Despite our matchless heritage of rich cultural diversity, it is a surprise that the political landscape of most African states does not display a determination to find a hospitable political space for pluralism in cultural communities and identities. There are no doubt reasons of history to explain why African political communities sought to keep diversity at a distance from public life. First, as is widely known, under white supremacist regimes – colonial, apartheid and the like – cultural diversity was cynically and effectively deployed as a divisive means of repressive rule. Second, during the struggle for independence, mass mobilization of the populace, often wantonly cobbled together by an imperial power, liberation movements tended to draw upon inclusive nationalism in order to build a force capable of winning freedom from a Western power in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds.

In accommodating diversity as well as in securing peace and stability, independence, as with much else, was a pyrrhic victory. In contrast to the chief contending powers, who enjoyed a period of comparative peace during the Cold War, the contest embroiled African states in proxy wars, wars led largely by African strongmen that enjoyed the support of a given power and were, in turn, at liberty to infringe on the freedom of citizens and the autonomy of communities. Beyond the Cold War, postcolonial Africa did not furnish fertile ground for diversity to flourish. To cite an example close to home, on the eve of the end of Italian colonial rule and British administration in Eritrea, there were strong forces, both in Ethiopia and Eritrea, pushing and pulling the two communities to come together. Ethiopia and Eritrea eventually united – first, in a federation and soon thereafter in a union. In the meantime, the Ethiopian empire forcibly suppressed public expression of Eritrea’s distinctive cultural identity as well as Eritrea’s nascent democratic freedoms such as those of the press and association. Thus, Eritrea was swiftly and fully assimilated into the cultural and political norms governing imperial Ethiopia. These highhanded measures fuelled a civil war that lasted for three decades. Similarly, millions of Africans paid an exacting cost in loss of peace and other essential public goods because African states were prone to be in denial about cultural diversity, and widespread cultural cleavage, rivalry and subordination – a crippling legacy of empire. Besides the case of Eritrea,
Africa has witnessed many conflicts motivated by secessionist aspirations, among them: Comoros Islands (Anjouan), Malawi, Niger (Touregs), Nigeria (Biafra), Senegal (Casamance), Sudan (Southern Sudan). Moreover the genocide in Rwanda, whatever its ultimate causes, centred on deep and deadly cultural division and rivalry. Besides these extremes, the failure to extend political recognition to cultural diversity has caused strife in many parts of Africa. For instance, in Kenyan in spite of the lame invocation of ethnic harmony, as in the slogan harambee, interethnic communal conflict has intermittently broken out, particularly during electoral contests. There are, of late, growing signs that religious differences and identities are becoming serious sources of political contention and violent confrontation. In addition to Nigeria, the freewheeling movement for democracy by citizens in the Arab Uprising has aroused communal tensions and violent clashes between religious communities – say, between Muslims and Copts in Egypt or between rival Muslim sects in Syria – as well as far-flung, sharp divisions between secularists and political movements or parties with religious political agendas.

However, alongside this dispiriting record of miscarriage and misery, there is a counter current seeking to make public acknowledgement of diversity integral to decent African governance. Moving or turning variously against the prevailing current are countries such as Nigeria and, more recently, South Africa, Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan and Somalia. They all seem to agree that being burdened by a marginalized or denigrated cultural community and identity is to be alienated or uprooted in the very place where one belongs. Put differently, amid diversity the need for a home of one’s own may well be a basic good of equal and free citizenship. Perhaps the boldest experiment in this counter current is that championed by Ethiopia, where the right to self-determination, including secession, is a fundamental constitutional right, and a federative arrangement conferring robust rights of cultural and political self-government is constitutionally entrenched. It is, of course, too early to tell if the experiment has taken. For instance, it is a sad fact that Ethiopia’s valiant consent to Eritrea’s independence has not yielded peace between the two amicably separated political communities, communities that share enduring cultural, economic and historical bonds. Still, Ethiopia’s resolve to uphold the collective rights of self-determination and federalism has already engendered a great deal that is of lasting value. First, we now know that there is little to be gained and nothing to be lost by giving up the longstanding effort to shoehorn our varied cultures into some supposed single, inclusive or privileged culture: Are there any cogent reasons of principle why all our cultures should not bloom? Second, federalism has succeeded in concluding nationalist strife that had consumed the country’s assets for decades; it has, moreover, averted the attendant looming threat of national disintegration. Third, federalism has checked a persistent propensity to look
for uniform, centralized rule by a remote, ill-informed authority, an authority that not only stifles the citizenry’s initiative, public participation and free association but also thwarts flexibility in the formulation and execution of public policy. Fourth, federalism opens the possibility of limiting and separating the powers of public authority. Finally, federalism encourages equitable distribution of national income and the emergent fruits of development – a significant achievement, particularly for historically neglected cultural communities. Thus, federalism may well serve to foster political pluralism and social equality – worthy public goals that are notoriously elusive even in mature democracies. In respect to these and other aspects of Ethiopia’s new venture, it is obviously premature to pronounce a triumphant culmination. Given the unforeseeable ups and downs of public life, it suffices to claim the advent of Ethiopia’s novel vision and the promising beginnings of its realization. In the pursuit of worthwhile public aspirations, African citizens and leaders, who doggedly strive for a brighter future for the peoples of the continent, can do worse than to adopt Samuel Beckett’s famous, negative aesthetic credo: “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”