident. Furthermore, besides several other civil unrests, war broke out in October 2020 in the northern part of the country between the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the government of Ethiopia which was another major event that caused further instability in the country.

The above instances are just a few examples to show that Ethiopia has been experiencing various instabilities in recent years. The country's economic, political and social life has been devastated by frequent inter-communal and interreligious conflicts. Studies indicate that the political, economic and social aspects of a country are interrelated and depend on one another in order to bring comprehensive peace and development in the country. Any negative event that happens in one aspect affects the other and contributes to the overall instability. The current situation in Ethiopia confirms this fact. Hence, the above events that happened in the political sector resulted in the economic crisis. Although we need a deeper study to give detailed thoughts on the recent economic situation of this country, the authors of this article would like to reflect on what is occurring in the daily life of the nation's citizens. It is almost a day-to-day event to hear about and witness market instability.

Issing (2002) defines market or price stability as a state in which the price level is relatively stable and there is a low inflation rate. This is a crucial issue that the government needs to give attention to, and important economic measures need to be taken to avoid unnecessary inflation that can hurt the public. Nevertheless, in Ethiopia the wholesale and retail price of all goods increases without much reason or notice, making life extremely difficult for the nation's citizens.

Furthermore, Eherbeck (2013) emphasises that market stability is closely connected to consumer protection (cf. ed. Narayana, 2016:130). This means that whenever there is economic instability at macro or micro level and price inflation consequently occurs, the low-income people who are the majority in most developing countries are the ones who suffer the risk. To avoid such kind of crises, the government must have a system in place that addresses the economic safety of these citizens. However, regardless of some efforts to control the market and give legal coverage to consumers, it seems that the situation is out of control in Ethiopia regarding market stability and consumer protection. Eherbeck (2013) further explains that financial sector stability is a prerequisite for households and firms to trust the system and to participate in it. Similarly, an inclusive financial system that reaches all citizens will enforce a more stable retail deposit base, which should increase systematic stability. Nevertheless, mainly due to the imbalance between demand and supply, the disproportional export and import business has been contributing much to the economic instability and fluctuation of the market. Global Edge (n.d.) mentions some additional factors contributing to the weak Ethiopian economy. These include the lack of a port and that 90% of export passes through Djibouti, and that agriculture is not very productive. Several other factors affecting agricultural production include: it is sensitive to weather conditions and changes in world commodity prices; low foreign exchange reserve; lack of foreign exchange; import restriction, persistent challenges in the business environment; underdeveloped banking system; insufficient power supply, etc. (Global Edge, n.d.). The African Development Bank Group¹ argues along the same lines that the country's economy has not only been unstable but also its growth was slowed to an estimated 7.4% in 2019 from its 7.7% in 2018.

The second vital aspect for the stability of a country is pertinent to its social life. As mentioned in the introduction, Ethiopia is the home of around 86 ethnicities. The social fabric of all these is significant to stabilise the country. Recent incidents in Ethiopia show that conflicts, small and big alike, have been happening in different parts of the country. In most cases, the reason is related to the identity or ethnic geographical border quests. Yusuf (2019) mentions that ethnic mobilisation has persisted in Ethiopia for at least five decades, either excluded or nurtured by successive political systems. Especially since 1991, the empowering and disempowering effects of, and the simmering tensions within, the centralised ethno federal system continued unabated until unbridled ethnic movements finally engulfed state and party institutions, rendering them weak and incoherent. After assuming power in 1991, the EPRDF/TPLF set out to redress the question of identity and the past ethnic subjugation by remapping Ethiopia along ethnic lines. Consequently, ethnic federalism was put in place as a remedy to the country's complicated ethnic problems. However, as Yusuf (2019) explains, the federation is beset with ironies, creating a sharp division between the 'natives' (and thus 'owners' of regions) and the 'settlers', which later on resulted in serious conflicts among different ethnicities (cf. Birara, 2019:144). Consequently, nationalist grievances and mobilisation have continued to date, resulting in multiple lines of clashes and violence across the country. This section briefly reviewed the current situation in Ethiopia. It is evident that the country is unstable in three major areas: politically, economically and socially. In the following section of the article, we want to deliberate on the role of the church as an agent of transformation.

The Calling of the Church

The church exists in this world with a clear mission, namely reconciliation and transformation, with the ultimate goal of building and extending the Kingdom of God. Furthermore, the owner of the mission is God himself. It is in this *missio Dei* that the church is called to take part. In other words, the church is not the owner but it is commissioned to carry out the mission of God. In

this regard, the church is called out to work towards holistic reconciliation and transformation through which it promotes the building of the Kingdom of God. As we have seen above, there are several socio-economic and political crises Ethiopians have been experiencing. Although one may mention various reasons for these sufferings, the major reason appears to be lack of reconciliation and transformation. It is not only about physical development, but rather it is concerned with holistic change which includes several other areas, that is, physical, spiritual, psychological and behavioural transformation (Knoetze, 2022).

The church of Christ is the one that needs to play a key role in promoting this kind of holistic reconciliation and transformation. Knoetze (2019: 5) uses the term *diaconia* as he attempts to explain more about the role of the church in this regard. According to him, *diaconia* is about the role of the church which originates from the being of the Trinitarian God. It refers to the mercy of God towards humankind and creation, and humankind's mercy towards each other and creation. As the second part of the above statement indicates, the church is the focal point in dispensing the mercy of God to all creation. This is where the concepts of reconciliation and transformation are fitting. In that the purpose of God's mercy, which is extended to all of creation, is basically to reconcile the whole creation to God and to transform it.

Genuine Transformation

Transformation is one of the concepts that is seldom misunderstood by people. As Myers (1999: 14–15) indicates, transformation entails creating more material resources so that the disadvantaged community may acquire what they need for a better life. Such an approach has been employed since the Second World War, and it is evident that aid or assistance has been largely given to implement various project interventions which were thought to address the diverse needs of the global community. This was primarily intended to advance economic growth and was concerned with the accumulation of commodities and wealth (Bragg, 1987: 22). Furthermore, the goal of this development endeavour was to create a better future for human beings here on earth. That means the concept of 'utopia', which refers to the golden time where every human being enjoys a socially and economically fulfilled life, is its central theme. In reference to this, Sine (1987: 2) argues that the concept of mere transformation or development is based on the implicit belief that human society is inevitably progressing towards the attainment of a temporal, materialistic kingdom here on earth. Nevertheless, in this article, we would like to approach transformation from the biblical point of view. Myers (1999: 14) argues that genuine transformation coupled with holistic reconciliation is vital to form a changed society. This is the kind of society the church of Christ is commissioned to produce, where disciples have rediscovered and recovered the fullness and purpose of their lives (Knoetze, 2017: 3). Put differently, it focuses on restoring relationships in all dimensions and seeks truth, justice and righteousness (Myers, 1999: 15). 'Christian reconciliation and transformation starts with the cross of Jesus Christ, on which he gave his life so that people could be transformed from "ill-being" to sustainable "wellbeing"' (Knoetze, 2018: 489).

Real transformation is characterised by two significant qualities, namely *true identity* and *true vocation*. Working to help people regain their true identity and vocation is such a significant duty of the church of Christ. It all depends on knowing who we are as God's creatures and what we are intended to do in our earthly life which is the base of real transformation. In other words, the church always has to work with these two goals in view in order to advance holistic societal change and contribute to the building of the Kingdom of God. Each point is discussed in more detail below.

True Identity

This concept is sometimes misunderstood. As was mentioned earlier in this article, the quest for identity is one of the sources of conflict in Ethiopia. Most people in Ethiopia think that their real identity emerges from their tribal background. In other words, they think that their tribal affiliation is in their DNA² which determines who they are and what they are created for. As we can see what is happening among various tribes in different parts of Ethiopia for the past several years, this perception is so strong – to the extent that it has overshadowed the concept of humanity as created by God. It seems good to use the terms Myers (2011: 83) employs in his book to describe identity in this case, namely egocentricity versus ego awareness and tribal centredness versus tribal background awareness. In other words, a person may be aware of his/her personal identity and his/her God-given behaviour as a unique person on this planet. In addition, he/she may affiliate him-/herself genealogically to one of the ancestral roots. Nothing is wrong with both of these approaches. However, it should be taken into consideration that it does not mean his/her ultimate destiny is determined by his/her mere knowledge about him-/herself or his/her tribal/ancestral background. Nevertheless, Ethiopia has been suffering from such kind of twisted egocentric and tribal-centred identity perception.

Human beings' true identity is acquired only from God, and it is characterised by the image of God (*imago Dei*). The concept of the image of God requires careful and thoughtful consideration. It is not to say that God is in human form, but rather that humans are in the image of God in their moral, spiritual and intellectual nature. This means that humans mirror God's divinity in their ability to actualise the unique qualities with which they have been endowed, and which makes them different from all other creatures in the universe. Furthermore, the '*imago Dei*' or humans' likeness to God can also be understood by contrasting it with that which does not image God, such as creatures without self-consciousness, and the capacity for spiritual/moral reflection and growth. That means humans differ from all other creatures because of their rational structure which is their capacity for deliberation and free decision-making (cf. Assohoto and Ngewa, 2006: 14). Furthermore, to say that humans are in the image of God is to recognise the special qualities of human nature which allow God to manifest himself in humans. In other words, for humans to have the conscious recognition of their being in the image of God means that they are the creatures through whom God's plan and purposes can be made known and actualised; in this way, humans can be seen as participants in the *missio Dei* (cf. Knoetze, 2017: 3). This concept leads us to the second characteristic of real transformation, namely true vocation, and it is closely related to the above thought.

True Vocation

Humans have to regain their real vocation in order to cause genuine transformation in a given society. God's original intention of creating humanity on this planet needs to be clearly captured by every human being. Biblical evidence indicates that God created humanity to worship him and to live in perfect communion and fellowship with him. Genesis 3 describes this fact. After creating Adam and Eve, God chose from the entire universe a single place for them to live in. He put them in the Garden of Eden which was intentionally prepared for them. It was no doubt a special and suitable place to live. As Sailhamer (2008: 75) indicates, the Hebrew meaning of the word 'Eden' is 'delight', which may imply the intrinsic pleasure and rest that is embodied in God's original plan for humankind. In the creation account, it is clearly stated that God made all kinds of trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food to grow. The two terms, '*pleasing to the eye*' and

'good for food' indicate that the Garden of Eden was designed in a way that it can address the physical, spiritual and psychological needs of the first couple. They were to enjoy and get internal satisfaction by seeing all the beautiful creatures of God around them, and feed on them, without lacking anything for their sustenance. In addition, it was meant that rivers from four directions may water the Garden of Eden so that it can retain its green beauty and the trees may yield fruit without ceasing (Assohoto and Ngewa, 2006: 14). On the other hand, Sailhamer (2008: 79) explains that a major part of the life of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden was enjoying fellowship with God and worshipping him. Nevertheless, the first tragedy that happened in the history of humanity, the falling of Adam and Eve into sin (Gen 3), marks the first break with God's holy purpose for humanity. The couple lost their true vocation of serving, and worshipping God and living in fellowship and communion with him which would bring the ultimate glory to their Creator.

To regain both the true identity and vocation of humanity, reconciliation is needed. Myers (1999: 117) points out that the relationship that was damaged by the fall of Adam and Eve needs to be restored in all dimensions. Reconciliation has four major dimensions, all of which are equally important, namely the relationship with the triune God, with self, with others and with the rest of the creation (cf. Knoetze, 2019: 5). To state it differently, the original sin of Adam and Eve disrupted the created order which resulted in humankind's loss of its true identity and vocation. The church promotes the concept of holistic reconciliation and transformation against this background. Knoetze (2017) argues that the church as an agent of God is an important contributor in identity requisition in order to form a reconciled and transformed society. Myers (1999: 15) asserts that reconciliation and transformation are biblical; they belong to God and work from the perspective of God's original purpose for humanity. Thus, reconciliation and transformation are vital to regain the true identity and vocation of humanity by restoring the multidimensional relationships (cf. Knoetze, 2017). Myers (1999: 117) further attempts to show that this is the only path that leads towards life and holds the promise of *shalom*. Furthermore, Moffit (1987: 235) adds that biblically based transformation refers to a holistically changed life in mental, physical, spiritual and social arenas towards God's eternal purpose for humankind. This is what is expected of the Ethiopian evangelical churches as an agent of reconciliation in this world.

Hindrances to True Transformation

When we assess the ministry of the Ethiopian evangelical churches in terms of working towards regaining true identity and vocation, it seems that there are significant limitations. This is evident from the impact of the churches' ministries in the society. The authors identify three main reasons behind this inadequacy: The first one is pertinent to the view they hold about the overall ministry of the church; the second to their altar service, specifically dispensing of the Word; and the third one is related particularly to their eschatological position. Each point is briefly discussed below.

Constricted View About Church Ministries

The first factor contributing to the weak impact of the evangelical churches in promoting real transformation in the Ethiopian society is the limited view they hold about church ministries. Regarding the overall ministry of the church, most evangelicals in Ethiopia think that their ministry is limited only to their membership circle. Consequently, the influence of the church is insignificant in the outside community. Nevertheless, biblical evidence affirms that the ministry of the church should be reaching to all corners of the community. That means its impact needs to be seen and

felt not only in the church setting but also outside of the church (Matt 5:13). The Cape Town Commitment, a document written by world Protestant Christian leaders, substantiates that the love of God compels the church to go to the whole world in service of the Lord (The Cape Town Commitment, 2010a: 2). In other words, as God loved the church, the church has to pass this love to the world by making disciples (Knoetze, 2017). The church has to follow after the model of God in its ministry of dispensing love to all around it. The short phrase under the seventh point of the above-mentioned document, The Cape Town Commitment, which reads as follows: ‘We love God’s World’ (2010),³ emphasises the significance of love more from the perspective of reconciliation and transformation. To state it another way, this love is not mere sentimental affection for nature or human beings, but it is working to reconcile and transform humanity through regaining their true identity and vocation (The Cape Town Commitment, 2010a: 14–15; cf. World Communion of Reformed Churches, n.d.). In addition, the document also clearly mentions that socio-economic justice is another vital area where the ministry of the church could be seen in the community. Several Scriptural passages underline that the Lord upholds the cause of the oppressed, loves the foreigner, feeds the hungry and sustains the fatherless and widows. However, he does all these through the instrumentality of mainly the church who is specially called for such actions (Knoetze, 2019: 7). The document points out that the church has to give itself afresh to the promotion of justice, including solidarity and advocacy on behalf of the marginalised and oppressed (The Cape Town Commitment, 2010a: 15). God has entrusted the whole world under the care of the church, and the church is required to show the love of God to the whole world through its service.

Limitation in Ministering the Word

The second factor contributing to the weak impact of the evangelical churches in promoting real transformation in the Ethiopian society is the limited view they hold about ministering the Word. Sound biblical preaching and teaching is foundational to all church ministries. Nothing can satisfy the deepest needs of the human heart and quench the spiritual thirst of believers. The church is required to provide its members with a healthy and balanced biblical truth in order to equip churchgoers with the knowledge of the Word of God. Many biblical references highlight the significance of teaching and preaching a reliable doctrine, and one of them is the Apostle Paul’s exhortation to Timothy. In 1 Timothy 6, Paul warns the young Timothy to beware of those who bring doctrines that do not agree with the sound words of the Lord Jesus Christ. When churches spend more time entertaining people and giving shallow sermons, they are not fulfilling what a church is supposed to do and be. Scriptural truth indicates that one of the major problems of the lack of solid biblical knowledge is the fact that humanity may go astray from God’s original intended purpose for them, which is living for his glory. The experiences of most of the evangelical churches in Ethiopia show this truth. It is evident that in most of the local congregations, this service is provided by ministers who do not have adequate biblical and theological foundations. Consequently, the contribution of the preaching ministry in building true identity and vocation is trivial.

The Influence of the Eschatological View

According to the writers’ observation, the third factor contributing to the weak impact of the evangelical churches in promoting real transformation in the Ethiopian society is their eschatological doctrine. Some of the doctrines considered as the eschatological events are, the Second Advent

of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the final judgement, the new heaven and new earth, hell and purgatory, to name a few (Peters, 2000: 318). These themes are referred to as 'the last things' based on the view that the present world is operating between the two aeons, the present and the future, and they are considered to occur in the future.

The question of the final destination of the whole creation has been one of the controversial points in the history of Christendom. In almost all Christian circles as well as other religions, it is believed that at some point there will be an end to everything; but the way or how it will end and what will happen after that is mostly disputable. Accordingly, in Christian history, there have been different views on the issue. Three main views are the annihilationist view, which has been held by pre-millennialists; the deificationist view; and the transformationist view (Moltmann, 1996: 268). Of these three, the first one – pre-millennialism – is more common in Ethiopian evangelical churches.

From various documents, we can see that evangelical Christianity was introduced to Ethiopia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This was the era where various eschatological views appeared in the Western Christian world and especially pre-millennialism, whose position about the destiny of the cosmos inclines more to annihilation, reached its peak (Bauckham, 1988: 429). With the coming of missionaries, the pre-millennialist view was introduced to Ethiopia and some other African countries which laid the foundation for today's eschatological view about the end of the cosmos among Ethiopian evangelicals. The annihilationist view claims the total destruction of the present cosmos at the end of the history of the universe. In other words, they believe in a total discontinuity of the present cosmos and the creation of a brand new one from *exnihilo* (Moltmann, 1996: 268). The substance of the present and the new one is totally different. Theologians who are in favour of this view appeal to Scriptural passages like Matthew 24:29 and 2 Peter 3:12 to verify their stance. Furthermore, they argue that God's judgement in fire of this universe implies its total destruction (Hoekema, 1979: 280). It is evident that this view is widely held and taught in major Ethiopian evangelical churches, and as they adhere to this position, it has contributed significantly to the weak attention given to the real transformation in Ethiopian society. The writers thus recommend that the evangelical churches need to carefully review their position on this matter so as to be able to facilitate real transformation in the community through the regaining of true identity and vocation.

The Message of Hope

The message of hope is about the coming consummated Kingdom of God. The concept of the consummated Kingdom of God is closely related to the significance of working for real transformation. It signifies the original perfection of God's creation and in this kingdom, every single creation up in heaven and down on earth comes under the sovereign rule of God. Consequently, it gives great motivation for the church to engage in the role of genuine reconciliation and transformation. Various studies ascertain that scholars believe that the Kingdom of God has two aspects: the present (now) and the future (not yet) (Myers, 2011: 88). The present dimension implies the out breaking of the Kingdom of God in the coming of Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah (Myers, 2011: 113). In his coming, Jesus Christ realised the Kingdom of God is here (Mk 1:15) and shows that its blessings are now open to all who seek to experience them (Lk 4:18-20). They include peace, freedom from spiritual bondage, deliverance from evil power, repentance, forgiveness of sin, eternal life and others (Beasley-Murray, 1986: 82–83; Gaffin, 1988: 367–368). The future aspect, however, refers to the consummated Kingdom of God, which will be realised at the second coming of Jesus Christ (Beasley-Murray, 1986: 88). In other words, at the end of

history there will be some time when the full-fledged rule and reign of God will be seen and all the nations, people and kingdoms of this world will submit to God's rule casting down their crowns. As Hagner (1993: 148) indicates, this will mark the consummation of God's purpose in the whole history of the universe and the fulfilment of the prophetic pictures of future bliss.

This aspect of the kingdom of God has its own special attributes. Mainly, it is characterised by *shalom*. This Hebrew word bears a comprehensive meaning about the concept 'peace'. It means harmony, wholeness, completeness, prosperity, welfare, and tranquillity. In other words, when we talk about *shalom*, we are talking about one being filled with a complete and perfect peace of mind and spirit, and it is about the circumstances, which is not just simple peace and happiness, but fullness and perfection overflowing in the inner and outer aspects of life (Myers, 1999: 113). *Shalom* refers to the complete serenity and tranquillity where justice and truth reign in all dimensions of life. Grudem (1994: 1163) substantiates that the consummated Kingdom of God is a place of great beauty and abundance and joy. However, it should be taken into consideration that the highest and perfect standard of the beauty of the consummated Kingdom of God is his own presence and the fellowship of his people with him (Grudem, 1994: 1163).

Conclusion

This article deliberates on the role of the Ethiopian evangelical churches with regard to addressing the quest for real transformation. In Ethiopia, there are numerous political, social and economic challenges that call for the engagement of the evangelical churches in order to create a more stable and God-fearing society. Nevertheless, the impact of the evangelical churches is only slightly felt and seen in the country. It is recommended that churches must be engaged not only in the evangelisation task but also in fostering true and holistic transformation through its diverse ministries.

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Notes

1. African Development Bank Group: Ethiopia Economic Outlook (2022). <https://www.afdb.org/en/countries/east-africa/ethiopia/ethiopia-economic-outlook>. Date of access: 10 September 2022.
2. Abbreviation for deoxyribonucleic acid.
3. The Cape Town Commitment (2010b): <https://lausanne.org/content/ctc/ctcommitment#capetown>. Date of access: 10 October 2022.

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