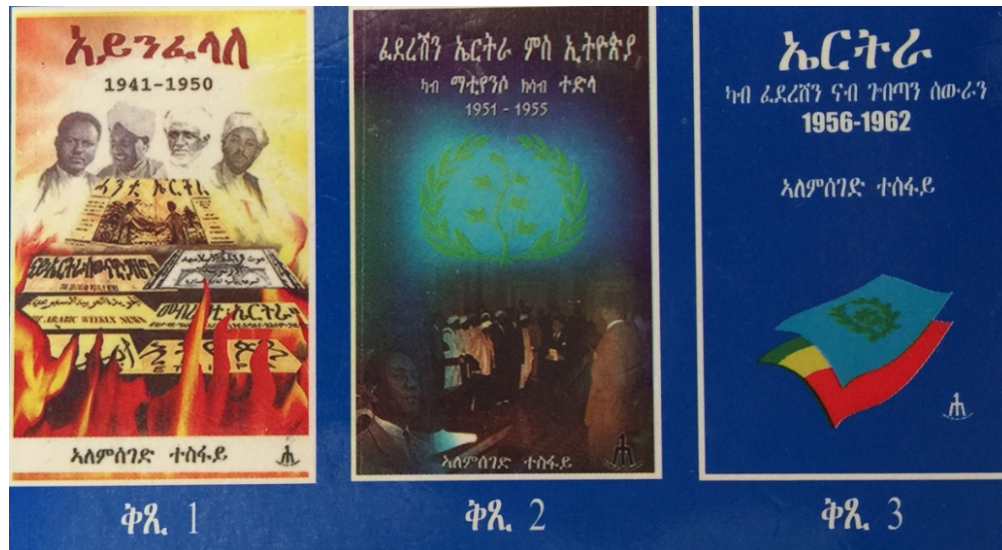


## Alemseged Tesfai's Trilogy of Books, A Must Read for All Eritreans

Book Review by Gebre Hiwet Tesfagiorgis\*



### 1. Political History Based on Meticulous Research

Alemseged Tesfai, a renowned Eritrean writer, has authored three history books in the Tigrinya language. In this review, I refer to the three publications collectively as his trilogy in the sense that the three, though separate, are interrelated. The content of the trilogy is primarily political history of Eritrea, covering 1941 to 1962, the formative decades of Eritrean political consciousness and nationalism. The first book is aptly titled, *Aynfalale 1941-1950* (loose translation, “No Disunity”), 611 pages. The second is *Federation Ertra ms EtioPia ... 1951-1955* (Federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia), 600 pages, and the third one, *Ertra kab Federation nab gobeTan Sewran, 1956-1962* (Eritrea: from Federation to Annexation and Revolution), 743 pages. They are published by Hdri Publishers, Asmara, Eritrea in 2002, 2005 and 2016, respectively.<sup>1</sup>

The trilogy, the result of years’ research using multiple sources, is political history at its best. The writer’s sources of information include: colonial government documents (the British Military Administration, Imperial Ethiopian Government, and Eritrean Government and Administration), court documents, minutes and reports of the Eritrean Assembly, correspondence between embassy personnel and their respective home governments, reports, books and other publications of scholars, newspapers and periodicals of the period, interviews with main political actors, dignitaries and ordinary Eritreans of the time who were alive during the writing of the books.

<sup>1</sup> The three books will henceforth be referred to, for short, as *Aynfalale*, *Federation ms Ertra*, and *Ertra kab Federation*, respectively.

Relying on information gathered from such extensive sources, the writer objectively and dispassionately weaves a narrative that is compelling. That, of course, is the Eritrean narrative, which at the risk of oversimplification, can be summarized as follows: Having been colonized by Italy for over fifty years, starting in 1890, the people of Eritrea should have been entitled to self-determination and national independence following the defeat of colonizer Italy in World War II, as was the typical outcome with colonized African and other peoples. Instead, the Western powers imposed an ill-conceived, faulty federation with neighboring Ethiopia which did not reflect the wishes of the Eritreans. Once Ethiopia gained this foothold, it gradually and systematically eroded Eritrean political rights, abrogated the federation and annexed Eritrea in 1962. The people of Eritrea were left with no option but to conduct an armed struggle that resulted in winning independence and establishing national sovereignty in 1991. This narrative is consistent with the doctrine of African *uti possidetis*.<sup>2</sup> The Eritrean narrative is in contrast to that of “Greater Ethiopia” which asserts that Eritrea was an integral part of Ethiopia before being colonized by Italy, and that the federation and eventual full union with Ethiopia in 1962 comprised the restoration of a lost territory.

Alemseged’s trilogy is special, and is distinguishable in several aspects from other publications on the political history of Eritrea covering the same period<sup>3</sup>: (1) It is written in Tigrinya, the major language in Eritrea, thus, making it accessible to ordinary Eritreans, (2) its extensiveness, depth and quality of analysis; (3) the multiplicity of sources of information consulted, and (4) its tendency to be an objective and dispassionate rather than polemical story. The writer presents a well-balanced, compelling narrative supported by meticulously and objectively researched information from multiple sources. That is why the trilogy is a must read for all Eritreans.

## **2. The Right Person for the Right Project**

Alemseged was the right person with the right qualifications to undertake such a massive project. He earned his bachelor’s and master’s degrees in law from then Haile Sellassie University in Addis Ababa and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA, in 1969 and 1972, respectively. He pursued a doctorate degree at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA, completed all course requirements, and went back to Eritrea and Ethiopia to collect data for his dissertation. Thus, he had the level of academic preparation needed to make him a competent scholar capable of undertaking such a massive research-based study.

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<sup>2</sup> The African *uti possidetis* is a reference to the principle adopted in 1964 by the then Organization of African Unity (OAU) which declares sovereignty and inviolability of colonially inherited boundaries regardless of pre-colonial territorial configurations. The principle has acquired a status of international law.

<sup>3</sup> Some of these publications are: Travaskis, GKN, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition* (1960); Jordan Gebre Medhin, *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea* (1993); Bereket Habteselassie, *Conflict and Intervention in the Horn of Africa* (1980); Tekeste Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia: The Federal Experience* (1997); Ogbazghi Yohannes, *Eritrea: A Pawn in World Politics* (1991); Gebre-Ad Habtu, *Ethiopia and Eritrea* (1993); Tekie Fessehatsion, *Eritrea from Federation to Annexation* (working Paper, 1990); Ruth Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence: Resistance and Nationalism, 1941-93* (1995); Zewdie Reta, *Ye Ertra Gudai, 1941-1963* (in Amharic, 1990).

Reading Alemseged's trilogy reminded me of Professor Harvey Goldberg, the great historian and political activist who taught at the University of Wisconsin in the 1970s and 1980s, the timeframe within which the author attended that university. Harvey Goldberg was a dynamic, charismatic professor whose areas of expertise included political history of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe including the French Revolution. He delivered his lectures in a large hall, standing-room only, in a dramatic fashion without the aid of any notes. He was a great story-teller. When he lectured on the French Revolution, for example, he placed emphasis on the people and the communes. His reputation on campus was so widespread that attendants at his lectures included not only history majors taking his course for credit, but also others, both undergraduate and graduate students. He was particularly admired by students from Third-World countries for his progressive stance. Alemseged was his student, took some of his courses, and had him on his dissertation committee. The professor occasionally held out-of-class informal discussions on current political affairs. Several African graduate students at the university, including the reviewer, were regular attendant of his lectures and discussions. Little did we know at that time that four decades later, Alemseged will produce a great scholarly work that tells the story of his own people.

In 1974, Alemseged Tesfai went back to Eritrea and Ethiopia to gather data for his dissertation. Instead of coming back to Wisconsin to complete his doctorate program, he made the unselfish decision to join the Eritrean armed struggle for independence.<sup>4</sup> For the next seventeen years, he participated in the different aspects of the struggle leading a simple life under harsh conditions with fellow Eritrean combatants. His contributions were mainly in the areas of information, education and training, and publication. And it was during the armed struggle that he started to write reports, short stories and dramas about life as a freedom fighter and his observations of lives of ordinary Eritreans. Thus, this humbling experience and closeness to his people when combined with his academic preparedness made Alemseged a well-rounded scholar to undertake such a major study.

The author states in his brief bio on the cover of *Ertra kab Federation* that after serving in post-independence Eritrean government in various capacities, he spent the following decades in writing the trilogy. It was indeed a worthwhile undertaking, as the trilogy of books, is a compelling story of the people of Eritrea eloquently told by one of their own.<sup>5</sup>

### **3. Major Themes That Emerge from the Trilogy**

It is beneficial to extract the major themes that emerge from the trilogy of books not only as a means of summarizing the essence of the narrative but also as points of reference and from which to draw lessons for current and future generations of Eritreans.

**3.1. Persistent Struggle to Preserve the Unity of Eritrea and Its People.** Right from the beginning (1941), when the British Military Administration (BMA) was established following the

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<sup>4</sup> Other Eritrean graduate students who attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison and either joined the armed struggle or went to serve in the post-independence government of Eritrea are: Stefanos Seyoum, Teame Beyene, Gebreselassie Yoseph, Gebremicael Mengistu, Paulos Tesfagiorgis and Woldai Futur.

<sup>5</sup> Credit also goes to the several assistants and enabling research centers the author graciously acknowledges.

defeat of the Italians, the British design was to partition Eritrea into two, based on religious and ethnic factors. The western, lowland region (*Metahit*) to join with the Sudan, then a British colony; and the highland region (*Kebesa*) with Ethiopia. Reading *Aynfalale* and *Federation Ertra*, one is struck with the incessant intrigues and machinations perpetrated by the BMA officials, aided by their scholars, to divide the country along religious and/or ethnic lines to convince the people themselves, Western powers and the international community at large that partition was the only solution for Eritrea. The height of that effort was reflected in the Bevin-Sforza plan of 1949 that was presented to the UN but, was rejected. Even more impressive in the accounts in the books is the diligence of the people and their political leaders in rejecting the British design and in preserving the unity of the country. Their activities and actions at different points in time attest to this effort.

The Association of Love of Country (*Mahber FiQri Hager*) was established as a semi-political organization in May 1941 to advocate for rights of Eritreans in the face of continuing mistreatment by Italians who were still in positions of economic and political power. The convening of the *Biet Giorgis* conference in November 1946 was an attempt by the members of that association (some inclined to support independence, others varying degrees of union with Ethiopia) to arrive at a unified compromise position, rather than diverge into two or more political camps. That attempt, unfortunately, was thwarted by Ethiopia's interference (*Anfalale*, pp 173-184).

In February 1950, following the assassination of a prominent pro-independence person (Nesredin) by unionist elements, a peaceful rally was conducted in conjunction with the burial ceremony on the streets of Asmara. That rally escalated into an out-of-control major violence assuming political and religious overtones resulting in about 50 deaths and over 200 injuries. Realizing the failure of the BMA police to control the situation, prominent citizens comprised of 31 Christians and 31 Muslims, headed by their respective religious heads (*Abun* and *Mufti*) congregated and formed a peace and reconciliation committee. The joint committee organized a peace rally at which emphasis was placed on unity, rather than allowing political differences to morph into religious conflicts. Thus, averting a potentially greater explosive confrontation (*Aynfalale*, pp. 437-449 and *Ertra kab Federation*, pp. 44-48).

When the Muslim League of Eritrea (*al rabiTa al Islamia*) party was formed in January 1947, the "Muslim" designation was just a rallying cry to counter the emphasis on Orthodox Christianity on the part of the Unionist Party. Otherwise, the goal of the League was full independence of Eritrea as a whole (*Aynefalale* pp. 185-207). Similarly, the goal of the Unionist Party remained primarily union with Ethiopia of Eritrea as a whole. Even at the height of the political division into two major camps in the late 1950s – the Eritrean Independence Block (*Quetsri Natsenet Ertra*) and the Unionist Party—the respective goals of the two camps, in the face of the persistent British campaign to partition the country, were focused on Eritrea as a whole.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The only exception was that in September 1949, Tedla Bairu, as the spokesman of the Unionist Party, upon arm-twisting by Ethiopia's prime minister, who saw the British design of partition gaining momentum, expressed at the UN that his party would not oppose partition, to the consternation of other Unionist leaders.

During the initial contacts to form the Liberal Progressive Party (LPP) (*maHber natsnetn Ebyetn ertra: ertra n'ertrawyan*) in 1944, the initiators reported that they first fed at a Muslim's home on chicken slaughtered by a Muslim, and then went to a Christian's home and fed on chicken slaughtered by a Christian. The significance becomes clear when one considers the fact that at the time it was considered a taboo to feed on an animal slaughtered by a member of the other faith. That means, the initiators overcame this taboo in the interest of unity. When the party was officially announced in February 1947, with independence of Eritrea as its goal, the president-elect of the party (*Raesi Tessema Asberom*), emphasized the importance of unity between the Christian and Muslim populations of Eritrea and the need to struggle in unity (*Aynfalale*, pp. 224-230). Representatives of the Muslim League were in attendance. Given the same goal -- Eritrean independence -- the two parties subsequently merged their activities to form the Eritrean Independence Block (*Quetsri Natsnet*).

When the Eritrean Liberation Movement (*Haraka or Mahber ShowAte*) was established towards the end of 1958, its constitution emphasized that unity is a precondition for independence; that the people of Eritrea should reject religious division and work in unity and brotherhood towards the independence and liberation of the whole of Eritrea (*Ertra kab Federation*, p. 410).

**3.2 Acceptance of the Federal Act by All Parties, albeit with Reluctance.** One of the main strengths of the trilogy is perhaps the amount of evidence the author presents which clearly shows that the disposition of former Italian-colony of Eritrea was reflective of outside interests, notably those of the United States, Great Britain and their client Ethiopia, and not the wishes and aspirations of the people of Eritrea themselves. The UN Federal Act of 1950 was billed as a compromise between the demands for independence and complete union with Ethiopia. In addition to the lack of Eritrean input, the Act was defective in that it was a federation of Eritrea under Ethiopia, not a federation of Eritrea and Ethiopia. Stated differently, the Act federated Eritrea under the crown of Ethiopia rather than as a party in a normal federation of two autonomous units.

Once the federation was enacted, however, all political parties had grudgingly accepted it as a compromise between their respective ultimate goals. The Unionists viewed it as a stepping stone towards the goal of complete union with Ethiopia; the Independentists (the Block) saw it as the minima to the ultimate goal of independence. In fact, the Block formally changed its name from *The Eritrean Block for the Independence of Eritrea* to *Eritrean Democratic Party* to reflect the changed reality (*Aynfalale*, p. 522). Both parties reveled in the defeat of the sinister British design to partition Eritrea and thought the fact that Eritrea will remain intact was in and of itself a victory. Thus, they pledged unity and cooperation in implementing the federation in good faith (*Federation Ertra*, pp. 20-30).

Of course, overzealous Ethiopian government officials, including the Emperor, and his representatives in Eritrea undermined the federation right from the beginning, employed bribery, intimidation, and other tactics to abrogate the federation and make Eritrea as just one of the units comprising Ethiopia in 1962.

**3.3 Loose Organization, Lack of Strong Leadership and Conviction.** The time frame covered by the trilogy, 1941 to 1962, was the period the political struggle of the people of Eritrea for their



democratic rights and self-determination assumed organized forms. The author shows that a few political parties were established over the period. But, they were loose organizations with vaguely defined, and at times, changing goals. Membership tended to be based on loyalty and allegiance to traditional leaders rather than understanding of and conviction to the ideas and goals of the parties.

People in leadership positions, by and large, lacked effective organization skills and ability to provide needed strategies. They were rather deficient in clarifying the goals of their respective parties and in inspiring the membership to advance party causes. Many of those who assumed leadership positions had limited educational opportunities, but as traditional leaders, they wielded strong influence on their followers. Many of the leaders were tempted by bribes and other personal gains and did not hesitate to switch parties or change allegiance when it suited them. For example, at the height of political activities in the late 1940s when the political parties converged into two distinct camps -- The Unionist Party and the Independence Block (comprised of Independent Muslim League, Liberal Progressive Party and Pro-Italy Party) -- the majority of Eritreans (about 75%) supported independence, the goal pursued by the Block. But, the Block was not able to take advantage of this fact due to splits and switching of sides. In fact, desertions from both the League and LPP paved the way for the federal act and eventual march to annexation of Eritrea by Ethiopia (*Ertra kab Federation*, pp. 380-384).

In addition to bribes and other personal gains that tempted leaders, there were, of course, those highly coveted titles of nobility.<sup>7</sup> The emperor of Ethiopia, and his surrogates, dangled those titles in front of the political leaders and nobility of the period, and he generously bestowed those titles upon those who could be persuaded, or were already willing, to do Ethiopia's bidding. For example, in June 1962, 112 Eritreans were granted nobility titles and 24 police officers were granted military titles ranging from major to general (*Ertra kab Federation*, p. 573 and 576).

It took the emergence of the Eritrean Liberation Movement (Haraka) in 1958 operating in secret cells, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) in 1961, and the Eritrea Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) in the early 1970s, to conduct the struggle of the Eritrean people at higher organizational forms, with better leadership and conviction to eventually realize the goals of independence and sovereignty of Eritrea.

**3.4 Heroes with Human Frailties, Villains with Misguided Goals** (*Labels are the reviewer's, not writer's*). From the detailed accounts on the pages of the trilogy emerge heroes and villains in the long drama of the struggle of the people of Eritrea for self-determination and independence. One of the heroes is Hamed Idris Awate, who is credited with the firing of the first shot that heralded the commencement of the armed struggle. As a former member of the Italian colonial army, he had some military experience. He already had a band of armed men inside Eritrea when a group of nationalists residing in the Middle East announced the formation of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF). The group contacted Awate, and his rug-tug army became the starting

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<sup>7</sup> The titles of nobility (such as, *blata*, *grazmatch*, *Quegnazmatch*, *fitewrari*, *azmatch*, *dejazmatch*, and *raesi*), though military in origin, gradually became symbols of civilian stature that distinguished the nobility from the ordinary.

block for the eventual development of a formidable fighting force. The second hero is Woldeab Woldemariam (affectionately known as Wol-Wol), a great writer and labor leader, and a devoted politician whose essays and political activities were directed at defending Eritrea's unity and advocating for its independence. He survived seven attempts on his life by opponents of independence and supporters of Ethiopia, was forced into exile, but continued his struggle from abroad. The third hero is Ibrahim SulTan who started his political activities as an advocate for the emancipation of the serfs (Tigre) in the feudal social structure of the lowlands (MetaHit). He successfully linked their emancipation with the goal of independence for Eritrea. He was a skillful and astute politician, a defender of Eritrea's unity and a consistent advocate of Eritrea's independence both inside Eritrea and in the halls of the United Nations. He too was forced into exile and continued his struggle from abroad.

From the pages of the trilogy, as much as one learns of the various activities of these individuals that made them heroes, one also learns of some of their shortcomings. For example, Idris M. Awate started out as a regular *shifita* (bandit) engaging in raids and counter-raids for animals and property against rival ethnic groups. Woldeab Woldemariam, as a candidate for the first Eritrean Assembly surprisingly lost by a wide margin. He also initially flirted with the concept of Tigrai-Tigrinyi (independence for the Tigrinya-speakers of Eritrea and Ethiopia combined) and at times for Eritrea's conditional association with Ethiopia. Ibrahim SulTan, in his first appearance at the UN (Third Session), somehow bangled his presentation by making exaggerated claims and cited unrealistic statistics.<sup>8</sup> In the contest for the office of Chief Executive of Eritrea in 1955, it was his party, the Muslim League, that nominated Asfaha Woldemicael, an avowed Unionist who shepherded Ethiopia's annexation of Eritrea (*Ertra kab Federation...* p. 17). These shortcomings, however, should in no way diminish the trio's heroism and contribution to Eritrean nationalism and struggle for independence in the eyes current and future generations of Eritreans. They merely show that they were after all humans.

From the pages of the trilogy, also emerge villains in the drama of Eritrean politics during the decades covered. The most prominent ones are Asfaha Woldemicael, Dimetros Gebremariam and Tedla Ogbit. Asfaha Woldemicael was the second Chief Executive (later changed to Chief Administrator) of Eritrea, and Dimetros Gebremariam was the deputy president of the Eritrean Assembly, starting in September 1955. The duo are perhaps the chief architects of the gradual erosion of Eritrean autonomy and final annexation of Eritrea by Ethiopia. Tedla Ogbit, as head of the police and the security apparatus, was the enforcer and ruthless suppressor of political activists.

The detailed background information provided by the author helps understand why the two architects were dedicated unionists and ready to do Ethiopia's bidding right from the beginning. Asfaha Woldemicael started his relationship with Ethiopian notables early in his life, in the 1930s, while serving Fascist Italy as an interpreter and official during its invasion of Ethiopia. He essentially served as a double agent passing critical information to Ethiopian resistance forces. He was so endeared by Ethiopian notables, including the emperor, for his services that he was later awarded a nobility title and sent to Eritrea as deputy representative of the emperor during the initial

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<sup>8</sup> Ibrahim SulTan's presentations at subsequent UN appearances, especially that of December 1950, however, were superb (*Aynefalale*, pp. 495-505).

federation period. He became the Chief Executive of Eritrea, following the resignation of Tedla Bairu, the first Chief Executive. Asfaha throughout his political life laser-focused on the goal of complete union of Eritrea with Ethiopia and led the effort to achieve it (*Ertra kab Federation ...* pp. 4-21).

Dimetros Gebremariam also had deep roots in Ethiopia. He received his religious education starting from his childhood at several monasteries in Ethiopia. To him, the Orthodox church was a strong pull to Ethiopia. Further, he served as secretary and chief advisor of the then aging Eritrean notable, *Raesi* Kidanemariam of Areza, one of the noted supporters of Ethiopian cause and actually the first honorary president of the Unionist Party. With the aid of the office of the Emperor's representative in Eritrea, Dimetros maneuvered his way to become the deputy president of the Eritrean Assembly, a position that enabled him to become a formidable force in the process of Ethiopia's annexation of Eritrea (*Ertra kab Federation*, pp.83-86). Details on Tedla Ogbit, the third villain, are in the next section.

**3.5 Unhappy Endings of Supporters of, and Collaborators with, Ethiopia.** The accounts in the trilogy indicate that several Eritrean individuals who either by conviction or for personal gains sided with Ethiopia and provided invaluable services to Ethiopian rulers ended up at best discarded and at worst disgraced or even facing tragic ends, once their service was rendered or simply fell out of favor with the emperor. Examples abound.

Lorenzo Teazaz was one of the Eritreans the emperor of Ethiopia cultivated early on. He went to Ethiopia in 1922 after completing Italian education in Eritrea. The emperor sent him to France to study law, and upon his return, became the emperor's confidant. When Italy invaded Ethiopia, he followed the emperor into exile and became his chief political and legal adviser. He was a strong advocate of the "Ethiopianness" of Eritreans. In the 1940s he was a frequent visitor to Eritrea advocating union with Ethiopia and consulting unionist elements in Eritrea. He held some ministerial positions in Ethiopia, including minister of foreign affairs. An Eritrean in a position of power and influence did not sit well with Ethiopian aristocrats, and his popularity waned overtime. He was removed from his ministerial positions and designated Ethiopia's ambassador to Moscow. He was a member of Ethiopia's delegation to the Paris Conference of the Four Powers in May 1946 that presented Ethiopia's claim to Eritrea. He was sick at the time and died in Stockholm shortly after under mysterious circumstances (*Aynfalale*, pp. 85-88).

Another ardent supporter of Ethiopia's cause, Gebremeskel Woldu, was a highly effective writer and debater, and president of the Association of Love of Country (*MaHber FiQri Hager*), the first semi-political association established in 1941. He played a leading role in eventually "converting" the Association into the Unionist Party. Nevertheless, he, along with Woldeab Woldemariam and Omer Qadi, was the core organizer of the Biet Giorgis conference. The intent was to reconcile differences, in the interest of unity, among supporters of the varying political positions within the Association (ranging from immediate independence to immediate union with Ethiopia). Ethiopia's representatives and other unionists saw Gebremeskel's efforts as an unacceptable compromise and started to undermine his leadership position. They pushed him aside as their main spokesman and replaced him with Tedla Bairu. From that occasion onward, Gebremeskel Woldu's position of leadership among the unionists faded (*Aynfalale* pp. 173-184). When the Unionist Party was



formally announced in December 1946 and the list of the leaders selected was announced, his name was nowhere to be found. Isolated, frustrated, and rejected by the Unionist Party, he withdrew from any political activity altogether (*Aynfalale* p. 231-234).

Tedla Bairu, the first Chief Executive of Eritrea, as will be detailed in Section 4.2 below, loyally and effectively served Ethiopian and unionist causes before and following his election to that position. In the mid-1950s, however, either due to not moving fast enough towards annexation of Eritrea or his resistance in favor of preserving the federation, was isolated, sabotaged and pressured to resign his CE position. After moving to Addis Ababa with no discernible political position and a brief service as the emperor's ambassador to Sweden, he was politically abandoned, humiliated and went into exile in 1966 from where he joined the Eritrean Liberation Front (*Federation Ertra*, pp. 574-585).

The case of Tedla Ogbit, a general and commander of the police force of Eritrea, represented perhaps the most tragic end of an ardent supporter of Ethiopia's cause. As the chief of police and head of the security apparatus, he was the enforcer in all the events that led to Eritrea's annexation. A stern disciplinarian, he acquired the reputation of a strict enforcer of the frequent state of emergencies declared by the CE. His actions, especially during the late 1950s, earned him notoriety in ruthlessly suppressing opposition groups and imprisoning individuals upon mere suspicion of political activities.

Once the annexation was complete and Eritrea became one of the provinces of Ethiopia, directives started to flow from Addis Ababa requiring changes in governmental policies and operations, including those of the police, in order to conform with those of Ethiopia. That didn't bode well with Tedla Ogbit and he started to show defiance. The straw that broke the camel's back was when he learned that he was to be transferred to Addis Ababa on the emperor's order. It suddenly dawned on him that the abrogation of the federation and annexation of Eritrea was wrong. He sent a telegram to his lieutenants in the districts declaring that "the federation is still in effect," and to their astonishment, urging them to be on alert. At a hastily arranged meeting of officers at the police headquarter in Asmara, he expressed regrets on past police actions, declared that the federation is still in effect, and instructed the attendants to be on "attention." All indications were that he was about to lead an insurrection.

Word immediately reached the office of the emperor's representative about Tedla Ogbit's actions and intentions. A contingency of Ethiopian army was dispatched to surround his office. His head undoubtedly was on the chopping block. Unlike the popular belief that Tedla Ogbit was assassinated, Alemseged's account, based on forensic evidence and interviews with relatives and associates including the general's own secretary, indicates that the general actually pulled the trigger of his own pistol on his head when the Ethiopian army closed in on him. A tragic ending! (*Ertra kab Federation*, pp. 646-661).

Even the two individuals considered to be the most ardent supporters of union with Ethiopia and the chief architects of the effort that led to annexation, Asfaha Woldemicael and Dimetros Gebremariam (*see* Section 3.4 above), were removed to Ethiopia, contrary to their expectation of

executive positions in Eritrea itself, once the goal of annexation was accomplished. They led an unhappy life inside Ethiopia moving from one insignificant government position to another.

#### **4. Though Extensive, By No Means the Definitive Political History of the Period**

The trilogy of books is a well-researched comprehensive political history of Eritrea covering 1941 to 1962. However, it should not be considered as the definitive history of the period. There are some gaps and some unanswered questions or issues that require further information and analysis. After reading the three publications, particularly two questions lingered in my mind: one is related to the goals and activities of the Liberal Progressive Party (LPP), and the other related to Tedla Bairu, the first Chief Executive of Eritrea.

**4.1 The Liberal Progressive Party (Ertra n'Ertrawian).** When established in February 1947, the declared goal of the party was independence of Eritrea. However, a reference was also made to the fact that it was a continuation of the initial movement for the independence of a territory that included Tigrai of Ethiopia (Thus, Tigrai-Tigrinyi) initiated by *Raesi* Tessema in 1943, perhaps inspired by the first Woyane movement in Tigrai of Ethiopia.<sup>9</sup> This raises a series of questions: Was Tigrai-Tigrinyi defined as the whole of Eritrea plus Tigrai of Ethiopia or just the Tigrinya-speaking peoples of Eritrea and Ethiopia? It looks like the goal of the party declared in 1947 was limited to the independence of Eritrea, but was there a clean cut from the initial goal of 1943? Doubts were raised, as one prominent member, none other than Abraha Tessema (son of Raesi Tessema) on occasions reminded his listeners of the concept of Tigrai-Tigrinyi (*Aynfalale*, pp.224-230).

Following its formation in 1947, what activities did the LPP conduct to further the cause of independence? For example, when all political parties of the time sent their representatives to present their causes at the Third Session of the UN, why was the LPP missing? Later, after the formation of the Independence Block, of course, the activities of the LPP were reflected in those of the Block.

Membership of the party was primarily from the Akeleguzai and Seraye areas. How unified was the membership? In fact, in 1950, apparently persuaded by the BMA, and to the consternation of his father and other members of the party, Abraha Tessema and some followers split from LPP to form a Liberal Unionist Party that advocated conditional union with Ethiopia. That party, however, did not last long.

Unfortunately, the author found little documentation on the goals and activities of the LPP to give a clearer revelation of its essence. The LPP remains an issue needing more information

**4.2 Tedla Bairu, the First Chief Executive of Eritrea: Unionist or Federalist?** After serving in the civil service section of the British Military Administration, Tedla Bairu emerged from the Biet Giorgis conference of 1946 as a politician advocating union with Ethiopia. He served the Unionist Party in various capacities: Its General Secretary, its chief spokesman both inside and outside

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<sup>9</sup> Not to be confused with the current Woyane, the alternative name of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the leading partner in the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), the ruling party in Ethiopia.

Eritrea, including at UN sessions. He was elected chairman of the constituent assembly that ratified the federation-based Eritrean constitution. When the time came to implement the Federal Act and the Eritrean Constitution, he was elected as Chief Executive (CE) in September 1952. In carrying out his responsibilities as CE, he clearly was advancing Ethiopia's cause. His initial cordial relationship with Ethiopian authorities including the emperor, his maltreatment of Eritrean individuals on the independence side, and his official statements at political events<sup>10</sup>, all indicated that he was still advancing the agenda of the Unionist Party. Eventually, however, he lost grip of his executive power and became increasingly isolated and betrayed by even members of his own party. He lost support of the Eritrean Assembly, was constantly opposed and sabotaged by the office of the emperor's representative. He was eventually pressured to resign and be replaced by Asfaha Woldemicael, who at the time was serving as the deputy representative of Ethiopia's emperor. The big questions here are: What led to the demise of Tedla Bairu as the Chief Executive? Is it because he was not moving fast enough towards annexation or was he presenting resistance in the interest of preserving the federation? In other words, towards the end of his tenure as CE, was he a unionist or a federalist?

His son, Hirui Tedla, in his latest book, claims his father was a federalist when he describes the standoff between the CE and the Eritrean Assembly "as a clash between the growing influence of the annexationist caucus in the Assembly and the efforts of CE Tedla [Bairu] to preserve the Federation." He adds, "Former leaders of the parties of the Independence Block became bedfellows of former unionists to form a coalition directed against Federalist CE Tedla."<sup>11</sup> Tedla Bairu himself, in a document appended to this same book, states, "My strong determination to uphold my constitutional oath and defend the full autonomy of our beloved homeland, was intensely obstructed by the Emperor, Aklilu Habtewold, Haile Selassie's son-in-law [Andargachew Messai], Eritrean traitors, and collaborators." And he adds, "I did not want to be the instrument and tool of betrayal against the rights of the Eritrean people; in 1955, after the last clash with the Emperor's government, I decided to resign."<sup>12</sup>

But, these are mere assertions that are hard to take at face value, especially when one considers Tedla Bairu's speech in September 1954, at the occasion of the second anniversary of the federation. In that speech, he stressed the Ethiopianness of Eritreans, chastised all anti-union elements and concluded with the following words: "The day the people of *Mereb Mlash* [his usual reference to Eritrea] choose complete union instead of federation [with Ethiopia], my happiness will be great" (*Federation Ertra*, p. 502. *Translation is the reviewer's.*) Such a statement betrays the assertion and claim that Tedla Bairu was a federalist. Hirui, in his book devotes a chapter (Chapter Three) on the politics of the period in which he contests accounts by Alemseged and three other authors point by point. Unfortunately, he merely makes assertions and claims not supported

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<sup>10</sup> In his official addresses he invariably referred to the country as "Mereb Mlash," instead of Eritrea, meaning "beyond Mereb," as if to emphasize the notion of "Ethiopia's lost territory" beyond the Mereb, the river that demarcates the boundary between Eritrea and Ethiopia.

<sup>11</sup> Hirui Tedla Bairu, *Eritrea and Ethiopia* (2016), Red Sea Press, Trenton N.J., p.60.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* Appendix section, p. 279.

by evidentiary facts. Alemseged's account of Tedla Bairu, actually, is fair and balanced. For example, he credits the CE with running a relatively efficient and corrupt-free government.

Had CE Tedla Bairu conducted himself, in words and actions, as a defender of the federation, he would probably have earned the status of a belated hero in the eyes of his countrymen. Unfortunately, the evidence is not there. The fact that he was a very private person and reluctant to share his views and feelings even with his close associates made it harder to find witnesses to corroborate the federalist claim did not help either. Thus, the issue of whether CE Tedla Bairu, towards the end of his tenure, was a unionist or federalist remains an open question.

## 5. Beyond Political History: Contribution to Eritrean Literature

Beyond the political history of Eritrea of 1941 to 1962, Alemseged's trilogy makes a great contribution to the development of Eritrean literature in Tigrinya. The word crafting and the eloquence with which the writer narrates the story represents Tigrinya at its best. Reading the Trilogy, one encounters many new Tigrinya terms that did not exist in the past. Some for sure were invented during the days of the armed struggle and have been in use since then. Others may have been invented by the writer himself. These new additions, primarily in the areas of politics, economics and technology, enrich the Tigrinya language and Eritrean literature in general.

As the writer laments at the introductory section of *Eritrea kab Federation*, there are no established Tigrinya standards to serve as guidelines for writers in that language. In the United States, for example, a writer and/or researcher in English can follow either the APA (American Psychological Association) or the Chicago styles of writing as to punctuation, citing and referencing of sources, etc. No such guidelines exist for Tigrinya. In writing the trilogy, Alemseged seems to have established some on the go. In that respect he is a trail blazer. Whether they were his or somebody else's, I saw for the first time in the trilogy *aHtsrote Qalat* for "acronym" and *kemahu* for "ibid." I cannot think of better terms for those. There is also *egre tsehuf* used for "footnote." I would have preferred *egre meglets*.<sup>13</sup>

Speakers of Tigrinya, especially the elders, employ parables, hyperboles, allegories and other nuggets of wisdom to effectively express their opinions. Throughout the trilogy, the writer quotes expressions of former government officials and other notables, and ordinary people from interviews and publications of the period. The reader gets a good taste of the eloquence and nuggets of wisdom from the quotations. To give some examples: In addressing the meeting on the formation of the Liberal Progressive Party, one of the leaders is quoted to have stated, "The presence of even one stirrer will deny a herd of cattle from drinking clean water,"<sup>14</sup> to remind attendants of what happened at the Biet Giorgis conference where the presence of spoilers disrupted the meeting. To emphasize the need for "long-lost" Eritrea to unite with Ethiopia, a unionist states, "Water runs to the stream, a baby to his mother."<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, an

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<sup>13</sup> The *tsehuf* in *egre tsehuf* translates to "text," whereas the *meglets* in *egre meglets* translates to "notes." Thus, my preference.

<sup>14</sup> ዘራጊት ዘላተን ኣሓ ጽሩይ ማይ ነይሰትያ (ኣይንፈላለ፡ ፲ጽ 226)።

<sup>15</sup> ማይ ንሩባኡ፡ ዕንዳይ ናብ እኖኡ (ኣይንፈላለ፡ ፲ጽ 277)።

independentist states, “They look like your shoes, yet they don’t fit,”<sup>16</sup> to emphasize that in spite of the similarities, union of Eritrea with Ethiopia will not be workable.

During the political debates, following the establishment of political parties in the mid-1940s, an independentist makes the following hyperbolic statement criticizing the goal of the unionists: “One who seeks a yoke for himself, mounts it on his neck, and invites others to fasten it on him, will suffer the consequence of his action”<sup>17</sup> (*Ertra kab Federation* p. 383). When a political activist lamented, “Why are people silent while our rights are trampled?” an elder responded to him with the following parable to remind him of the intimidating situation: The lion killed a deer and invited all his carnivorous subjects for their opinion on how to allocate the kill. The hyena responded by stating that he should get the legs, thighs and other selected parts. The lion asks, “and what do you leave for the rest of us?” The hyena responds, “The internal organs.” The lion was so infuriated that he slapped the hyena so hard that his eye popped out. He turns to the fox and asks her, “what say you, fox?” She replied that the legs, thighs and other selected parts should go to the lion. The lion asks the fox where she discovered such a wisdom. The fox responds, “From the hyena’s eye.” (*Ertra kab Federation*, pp. 361-362)

## 6. Matters of Sequence and Consistency

The trilogy is such a well-researched and well-written work that it is hard to find any significant shortcomings. Nevertheless, the reviewer sees room for improvement in three areas that are matters of sequence and consistency.

First, *Aynfalale* begins with “Some Points about the Second World War” as its introductory chapter. I would have liked it to begin with a brief background on Italian colonialism in Eritrea instead. As the first book of the trilogy, starting with a brief description of the Italian colonial experience would have set a more effective tone for the trilogy. After all, it was the Italian colonial occupation and its rule for more than half a century that gave the various ethnic groups residing in present-day Eritrea a common experience and a common cause for seeking independence and liberation. A background on World War II is also important but, could come as a chapter following the suggested brief introductory chapter on Italian colonial experience.

Second, perhaps one of the most interesting stories in *Ertra kab Federation* is in Chapter 19 on the formation and initial activities of the Eritrean Liberation Movement (*Haraka* or *Mahber ShowAte*). *Haraka*, which was conceived among Eritreans residing in the Sudan and gradually spread to Eritrea, represented the beginning of the struggle of the people of Eritrea for independence on a national footing, emphasizing unity and rejecting religious and other sub-national views. The chapter ends with details on the spread of the movement in Eritrea and its initial activities especially in Asmara, leaving the reader wanting to read more about its activities. The next chapter (20) starts with a section on Ethiopia’s diplomatic strategies followed by a section on the 1960 coup attempt in Addis Ababa. Then, the story on *Haraka* resumes. I found the said two sections a distraction. I understand their need for context. But, they could have come at the end, that is, after

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<sup>16</sup> ኣሳእንካን ይመስላ፡ ኣብ እግርኻን ዘይ ኣትዎ (ኣይንፋላለ፡ ገጽ 124)።

<sup>17</sup> ባዕሉ ኣርዑት ዝደሊ፡ ቆራቆሮ ጸሪቡ ኣብ ክሳዱ ሰቓሉ ብቁራብዓት ሕንቕኒ ዝብል ፍጡር መወዳእትኡ ኪጸግባ እዩ።



exhausting the story of *Haraka*, and still provide the intended context without distracting from the main story.

Third, the author's contribution to enriching the language of Tigrinya and Eritrean literature in general has already been mentioned. However, some inconsistencies are observed in the trilogy. For example, *Aynfalale* uses endnotes, whereas *Federation Ertra* and *Ertra kab Federation* use footnotes. Bibliographical references to Eritrean authors are written last name followed by first name in *Aynfalale*, but the reverse in the last two books of the trilogy. It is an indication that even in the author's own mind, the Tigrinya standards have been evolving, and one can safely assume that the standards reflected in *Ertra kab Federation*, the author's last book, is the one on which he settled.

## **7. Suggestions Emerging from the Content of the Trilogy**

In the opinion of this reviewer, at least three suggestions logically emerge from the contents of the three books in the trilogy.

**7.1 Translation to English and Other Languages.** It is not uncommon in African circles to hear people lament about the paucity of stories of African peoples written by Africans themselves. Most history books are written by foreigners, mainly from former colonial powers, and self-declared experts, reflecting their own subjective perspectives. The trilogy of books under review, authored by an Eritrean writer, in a way, addresses that lament. Translation of this exemplary work to English will not only provide wider readership for the author but also provide useful lessons to aspiring African writers.

Translation of the work to English does not necessarily have to be an exact word-for-word translation of the whole trilogy. Perhaps a single consolidated volume might work better. The work in English can best be done by the writer himself for at least two reasons: (1) He is in the best position to choose and/or consolidate the details for inclusion, and (2) It appears the author of the trilogy used significant numbers of source documents that were written in English and carefully translated them to Tigrinya where applicable. He can use those original English documents directly instead of translating back the Tigrinya version to English and "lose a lot in translation" in the process.

I understand translations of one or more of the books to Tigre (another Eritrean language) and Arabic have been completed. Doing so must have expanded readership beyond Tigrinya speakers. Translation to Amharic, the Ethiopian official language, can also be beneficial. Amharic readers of stories on the relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia are exposed to the Ethiopian narrative only, for example, Zewde Reta's *YeErtra Gudai*, 1990 (The Case of Eritrea). An Amharic translation of Alemseged's trilogy will enable them to gain a balanced view on the political history of the relationship.

**7.2 Need for Tigrinya Standards and Writing Guidelines.** Reference has already been made to the contribution of the trilogy to the enrichment of the Tigrinya language and literature. However, there appears to be a need for establishing Tigrinya standards and writing guidelines. This can be done through the establishment of a blue-ribbon commission or if there is an Academy of Eritrean

Languages in the higher education institutions. Such a body should include language experts (linguists), writers, publishers and members of the clergy. Given his several years of work on the trilogy of books, having encountered the problem in the process, and having already contributed substantially towards the establishment of guidelines, Alemseged should be involved in some capacity to lead such an effort.

The idea for Tigrinya standards and guidelines is not new. The BMA had established a Tigrinya Language Council in 1942. What its exact mandate was is not clear. However, it is credited with: (1) the borrowing from foreign languages some political and technical terms and adapting them to Tigrinya, and (2) the elimination of three redundant Geez alphabets.<sup>18</sup>

Tigrinya utilizes the Geez alphabet, as do Amharic, Tigre and other Semitic languages prevailing in the Horn region of Africa. Ideally, and despite the current political relationship between the two countries, such an effort should be undertaken jointly by Eritreans (representing Tigrinya and Tigre) and Ethiopians (representing Amharic and Tigrinya).

**7.3 Political History of Eritrea after 1962.** As repeatedly already noted, the trilogy covers political history of Eritrea 1941 through 1962. That begs the question: How about the history of 1962 and after, that is, the armed struggle and post-independence periods? That potentially important project is perhaps well-suited and better left to members of the new or future generations. In fact, that is the sentiment the author expresses in the concluding chapter of *Ertra kab Federation*, and adds, “The history of the Eritrean revolution is a fertile ground awaiting future researchers” (p.672). However, we should take solace in the fact that Alemseged has set a high standard for researching and writing political history of Eritrea to which future researchers and writers can look up.

## 8. Summary and Conclusion

Alemseged Tesfai’s trilogy of books (*Aynfalale*, *Federation Eritra ms EtioPia*, and *Ertra kab Federation nab GobeTan Sewran*), is the outcome of years of research and hardwork by an Eritrean scholar and dedicated freedom fighter. The writer expertly and eloquently weaves the information from multiple sources into a cogent narrative that reflects the Eritrean perspective. The themes that emerge from the narrative provide important lessons for current and future generations of Eritreans. They include: (1) constant struggle to preserve unity of the people in the face of efforts by foreign powers to divide them along religious and ethnic lines; (2) acceptance of a defective federal act by all political parties in good faith in the interest of unity albeit with some reservations; (3) lack of strong organization and effective leadership, as well as, clarity of goals and conviction to advance national interests; (4) emergence of heroes and villains in the political drama of the two decades covered; and (5) unhappy endings of political careers of those who served Ethiopian causes against the interests of their own people.

Beyond political history of the important formative decades of Eritrean nationalism and political activism, the trilogy substantially contributes to the enrichment of the Tigrinya language and

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<sup>18</sup> See *Hadas Ertra*, Eritrean daily in Tigrinya, No. 143, February 14, 2018, page 6. The three redundant alphabets are: ሀ, ሐ, ጸ and their alternatives.

Eritrean literature in general. Though by no means a conclusive political history of the period, the trilogy of books is a richly sourced cogent narration of a story that represents the Eritrean narrative so well that it is a must read for all Eritreans. This exemplary work in the language of Tigrinya should be translated to other languages, especially English, for wider readership.

Towards the beginning of this review, I made a reference to a famous University of Wisconsin history professor, Harvey Goldberg, who was a great story-teller. If he were alive today, he would be happy to know that one of his foreign graduate-student admirers, Alemseged Tesfai, has published a great study that tells the story of his own people, and in their own vernacular at that!

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