

BOOK REVIEWS

አብዮቱና ትዝታዬ (*Abyotunna tazətaye*, 'The Revolution and My Memories'). By Fisseha Desta. Addis Ababa: Tsehai Publishers, 2008 A.M. Pp. x + 598; 53 images. ISBN: 978-1-59-907108-4. 250.00 ETB.

The history of Ethiopian revolution has attracted a great deal of attention and the scholarly studies on this period are numerous. However, often the studies have lacked insight and the interpretations on the origins, the course and the collapse of the Derg regime have appeared as conventional when not fully satisfactory. Many studies have relied on secondary or published literature and a few are based on extensive archival work and on the reading of primary sources. As a consequence many an academic has embraced superficial explanations to account for the emergence, development and collapse of the Derg (for an overview, old but still valuable, on the historiography on the Derg, see Henze, 1989). The book under review, however, is different from the previous literature. The author was one of the Derg's top officials and, therefore, his narrative, while not completely objective, provides information that can shed light onto some of the Derg's most important episodes.

Fisseha Desta was born on April 21, 1941, into a family of the petty Tigrayan nobility in 'Adwa; his father was rewarded with the title of *blatta* by *ras* Seyoum Mengesha. After graduating at the prestigious Hayle Sillase I Military Academy in Harar, Fisseha started his professional career in the Imperial Bodyguard. Yet, with the outbreak of the revolution he joined the rebels and subsequently served in prominent positions during the ill-fated Derg regime; he was vice secretary of the Derg (p. 354), vice chair man of council of ministers (pp. 334, 433) and vice president of PDRE (Peoples' Democratic Republic of Ethiopia) (p. 380). Besides, he was in command of the army's third division, defined by an expert on the Derg's military as "one of the oldest army units in the country" (Fantahun, 2015, p. 46).

The Revolution and My Memories opens with an apology where the author begs the Ethiopian people for forgiveness for what bad things the Derg, knowingly or unknowingly, did. The central part of the apology reads as follows: "... as I am happy with good deeds of the Derg, I want to take responsibility for the wrong deeds by the Derg, knowingly or unknowingly and ask apology from the people of Ethiopia on my side (inside of cover page).

The main text is divided into five parts and fifteen chapters. In Part One the political situation of Ethiopia before the revolution is discussed. Chapter One elaborates on discontents and revolts during the imperial regime (pp. 9-13), on the history of Ethiopian Army (pp. 31-34) and provides a discussion of the Ethiopian Students' movement at home and abroad (pp. 45-54). Chapter Two focuses on the revolution properly and provides some insights on the events of September 12, 1974 (p. 100), when Emperor Hayle Sillase was deposed. In Chapter Three the narrative deals with internal episodes

on the formation of the Derg ('committee' in Amharic), including disagreements among its members (pp. 105, 107, 114-122, 131-132). The next chapter gives insights into the famed 'Land to the Tiller' policy (p. 143). In Part Two (chapters five to eight) Fisseha discusses the formation of opposition parties such as EPRP (Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Party) and MEISON (All Ethiopian Socialist Movement), the episodes known as the Red and White Terrors and on the issue of nations and nationalities. In Part Three the book focuses on the aspects of foreign policy (Ethio-Soviet relations) and on the two main war fronts faced by Ethiopia, the Ethio-Somali war and the Eritrean conflict. Under Part Four (chapters ten to thirteen) the author describes aspects of internal politics, such as the formation of WPE (Workers' Party of Ethiopia), the creation of the PDRE (Peoples' Democratic Republic of Ethiopia) and the 1984/85 famine. Later in Part Four the book focuses on the different conflicts in the north that eventually brought about the end of the Derg dictatorship: the emergence of TPLF (Tigray Peoples' Liberation Front) and the Red Star operation in Eritrea. In the last section, Part Five, a detailed account of May 16, 1989 coup d'état against Mengistu Haile Mariam is given (Chapter Thirteen). The book concludes (Chapter Fifteen) with the beginning of peace agreements, the proclamation of the mixed economy policy and the final defeat of the Derg army (p. 503).

The book also includes an annex 1 with a list of all members of the military men who established the Derg, including their full names, rank and army unit. This appears as an important contribution as previous scholars incurred in confusion concerning the identity and number of the Derg founders. Thus, Bahru stated the number was less than 110 (Bahru, 2002, p. 234) while Gennet Ayele pointed to 109 Derg members, the same number given by Fisseha, but without providing any source (1994 E. C).

In a book of this kind, there are strengths and shortcomings. Among the first is the historiographic effort made by the author, who provides plausible explanations to important chapters in the Derg's history. Fisseha strives to emphasize the reliability of his own account by blaming some well-known historiographic works on the Derg such as **ጥላከርነት** (Tefsaye, 2001 A.M., p. 583) and **ነገር** (Zenebe, 1996 A.M., p. 4) of being more interested in reaching a wide readership than in seeking truthfulness. In some aspects we might concede Fisseha's plea to be justified. For instance, concerning the famous summary execution of sixty generals of the imperial period by the Derg, there have been contradictory views: some authors have stated that the execution was the result of study conducted by a commission of investigators, while others have said that it was the result of an anonymous decision by the general assembly of the Derg. Yet, Fisseha convincingly explains that the ultimate decision was taken by Mengistu Haile Mariam, a day before the assembly formally met, in order to clear his way to power; in support of this the author provides an execution letter signed and sealed by the dictator (p. 130). Another famous episode that might have been shed light onto is the coup attempt of May 16, 1989, which is the object of a detailed description.

Yet, other episodes of the Derg are less convincingly explained. For instance, the author tries to describe in detail the operation Red Star by the

Derg against Eritrean fighters but does not provide a plausible military explanation to account for the failure of this operation (p. 432; for a more comprehensive narrative on the operation, see Fantahun, 2014, conclusions). At the end of Chapter Two (p. 104), the author discusses the downfall and the death of Emperor Haile Sillase I yet without providing relevant details, such as the reasons why the ruler was killed and where his burial place was.

Moreover, Fisseha claims that he was not involved in some of the darkest episodes of the Derg, but this is difficult to accept considering he was one of the regime's top commanders; such is the case with the murder of the journalist Bealu Girma (p. 442) or that of Tariku Ayinie, commander of Ethiopian army during the fall of Afabet (p. 445). Concerning the latter case, Fisseha explains his own personal issues with General Tariku and even insults him as ትዕቢተኛ ('man of misconduct') (p. 448), which seems to cast a shadow on the author's own plea for innocence. Moreover, although the author emphasizes that he has presented only those facts for which he has substantial sources (Seifu Fantahun Show, 2015), and this is not the case and, indeed, he presents most of his views without the necessary documentary evidence. Last but not the least, some technical limitations ought to be noted, such as the alternative use of two dating systems, the Gregorian calendar, which is used at the beginning of the book (see e.g. pp. 8-12), and the Ethiopian calendar, used in the rest of the text.

Abyotunna tēzətaye is a book of memories by one of the Derg's top officials. The book covers the main chapters of the military dictatorship that devastated Ethiopia and concluded in a murderous civil war from the point of view of one of its principal actors. So, while shedding light on some episodes, it leaves others in the shadows. Similarly, while the author might have answered satisfactorily to some questions concerning his involvement in the Derg's murderous machinery, he is less convincing in some prominent cases: was Fisseha actually as oblivious, as he claims to be, of the murder of Derg's political opponents? This notwithstanding, *Abyotunna tēzətaye* is an important contribution to the history of the Derg. The book stands out as more authentic than many previous literature published on the same topic. With its insights into the Derg's development and internal organization, the book makes an indispensable read for historians of the Derg regime, in particular, and, more in general, for scholars focusing on the role of the military in contemporary African societies.

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Negotiating the Lion's Share of Freedom: Adventures of an Idealist Caught up in the Ethiopian Civil War. By Makonnen Araya. Addis Abeba: AAU Printing Press, 2014 (1st ed. 2010). Pp. viii + 355; 2 maps. ISBN: 978-0-578-14678-2. 150.00 ETB.

The Derg period has been one of the most devastating episodes in the history of modern Ethiopia: hundreds of thousands of people were killed, mostly for political reasons, entire village communities were forcefully resettled and thousands of youth were pushed towards the exile. Among those who survived and found a new home in the exile a few have, during the last years, gone into writing the memories of their past experiences. From the comfort of their American or Australian homes, these 'diaspora habasha' have started memorializing a life long abandoned, full of struggles, uncertainties and risks. Their recollections add up new perspectives to those opened by prominent members of the Derg regime who have also started memorializing their life within the regime's machinery of terror (see this issue, Book reviews).

Makonnen Araya's *Negotiating the Lion's Share of Freedom* is one of a few books written by exiles of Derg's Ethiopia that have recently reached the book market. First published in 2010 it now appears in a second, revised and updated edition. The new edition includes a glossary, an afterword and two maps. The author is a Christian Orthodox born in Harar at the eve of the liberation of Ethiopia from the Italians who, during his youth, joined the ill-fated EPRP (Ethiopia's People Revolutionary Party, 'Ihapa' in Amharic) at a moment when this movement led a brutal war against the Derg government. His is a personal chronicle from his first days as a young recruit of Ihapa's military arm, EPRA (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Army), in 1977, until his escape, in 1980, from a struggle he no longer believed in

and from a murderous regime that had achieved its peak of power and destruction.

As it happened to many of his generation Makonnen found himself immersed in the web of political activism that sprang up in the 1970s during Hayle Sillase I's final years and that came to be known as the EMU (Ethiopian Student Movement; see Andargachew, 1993, p. 135 et passim). Later, when the Derg came to power, his ideological inclinations and the government's repressive drive pushed him to join EPRA (p. vii). Thereafter, as a young soldier of EPRA Makonnen started a thrilling, hazardous adventure that for over three years took him across some of Ethiopia's most breathtaking regions. The narrative leads us in the footsteps of the author's journey, from his flee from Addis Abeba and arrival at the contact place in Mekele, capital of Tigray, to his initiation in guerrilla warfare in the *talim* (EPRA's training camp) of Senegede, in the same regional state (p. 57, 87). The narrative continues to other regions of Tigray (Alitena, Gortello, Adigrat, and Tembien), where clashes with TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front; p. 46) were frequent. Then, when the TPLF forces destroyed EPRA's main base in Asimba in May 1978 (an episode, however, which does not feature in the book), Makonnen moved with his troop to the Agaw-inhabited areas of north Wello (Wag and Sekota). The last theatre of operations that features in the book is that of Semien mountains, probably the only one EPRA could have claimed to have held some form of dominion upon. There EPRA's energies were largely focused on establishing peasant associations and the author leads us to several remote areas and villages, including Mekane Birhan, Hawaza, Dembello, Tselemt, and Beyeda. The adventure comes to an abrupt end when Makonnen, as it seems without a reason, is accused by EPRA's High Command of being a member of an *anja*, an underground splinter group (pp. 258-59). This is, in the author's own words, his "fall from grace" and the prelude to his flight to Sudan. Since this is the last part of the book and it is full of suspense moments, I will let to the reader to find by herself or himself what happened.

Throughout Makonnen's journey we learn of the precarious lifestyle of the guerrilla soldier, his frugal diet prone to diseases like *kirkar* (i.e. constipation, pp. 97-98), and the serious logistic problems of the troop, which is equipped with out-dated nineteenth-century rifles (p. 262). The passages showing the internal functioning of the guerrilla are enthralling: from the rules of conduct kept among the soldiery (pp. 114, 158) to the EPRA's rather unfruitful and naïve propaganda campaigns (pp. 128, 185, 193, 199) and the latter's strategies to gain the support of the local peasantry (e.g., the improvised rural 'courts', p. 145). The part of the book that is dedicated to the guerrilla in Semien, where Makonnen lived for about a year (early 1978 to early 1979), includes passages of historical and ethnographical value. Among such passages there are the portrait of the petty ruler *balambaras* Ajire (p. 194 et passim) who carried on with an archaic lifestyle typical of the times of Hayle Sillase I, the story on *balambaras* K (sic) (p. 208) and the clashes between the Semien National Park rangers and the guerrilla (p. 216-17). The description of the blood feuds among Christian and Muslim communities in northeast Semien (p. 200 et passim) is noteworthy, as well as those on the social life of Agaw communities (p. 223) and on the

harsh life conditions in the *dega* (the highest inhabited areas in Ethiopia, ranging from altitudes between 2,300 to 3,200 m) (p. 226 et passim). Other relevant ethnographic passages include those on the condition of peasant women in Beyeda (pp. 237-40), whose lives are described in a vivid and poignant way, on the widespread beliefs in spirits (*koles*, *wotete*) (p. 240 et passim, 253, 309) and the mourning practices among women (pp. 243-44).

One has to praise this book for the sober style of the narrative and the humbleness with which Makonnen describes his guerrilla years. Accordingly, the protagonist rarely appears as a hero. Instead, he is portrayed as a rather clumsy, incompetent soldier and quite ill at ease in the rural environment in which he was obliged to live. Instances of this are the scene where he is unable to pack his gear (p. 69), another scene where he shows to be unfit to keep a guard (pp. 120-21) and even the accident that occurred January 1978 that left him seriously injured and invalid for military life (p. 179, 188). More positively perhaps, he also appears as a sharp ethnographer and a skilled observer while presenting the life conditions of the peasant communities whom he has encountered. From the point of view of the forging of the narrative the reader would have wished a few words on how Makonnen recollected his memories: did he keep a journal during his wandering guerrilla years? Or did he rather recollect those memories retrospectively, once settled in the U.S.?

For a book of this kind that presumably did not count with professional proof reading the editing is fairly good. A couple of layout problems could be mentioned, such as several pages without block justification (pp. 151, 169-173), a missed indentation and a chapter title that has fallen to the bottom of the page (p. 342). The English style is also fine and only a few typos ought to be noted: “my being shot” for “me being shot” (p. 5), “purpose distributing” for “purpose of distributing” (p. 24), “Adigat” for “Adigrat” (p. 136), “hyle” for “half” (p. 149), “of of” for “of” (178), “us eaten” for “us had eaten” (p. 257), and “took took” for “took” (p. 335).

Negotiating the Lion's Share of Freedom is the passionate, sincere chronicle of a survivor during a period that saw no rest in Ethiopia, in its cities, villages, and valleys; it is the chronicle of a man who survived the repressive hand of a murderous regime, a civil war fought in remote mountains, the purges of a paranoid guerrilla, a hazardous fall from a cliff and the greed of the head-hunters from the Ethio-Sudanese lowlands. This well-written book makes for a pleasant reading, with its moments of suspense, its detailed descriptions of guerrilla campaigns and its setting in scenic landscapes. But more than its aesthetic values its worth lays in the history and ethnography hidden behind that. The narrative transports us across some moments that dramatically changed the fabric of Ethiopia's state and societies: the repression of the Derg, the emergence of TPLF, the indoctrination of traditional peasant societies by self-assertive urbanites, and the mass migration of Ethiopia's youth to the exile. Moreover, it contains ethnographic passages that provide precious information on the social and cultural life of the societies inhabiting the Semien mountains. Makonnen Araya's work, having a place half way between travel writing and historical chronicle or ethnographic survey, is, thus, called to appeal to a broad readership.

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Wore Negari. A Memoir of an Ethiopian Youth in the Turbulent 70s. By Mohamed Yimam. [N.p.]: Xlivris, 2013. Pp. 222. ISBN: 978-1-4836-9896-0. 60.00 ETB.

If Makonnen Araya's *Negotiating the Lion's Share of Freedom* (see this issue, Book reviews) is a personal chronicle of the rural struggle of EPRP (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party, better known by its Amharic acronym 'Ihapa') against the Derg in the remote mountains of northern Ethiopia, Mohamed Yimam's *Wore Negari* ('Story Teller' in Amharic) is about the EPRP's urban war against the same regime, which had its main theatre of action in Ethiopia's capital, Addis Abeba. Like Makonnen Araya, Mohamed Yimam was caught in the political activism of the 1970s and came to join the largest student organisation of the time, Ihapa, ultimately, taking the same way of exile to the U.S. His book documents from his 'dispassionate' entrance into the EPRP, to his clandestine activities up to his disenchantment from the organisation and the eventual exile to Djibouti and, then, to the U.S.

The book opens with a Preface and an Author's Note. The Preface gives an informative sketch on the socio-political situation of Ethiopia around 1974, the backdrop against which the Derg regime emerged. The Author's Note clarifies key aspects of the book. Firstly, it explains how the text came into being: the manuscript was largely written in 1992 during a time of personal crisis (p. 13; however, the statement later in the Postscript, p. 213, that the book came in reaction to Mezy's tragic murder in 1988 in the U.S. seems contradictory). Then it gives the profile of the protagonists, who are therein described neither as heroes nor as main political actors. Finally, the author explains that his book is unlike other books written on the Derg that have their main foci on important political actors: "My book, declares Mohamed, is different; it is only meant to be a human-interest story about a group of individuals, who in a generic sense, represent all the typical leftist youth of Ethiopia in that period" (p. 15).

The narrative is divided into three parts. Part I bears the significant title "Genesis of Radicalization: Ideological Seduction" and as it can be deduced the focus here is on the political coming of age of Mohamed. Therein, we see him moving away from a humble upbringing in a Muslim family from Dese (northeast Ethiopia) and beginning his political activism, first at the famous

Woizero Sihin (“Siheen” in the book; p. 22) Mikael Secondary School of Dese and, later, at the Jimma Teacher Training Institute. The Woizero Sihin and Jimma Institutes, like many other centres of modern education opened during the last years of Haile Sillase I’s regime, became the arena for the rapid spread of revolutionary ideologies freshly-arrived from Europe, China and America (p. 28) and a sort of jumping off points for many young Ethiopians into radical politics. Then, in the 1973-1974 academic year, “the eve of the most fateful year in Ethiopia” (p. 42), Mohamed joins Haile Sillase I University. Mohamed captures the zeitgeist in this venerable institution: “The university that I came to was a hotbed of revolutionary activity, filled with firebrands and aspiring revolutionaries who saw it more and more as a breeding ground for revolutionaries than as an academic institution” (p. 43). Thereafter he will join an EPRP cell lead by ‘Mesfin’ and ‘Birhanu’ established in Addis and his revolutionary career will be occupied mostly in journalism (writing for *Goh* and *Lab Ader* magazines; p. 75 et passim, 97), the distribution of propaganda leaflets and the indoctrination of workers (p. 67 et passim).

If Part I covers the, relatively peaceful, spring of revolutionary activism, from about 1974 to late 1976, Part II (“Swept Away by the Whirlwind”) covers its autumn, with the outbreak of full-scale war between the military dictatorship and the left wing parties. This is the period that Prof. Andargachew Tiruneh has described as one that “led to the most horrifying carnage in the history of the country” (Andargachew, 1993, p. 211). As it is well known, the EPRP did not survive the onslaught of the military government. Mohamed describes these crucial months when the EPRP was the target of the brutal *asesa* (“search and destroy operations”; p. 115, 128) vividly, with the hindsight of the perspective of a survivor. His narrative shows us a group poorly organized, increasingly isolated, whose fame (largely created by the Derg propaganda machine itself, p. 115) exceeded its actual military might and led by false expectations based on a dreamt of powerful rural guerrilla and imagined urban ‘elite’ commandos (p. 118, 147). Progressively, we see Mohamed’s political and social circle disappear, from Jale Bia to Wolde Ab, to Birhanu to Tesfaye and Arabu.

In Part III (“Prison, Escape and Freedom”) we see the protagonist experiencing prison but managing to escape. Thereafter, he flees to Dese where for a few months he will live the life of a Muslim peasant in the area of Gragn Meda. Later, by using his family circles and by taking the route to Asaita and Afambo, he successfully reaches Djibouti, French territory, which together with Khartoum became one of the main destinations of the Ethiopian exiles.

The chronicle of the White and Red Terrors from an insider’s perspective makes *Wore Negari* worth reading. The book covers interesting aspects from this brief but dramatic chapter in the history of contemporary Ethiopia: the dynamic publishing life during the times of the ‘White Terror’ (p. 61 et passim), the dreadful *asesa* (p. 87), the rivalry between Meison and EPRP (p. 90), the experiences of second rank urban revolutionaries (pp. 189-90) and even the life of Ethiopian exiles in Djibouti (p. 200 et passim). Some shortcomings, however, ought to be noted. While the narrative is easy and un-

complicated the book suffers from poor editing: the English style is at moments clumsy and there are several instances of repeated statements in the same paragraph (e.g. pp. 22-23, 44, 74, 146, 176, 178, 205). Moreover, the text includes alternative spellings of Ethiopic terms (Harawcha and Harawecha, p. 37; Ormo and Oromo, p. 37; Abe Gubegna and Abe Gobena, p. 63; Yohannese and Yohannes, p. 90; Wolde Ab and Wolde Abe p. 166; Affambo and Afambo, pp. 201-02) and a few typos (“in in”, p. 24; “fill” for “feel”, p. 49). The index is by far very meagre and it only contains a handful of the names mentioned in the text.

Yet, what appears more puzzling from this narrative of revolution and discontent is the author’s own self-portrait, the way Mohamed the Yale graduate has come to depict Mohamed the revolutionary. This portrait is unambiguously provided in several passages from the book. Therein emerges the image of a reluctant revolutionary, a hesitant fighter, and a passive actor (see another review of the same book, Haile Tolla, 2013). For instance, in the Author’s Note Mohamed says of himself and of his peer: “We followed orders, completed our assignments, participated in committees, and were passive actors” (p. 14). Later, in a chapter explicitly entitled “Membership in a Cell: A Reluctant Revolutionary”, the author describes his entrance into an EPRP revolutionary cell in 1974 as the product of sheer manipulation by Birhanu, a revolutionary cadre that is dubbed “the hidden hand behind our transformations” (p. 52, also 55). Whilst working as a CELU (Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Union) cadre in Wonji Sugar factory he has a moment of doubt:

As I lay down on the floor, staring at the ceiling, I wondered to myself if I had what it takes to take up arms. I instinctively reacted negatively to the concept of armed struggle. I did not really want to commit my life for the cause, not yet (p. 72).

But with hindsight it can be asked, how could Mohamed, in 1992, remember so vividly that minute of doubt experienced during a summer night back in 1975?

The narrative also includes several moments when Mohamed the Yale graduate delves on the life of Mohamed the revolutionary. The tone is always judgemental, yet at the same time it appears as apologetic for the person and accusatory against the political organisation. This is exemplified in the following passage:

To this day, I have never been able to clearly say why I did what I did. It was a life of deceit, but I was doing that to myself and not to anyone else. I must have had an inner urge to prove my courage and gain recognition, so much so that I was willing to engage in actions that were incredibly stupid. (p. 121)

Or another one:

After I left Ethiopia, I often felt that I had come out of my past connections with EPRP relatively guiltless. I had never recruited anyone to

join the party; I have never caused the death of anyone. (p. 155)

The party was a monster (“Most of its members were good and noble, but the party was bad and dysfunctional”, p. 216), the individual a pawn trapped within a murderous, abstract, structure.

We may understand why Mohamed has crafted the narrative as he did: after his failed revolution he started a new life in the U.S., achieving a respectable position professionally and socially (p. 211, 215). The narrative thus has a sort of cathartic function, scourging a past life full of mistakes and deceit and embracing a new one deemed righteous and successful. But while serving such a personal purpose can be deemed lawful, in doing so the *wore negari* fails to comply with his chief aim, that of telling a veracious history: Is the book a product of truthful memorizing or is it rather a place where fiction, hopes and memories are too much intertwined for us to know who Mohamed the revolutionary really was?

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The age of dictators is long over in the African continent but yet their memory is still present in today’s African societies. The horrors these figures provoked still daunt their victims as well as the younger generations. Moreover, some of their legacies, in one way or the other have also survived the collapse of their regimes. In the case of Ethiopia the crimes of the past dictatorship received due trial only recently: in 2006 a court of the People’s Democratic Republic of Ethiopia found Mengistu—himself tried in absentia—and dozens of Derg officials guilty of genocide. That Mengistu’s rule is widely discussed in today’s Ethiopia is attested by the book under review, which was first published in 1994 A.M. and it has recently reached its third edition.

Gennet Ayele is a journalist with a long track record. From 1993 to 1997

she directed Gennet Enterprise, the publisher of such magazines as *Gennat* and *Beza*. Since 1997, from her home in Paris she has been writing for different media, including *Novel De Addis*. The book under review, written in Amharic, is based on interviews made by Gennet herself to Mengistu Haile-Mariam and to other top officials of the Derg regime. Gennet met Mengistu during the latter's exile in Zimbabwe and she interviewed the Derg officials in the Ethiopian prisons where they are confined in. Hers is thus a pioneer contribution to one of the most controversial periods in modern Ethiopian history.

Yälätänant kolonel Məngəštu Haylä-Maryam təzətawoč focuses on the Ethiopian Revolution, from its genesis and eruption till its end, thus comprehending a seventeen-year long dramatic period that is today remembered by the bloodshed it provoked as well as by the humanitarian and political crises that punctuated its development. The text is divided into two parts. The first part, entitled "Interviews of officials", deals with the most important chapters of the Derg through the eyes of some of its officials: from the dawn of the Revolution up to its demise, including the genesis of the Derg, the dethronement of Emperor Haile Sillase I, the summary execution of sixty government officials, the period of Red Terror and the coup de d'état. The second part, which covers more than three quarters of the book, is an exhaustive interview to Mengistu Haile-Mariam during his exile in Harare.

As indicated in the prelude of the book, Gennet's central concern is "to investigate and display the various secret issues for the sake of the readers" (p. II). The breadth of her interviews is commendable. Her book elucidates some hidden enigmas of the Derg, such as the burial place of Emperor Haile Sillase. Mengistu and other top figures confirm that the corpse was buried in secret in the Addis Ababa Be'ata church. The book also shows the frail ground on which Mengistu built his regime, where the top figures had a very poor knowledge of the very socialist theories they were embracing. Besides, the work confirms a common feature of Ethiopian political culture, which is the unwillingness of its leaders to hold responsibility for their mistakes.

Yet, several problems punctuate the work. Firstly, the book suffers from a poor editing. An obvious example of this is the lack of table of contents. In addition, some of the titles of the chapters or subchapters do not correspond with the content of the text they present. Thus, in the preface the author puts the following words of Mengistu as a subtitle "the TPLF cannot capture me even my corpse body" (p. i), but the ensuing text is not correlated with it. A sub-title is dedicated to the execution of sixty influential figures, but the paragraph (p. 146) deals about another issue, the last meeting of the National 'Shengo'.

More importantly, however, the book fails to shed light onto some crucial chapters of the Derg history and sometimes focuses on irrelevant topics.

Thus, the author tries to enquire into the personality of Prof. Mesfin Wolde-Mariam through interviews with Derg officials (pp. 66-68) but without it being clear why this excursion is important for the topic covered in the book. Yet, when the narrative focuses on the withdrawal from Ethiopia of the Ethiopian Jews, the Beta Esrael (pp. 98-99), the author fails to push Mengistu to explain how such a crucial episode as the Moses campaign was carried out. This gap, however, was corrected with the publication of the second volume. There, Mengistu explains Gennet that while Operation Solomon was conducted without he being informed of it, Operation Moses was formally organized with his direct approval. This statement by Mengistu is all the more surprising since he sent his special envoy to the London Conference with EPDRF in order, among other issues, to negotiate on the fate of the Ethiopian Jews. At some point in the book it also becomes clear that Gennet had problems in making Mengistu answer to her questions. Thus, when the dictator is asked about the Ethio-Somalian war (pp. 240-243), he shifts the topic to talk about the crises in the north of the country Eritrea and Tigray. Another interesting episode at the dusk of the Derg, the flight of Mengistu and his family to Zimbabwe, which probably happened with the help of the United States ("US admits helping Mengistu escape", 1999), remains uncommented.

Some contradictions and historically dubious facts also punctuate the text. Thus, while Mengistu (p. 25) informs that the total figure of the founders of the Derg on June 28, 1974 was of 120, the author brings that number down to 109 (pp. 100-105), without providing evidence for such a divergence. Similarly, Mengistu speaks of the massacre of sixty Imperial figures as if it had been decided by a meeting of the Derg Committee (p. 162) but this episode is well known to have been decided at the Meskel Flower Hotel and only by a bunch of Derg members, and then submitted to Derg members (Zenebe, 1996, p. 100). Some contradictions may also reflect the wavering personality of Mengistu. Thus, in vol. 1 (p. 168) Mengistu informs Gennet that the death of Hayle Sillase was a motive of joy for the Derg members but in vol. 2 (p. 21) he changes his statement and says they were vexed by this event. Similarly, in vol. 1 the exiled dictator praises Michael Aman Andom as a great military hero (whom he refers to by his nickname "Nr. 1"; p. 141) but in the second volume he underrates the same figure (p. 86).

Some contradictions, however, cannot be attributed to Gennet's historical shortcomings but to the grievances that have been nurtured throughout the years between Mengistu and his former officials. Thus, some important officials now in Ethiopian jails blame the defeat of the Ethiopian army directly on Mengistu, who is accused of favouring quantity over quality and they use the metaphor "the fish starts its spoil from brain" (p. 40). But Mengistu defends his role and enumerates internal (his army commanders) and external (the USSR and USA) factors to account for the downfall of his dictatorship (pp. 219-238).

Last but not the least, the author could be partially blamed for missing a precious opportunity to cast light on some of the most sinister episodes of the Derg, which had—partially—already been discussed by such writers as Riccardo Orizio (2002), Addis Hiwot (1975), and Andargachew Tiruneh (1993). So, what about the killer of the novelist Bealu Girma? The officials interviewed put the blame on Mengistu and on the executioners Shimels Mazengia and Tesfaye Wolde-Sillase (p. 59). Mengistu, in his turn, denies any involvement in the crime and even insists he heard of it weeks after it had been committed. A similar thing occurs when facing the case of Haile Fida: two controversial ideas emerge from the book, without the author letting the readers know which one is correct. Gennet focuses much effort in shedding light on the Red Terror but forgets about the so-called White Terror. But even concerning the Red Terror central episodes are not commented, such as the Hawzen massacre, the last meeting of the National Shengo or even the sheer number of victims that it provoked; Mengistu is able to remember all the victims of the White Terror (p. 206) but he is oblivious about the fate of those who fell under the Red Terror, and he repeatedly answers to Gennet with the same sentence, “I cannot remember” (but he has vivid memories from his early childhood, e.g. vol. 2, p. 12).

All in all, the book suffers from a lack in historical depth. One is inclined to argue, with hindsight, that the journalistic background of the author prevented her from acquiring a grasp of the economical, political and religious context that witnessed the emergence of the Derg and of its main political figures. Yet, it is regrettable that primary sources and secondary literature (e.g. Andargachew Tiruneh, 1990; Clapham 1988) were not used to cross check the interviews.

Yälätəna kolonel Məngəštu Həylä-Maryam Təzətawoç is an ambitious work but yet one that fails in its goals. Neither the personality of Mengistu comes clearer to the reader nor his *təzətawoç* help in clarifying the Derg’s tortuous history. One is inclined here to paraphrase the judgement made in *The Independent* over Orizio’s famous *Talk of the Devil* (Smith, 2003): Self-delusion and the capacity to draw others into their fantasies are two of the most striking attributes shared by dictators. But sadly Gennet has not been a consistently tough or challenging interrogator of Mengistu Haile-Mariam not to let him win the upper hand. Her book, like Orizio’s, is thus “a testament to the limitations of this kind of journalism, which mingles reportage and personal anecdotes with interviews that are often decidedly anticlimactic” (ibid.). Therefore, such a book should be read with utmost care. The reading should be done with the help of other historical studies where personal memories of historical figures are buttressed on sound archival work.

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Manacled – Poems. By Assefa Alemu. Addis Ababa: Yodahe Printing Press, 2012. Pp. 60. 20.00 ETB.

Manacled, the debut of Assefa Alemu, is a collection of 49 poems selected from those poems written during the first decade of his poetic career, from 2002 to 2012. They are his attempts to 'shape his feelings and observations into poems', as the poet says in the Introduction. They 'carry marks of experiences' of the poet, giving the readers not only the thrills of pleasure but also the stir for contemplation.

Assefa Alemu is teaching at the Department of English Language and Literature in the University of Gondar, Ethiopia. 'Manacled', as his debut to the publishing world, deserves praise and appreciation. As Yohannes Asfaw, one of his reviewers says, Assefa's poems, 'imbued with the potion that rips our consciousness open' (quoted from the blurb) are written in subtle but touching language. A few poems in the collection are genuine 'sobs and sighs' coming out from the depth of the poet's heart that they move the readers' hearts to tears.

Ethiopian literature in English, especially the genre of poetry, is undoubtedly making its glorious return, after a set back of a few decades following

the fall of monarchy. It is very hopeful and encouraging to see young writers come out with a rejuvenated spirit to enrich the field of English literature. Poets like Solomon Deressa, Tokola Hagos, Fekade Azeze, Wossen Mulatu, Lulit Kebede, Assefa Alemu and a number of others tried to enrich this genre with their valuable contributions.

The poems in this collection have no specific coordinating theme but are on varying themes like patriotism, love, death, identity crisis, moral indignation, frustrations in life, self-conflicts and so on. The hangover of the bygone days of slavery and bondage is reflected in many of the poems of Assefa Alemu. However, the titular poem seems to be expressing the dominating theme of the sense of being manacled, as the poet says: The field to run is vast / The possibilities to become infinite / The sky to fly is wide / The freedom to enjoy absolute / But we are manacled horses in an open land (p. 10). The lines remind us Rousseau who said, "Man is born free but everywhere he is in chains."

There are a few poems on 'death' which evoke a feel of reading the poems of Emily Dickinson. While the American poetess, in a sarcastic tone, welcomes death as a bridegroom, the poet of 'Not Yet' shuns away from the untimely death, like a hesitant bridegroom, saying, "Look! It is still noon for me / Too early to go to bed / I ain't tired yet / I have a desert to cross / a mountain to climb / an ocean to swim / Before I retired to my rest" (p. 44). The poet expresses his concern over the brevity of 'A Life Span' which is "Like your shadow / Taller at the morn / Stands short / Under your feet at noon / Trodden over / With the dust your feet picked / Then, covered" (p. 59).

The conflict within the self is evident in most of the poems of Assefa Alemu. Even the first poem in the collection begins with the line, "I am my own worst enemy." However, the poet later realizes that his 'enemy that stood high above' him 'was not my enemy / But me, yes, it was me" (The Colossus pp. 30-31). At times the conflict even leads to a sort of reconciliation and resolution, as the speaker in 'Getting Old' says, "I cannot be of confident or certain / Of anything I neither experienced nor seen" (p. 49), whether it is Heaven or Hell.

'Mob Politics' is a poem that clearly presents the moral indignation of the poet against the fights between 'Brothers on the left; and brothers on the right', where the common man stands in a dilemma without knowing which is left and which is right, or to whom to support. In many of his poems, the poet employs objects from nature, like the sun, the moon, the wind and the clouds as powerful symbols of the forces of nature that control human life on this planet. This may be an old technique of expressing the 'feelings recollected' of a poet, but Assefa Alemu did it in a natural way without any artificiality in expressions. In some of his poems, he cleverly utilized even the scope of graphics (*Yearning of Heart*) and its effect cannot be explained but should be experienced.

Despite all limitations in language competence confessed by the poet in his Introduction, the poems in this anthology give us an enjoyable reading. Assefa's sincere efforts to give vent to his poetic talent, especially through a

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foreign language, are highly appreciable. I wish all the best for the poet and his work.

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