Eritrea and Ethiopia: An Interminable Saga of Love and Hate

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The Memoirs of a Lawyer Turned Rebel by Bereket Habte Selassie

From his school days in Harari until his escape from the clutches of the Derg to join the EPLF, Bereket’s life was to follow the trajectory of many an Eritrean student and civil servant of his generation. Indeed, some of his most enduring friendships were to be with Ethiopians rather than Eritreans, such as Worku Habte wold, his constant companion both in high school and in England, the famous poet Mengistu Lemma, and Tesema and Shimelis Adugna, who was to become the first Commissioner of the Ethiopian Rehabilitation and Disability Commission that was set up following the 1973 famine. A propos the last two, Bereket writes: ‘Although eventually, differing views or opposed positions on the Eritrean question would send us our separate ways, I remember both Assegidh and Shimelis with fondness and gratitude’ (p. 236).

Indeed, while Bereket could never forgive the ‘Soaun’ empire’s treatment of his studies in England in 1953, he could not forget the steadfast support and encouragement that he encountered from so many ‘Shoa’ friends. By the end, that ‘Soaunian’ intrigue turned out to be a unilateral act of the Vice Minister of Education, Akalewerk Habteselassie, and the agent’s forced repatriation was eventually terminated through the intercession of Emperor Haile Sellasie’s eldest daughter, Princess Tenagawork. It was also during his forced sojourn in Addis that he met, almost providentially, his future wife and mother of three children, Koki Merker, also from a Shoa family. Some fifteen years later, when Bereket was banished to Harari province, he fell into the warm embrace of the governor general, Dejazmach Woldechol Ammanuel, and his family. Finally, he returned to grace and to a new form of practice law; he was, as was Imperial Navy, summarily recalled by the Ministry of Justice, where he rose convened earlier in the year by Nkrumah. Five years later, the Organization of African Unity was born in Addis Ababa. Bereket, who was a member of the Ethiopian committee that drafted the OAU charter, gave us some vivid descriptions of those heady early days. To the upward surge of Nkrumah stepping ceremonially over a slaughtered sheep, the tumultuous welcome that the Muslim population of Addis Ababa accorded the Egyptian president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, the emperor imploring Sekou Toure (‘Mon fils, je vous presente’) to dissuade Nkrumah from walking out when he saw that his call for a strong union was going to be rejected by the majority, and the dramatic confrontation between the Somali president and the Ethiopian prime minister.

Bereket’s estrangement with the imperial system – the battle between the ‘crown and the pen’ – came to two levels, first as an Ethiopian then as an Eritrean. While in London, he was part of the budding student movement that was destined to be the harbinger of the revolution that swept away the ancient regime. What began in more innocuous forms in the United Kingdom assumed a more radical flavour in the United States (where he had gone to study at UCLA), where he chaired the historic 1963 congress of ESUNA (the Eritrean Students’ Union in North America), marking the decisive shift from a reformist to a revolutionary agenda. Back in Ethiopia, he was sympathetic to the rebellions of Figure Neway, who was to be the brain behind the abortive coup of 1960 that was led by his brother, Brigadier General Mengistu Neway. Bereket recounts an interesting incident in which the third leader of the coup, Colonel Workineh Gebekeychu, Chief of Security, when the colonel let Bereket read the thick intelligence file compiled against him by security agents and then, to the utter astonishment of the author, burnt the whole file. The emperor had so much faith and confidence in his chief that he remained in a “state of denial” about the colonel’s involvement in the coup and kept asking for him long after he was dead.

Although it failed, the coup opened a new era in the history of political opposition to the regime. As Bereket concludes: ‘Those historic events infused in the progressively inclined elites of the time all those who desired change – a sense of empowerment, intimating the possibility of change. The question became: what kind of change and by what means?’ (p. 165). Bereket, who was in Sudan during the coup, began to work with kindred spirits towards that change, ‘straddling two contradictory worlds – the one of high government office, the other of a secret underground movement’ (p. 183). The agents of change...