

Having fought what many people considered a senseless war in 1998-2000, Eritrea and Ethiopia find themselves no nearer to peace some eight years later. With UNMEE, the UN force that has so far set the two forces apart, declared practically dead by both parties, there is nothing to prevent them from entering another round of fighting. The region has thus established a record for one of the longest armed confrontations in the world – a record that is now approaching the half century mark. This goes back to the first shot that was fired in the western hills of Eritrea in 1961 and signalled the birth of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF). Between then and now, the peoples of the region had a merciful respite only in the years between 1991 and 1998, the years, respectively, of the de facto independence of Eritrea and the onset of the new round of hostilities, during which time the ruling parties exhibited an outward camaraderie that concealed underlying tensions.

This fairly long history of bloody confrontation has left its mark on memory and identity. Eritrea and Ethiopia have come to be viewed as irreconcilable polarities rather than overlapping identities, as primordial enemies rather than estranged members of the same family. In this respect, Bereket Habte Selassie's book could not have come at a better time. As the memoirs of someone who straddled both worlds, the Ethiopian and the Eritrean, this account of his life and career is typical of so many other Eritreans who have lived in both worlds, some eventually eschewing one completely for the other, some continuing to grapple with these conflicting identities. But few have told the story with so much eloquence and erudition, even if one is bound to take issue with some of his interpretations.

The book, which is said to be the first part of a two-volume memoir, traces the author's life and career from his early childhood in the village of Adi Nifas (Hamasi, in the heart of highland Eritrea) to the attainment of Eritrean independence in 1991. Bereket, to use the Ethiopian form of addressing him, was the sixth child of a large family of nine children. It was a family dominated by the imposing figure of his father, Qeshi (Priest) Habte Selassie Gulbot, an Orthodox priest who had turned Protestant. The Protestant element was to be so crucial in the intellectual history of Eritrea, producing as it did the two personalities who embodied the divergent aspirations of the Eritreans at the end of Italian colonial rule in 1941 – Bairu Tedla, leader of the group that sought the union of Eritrea with Ethiopia (the Unionists), and Woldeab Woldemariam, generally recognized as the 'father' of Eritrean independence.

Bereket had his early schooling at the Scuola Vittoria in Asmara, routinely making the five-mile walk from and back to his village, Adi Nifas. But this did not last long. In early 1945, as the Second World War was coming to an end, Bereket (then aged about fifteen) and a friend found themselves on their way to Harar in eastern Ethiopia, to join a Lutheran school. The eventful journey across Ethiopia to the boys' final destination is narrated with remarkable memory and a good deal of wit, a feat that is repeated in his account of some of the defining moments of his life, including the marathon flight that he and fifteen other mariticulturals – drawn from the rival prestigious high schools Wingate and Kotebe – made to England for their higher education in October 1948, complete with a vignette of the ground hostess (Almaz), who 'shepherded' the young scholars to the plane.

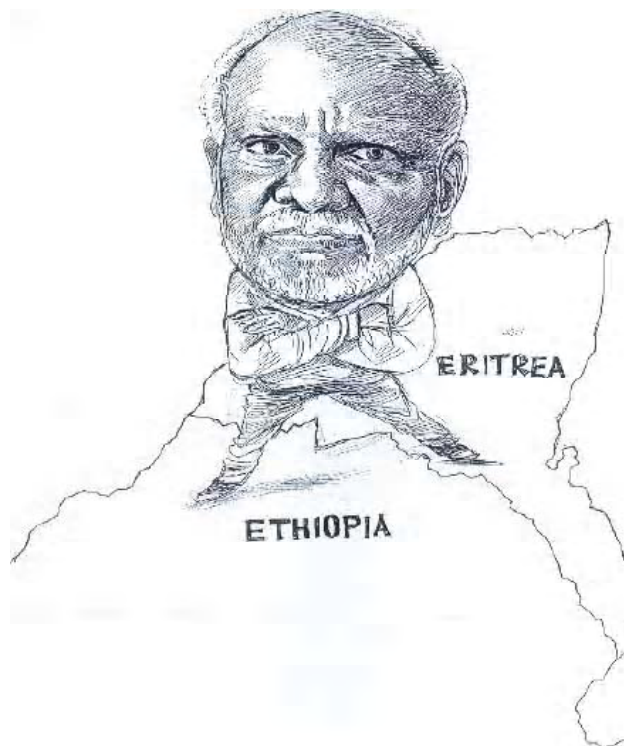
## Eritrea and Ethiopia: An Interminable Saga of Love and Hate

Bahru Zewde

### The Crown and the Pen The Memoirs of a Lawyer Turned Rebel

by Bereket Habte Selassie

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From his school days in Harar until his escape from the clutches of the Derg to join the EPLF, Bereket's life was to follow the trajectory of many an Ethiopian 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 Habtewold, his constant companion both in high school and in England, the famous poet Mengistu Lemma, the artist Afework Tekle and Aseghid Tesema and Shimelis Adugna, who was to become the first Commissioner of the Ethiopian Relief and Rehabilitation 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 Aseghid and Shimelis with fondness and gratitude' (p. 236).

Indeed, while Bereket could never forgive the 'Shoan intrigue' that precipitated his recall from his studies in England in 1953, he could not forget the steadfast support and encouragement that he encountered from so many 'Shoans'. In the end, that 'Shoan intrigue' turned out to be a unilateral act of the Vice Minister of Education, Akalework Habtewold. Bereket's forced repatriation was eventually terminated through the intercession of Emperor Haile Selassie's eldest daughter, Princess Tenagnework. It was also during his forced sojourn in Addis that he met, almost providentially, his future wife and mother of three children, Koki Menkir, also from a Shoan family. Some fifteen years later,

when Bereket was banished to Harar province, he fell into the warm embrace of the governor general, *Dejjazmach* Workineh Wolde Amanuel, and his family. Finally, his return to grace and to a new post of Legal Adviser at the Ministry of Interior was masterminded by the minister, *Bitwaddad* Zewde Gebre Hiwot, who persuaded the Emperor that it would be easier to watch over the dangerous element that Bereket was purported to be in the capital rather than in a distant province.

At the centre of the whole saga is, of course, Emperor Haile Selassie himself. Hence the title of the book. Even before Bereket relocated to Ethiopia, he recalls the Eritrean fascination with the young prince Tafari (as the emperor was called before his coronation in 1930). Many Eritreans had moved to Ethiopia in search of education and employment. Tafari patronized a number of them, notably the famous Lorenzo Ta'ezaz, who rose to become foreign minister after Ethiopia's liberation from Fascist Italian occupation in 1941. Bereket recalls songs in praise of the emperor, still fondly remembered as Tafari, during his period of exile in 1936-41. Haile Selassie was, as he puts it, 'a palpable force in the minds of many Eritreans, particularly among the literati' (p. 42). In view of this assessment, it is difficult to agree with the author when he reduces the attachment so many Eritreans under Italian colonial rule evinced for the emperor and Ethiopia as a matter of choosing between 'an African neighbor as against a European occupier' (p. 43).

Bereket gives us some memorable descriptions of his encounters with Haile Selassie. At his first audience, when asked who his father was, Bereket had the temerity to tell the sovereign that he would not know him, oblivious of the fact that the emperor would be briefed thoroughly about someone's background before giving him/her an audience, all the more so as Bereket's father happened to be an active member of the Unionist party. When Bereket returned from his studies abroad, he was asked with the fundamental and almost non-translatable question: 'mindenew yedekembiket?' which the author bravely translates into 'what was your endeavor on?' (p. 126). When it came to the laureate's future occupation, the emperor was not amused when Bereket expressed his preference to practice law; he was, as was imperial wont, summarily assigned to work in 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, gives us some vivid descriptions of those heady days – 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 Touré ('Mon fils, je vous prie') 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 at 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 ancien 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), when he chaired the historic 1965 congress of ESUNA (the Ethiopian Students Union in North America), marking the decisive shift from a reformist to a revolutionary agenda. Back in Ethiopia, he was sympathetic to the rebellious figure of Garmame 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 encounter with the third leader of the coup, Colonel Workineh Gebeyehu, 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 security 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 a member of that elite, 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