

The Unsung and Forgotten Ethiopian Heroes and Heroines

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Too many to remember and call their names
Heroes and heroines of utmost altruism
Who fell on behalf of a noble struggle and
Who gave their lives for justice, freedom, and
Equality for all nationalities of Ethiopia

Some of them were buried in shallow graves
In ravines and mountainsides
Others may have enjoyed a proper burial by their comrades
Yet, they too were buried in unmarked fox holes

But, thousands upon thousands have also fallen in the cities
Murdered by the sadistic, cruel and barbaric Derg forces
In front of their houses
In the face of their families
In a public square
For the exhibition of a terrified and traumatized people

Those fallen heroes and heroines of Assimba
Were saluted by their comrades
As testified by Kahsay Abraha
Asmamaw Hailu & Solomon Gebreselassie

The ones that met torture and death in the hands of the Derg
Are now remembered by Nesibu Sibhat
And their alias names documented by Konjit Berhan in *Murkogna*
They are remembered, just remembered!

Ironically, some of the unsung heroes and heroines
Were killed by their own comrades
Some of the latter were brainwashed by ideology
And some in perfect camouflage
The victim heroes in this block are also remembered
By Ayalew Yimam and Hiwot Teffera

All of the above unsung and forgotten heroes and heroines
Are of recent memory
And there are multitude of heroes and plethora of heroines
Who are antecedent to the recent heroes

In fact, who introduced altruistic sacrifice and
And unparalleled determination
In the annals of Ethiopian history

Ethiopia is notorious for having too many epic heroes
In its ancient and medieval history
As well as in the relatively modern period
The hundreds of Agazian heroes and heroines of the remote past
And the thousands of the medieval to late nineteenth century
Who fell for Ethiopia and its people as well as its independence

No wonder, ancient historians and poets
Like Homer and Herodotus write about Ethiopians
With admirable tone and verbiage
And other historian by the name Diodorus Siculus
Praised Ethiopia by singing for its heroes
'Many have attempted to conquer Ethiopia
But none was successful', he said

Some Ethiopian heroes were eulogized
Like Fitewrari Gebeyehu at Adwa
And some like Alula, Balcha, and Menelik
Who did not fall, but exhibited heroic leadership
Are celebrated and honored for eternity

And those selfless leaders who were sacrificed
On the altars of Ethiopia's defense frontiers
Are best exemplified by Tewodros and Yohannes
And they are also celebrated and honored for eternity

In the 1930s too, thousands of unsung heroes fell
In defense of Ethiopia
Against the Italian fascists
One, by the name Zerai Deress, Eritrean by birth
But Ethiopian by sentiment and patriotic zeal
Confronted the Fascists on their home turf
In the heart of Rome

His comrades, namely Belai Zeleke, Hailemariam Mamo, and Seyoum Mengesha
Engaged and fought the Italians in guerrilla warfare
On Ethiopian soil, in Gojjam, Shewa, and Tigray
Abebe Aregai routed the Fascists in central Ethiopia
While Desta Damtew was sacrificed in southern Ethiopia

Thanks to the Ethiopian timeless, rugged, and majestic mountains
That served as formidable defense edifices
And the jungles as hiding places and camouflages
In which the indomitable spirit of all Ethiopians reside
And the ghosts of all the heroes and heroines sojourn

Of the last Ethiopian heroes that fell
Are the gallant Ethiopian students
Equipped with ideology, commitment, and selflessness
And cognizant of Fanon's motto
'Each generation, out of relative obscurity,
Must find its mission, and fulfil it or betray it'
They chose to fulfil their mission
They chose to confront the status quo
In order to bring about fundamental change
By doing away the feudal order
And establish a better, prosperous, and democratic Ethiopia

Of those heroes and heroines
Were men and women with insight and vision
Determined to pay any kind of sacrifice
Brave enough to stand on behalf of the poor and the oppressed

And the first sacrificial lamb was Tilahun Gizaw
The charismatic student leader
Who indefatigably led the home front under the banner of USUAA,
University Students Union of Addis Ababa
And his motto was: 'We will never flinch even an inch'

The day Tilahun was shot my friends and I were at Amist Kilo
Watching TV at the Mekane-Iyesus bar
And we learned about the incident via USUAA flyer
We rushed to the Haile Selassie Hospital
To witness firsthand the condition of our comrade
Dozens of university students were already there
We jumped over the fence into the Hospital
And saw the body of Tilahun lying on a stretcher
His body was covered with a blanket
Except his foot in socks
He was motionless, dead and silenced!
We took him to the Sidist Kilo campus,
To arrange his funeral and pay him the final tribute
Goitom Berhe crying, all women crying in chorus
Still vivid in my imagination, as if it happened yesterday

Tilahun, however, was not alone
He was supported, followed, and his ideas embraced
By thousands of students beyond Sidist Kilo and Arat Kilo
To the high schools in Addis Ababa
To the Public Health College in Gonder
To the Agriculture College in Alemaya

Tilahun was also flanked and accompanied by many prominent student leaders
Who played a major role in the Ethiopian Student Movement
And some of these are
Berhane Meskel Reda, Gebru Gebrewold
Zeru Kihishen, Yoahannes Berhane
Walelign Mekonnen, our idol in the Question of Nationalities
Marta Mebrahtu, our Angela Davis and a female paragon
Walelign and Marta and their other comrades
Were destined to fall in a flying object
As if to announce their struggle to the universe
Thank you Gedion Wolde-Amanuel for remembering Walelign and Marta

There were also other student heroes
Who fell at different times and different corners of Ethiopia
Although some have survived against all odds
And they are
Berhane Iyasu, Tselote Hizkias
Ghidey Gebrewahid, Abay Abreha
Habte Giorgis, Taye Gurumu
Yohannes Sibahtu, Goitom Berhe
Haile Gebre-Yohannes, Seyoum Wolde-Yohannes
Berhane Zergaw, Yirga Tessema
And of course, there was also Nega Ayele, my professor and my mentor

Some of these, I had a chance to meet
Others, I never met
But, all, nonetheless, were my mentors
To who I bow and salute as a form of respect

But there were also others who were ahead of me at campus
Some same entry like me to Addis Ababa University
All affiliated to a grand club known as USUAA
And in unison, we formed a miniature Ethiopia
And that little Ethiopia was forged and fashioned
In the image of the student movement

All these heroes were fearless and dedicated Ethiopians
Staunch and determined
In spite of the guns and bayonets of the Fetno Derash, police, and the Imperial Guard
Of these heroes,
Meles Tecele, my senior and my friend
Agerie Mihret and Getachew Kumsa, my bodies at Sidist Kilo
All became victims of the Derg vultures

All the militant heroes, following the outbreak of the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution
Will go separate ways and for different political agendas
Zeru Gesesse fell in Tigray
While Aboma Mitiku became a martyr at Oromia

Modern Ethiopian history is full of glory
But also of melancholy
Too many sacrifices impossible to bear

Paradoxically, the death toll is a sign of rebirth
A constant renewal of the larger society
And renaissance of the Ethiopian nation

A country, whose children entered a covenant and
A social contract Ethiopian style
Sort of general consensus
To sacrifice in order for Ethiopia's unity and sovereignty to cement

Ethiopia was above everything else for these heroes and heroines
But it looks that the motherland has forgotten its own children
I like to give her the benefit of the doubt, though
May be she is suffering from amnesia or dementia
After all, she is too old; an ancient nation

But I did not want to be cynical and hopeless
And that is why I scribbled this piece
After an interrupted sleep in the middle of the night

I hope one day these unsung heroes and heroines
Will enjoy official recognition
So that they be remembered
By the present and succeeding generations

I want my heroes and heroines to be reborn
To resurrect like Jesus and Osiris

That could, however, be a fantasy, detached from reality
So I have decided to settle for
A monument for the heroes at a junction of avenues
In the heart of Addis Ababa
For everybody to see and to witness
And say, 'these Ethiopians have died for us'!

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