

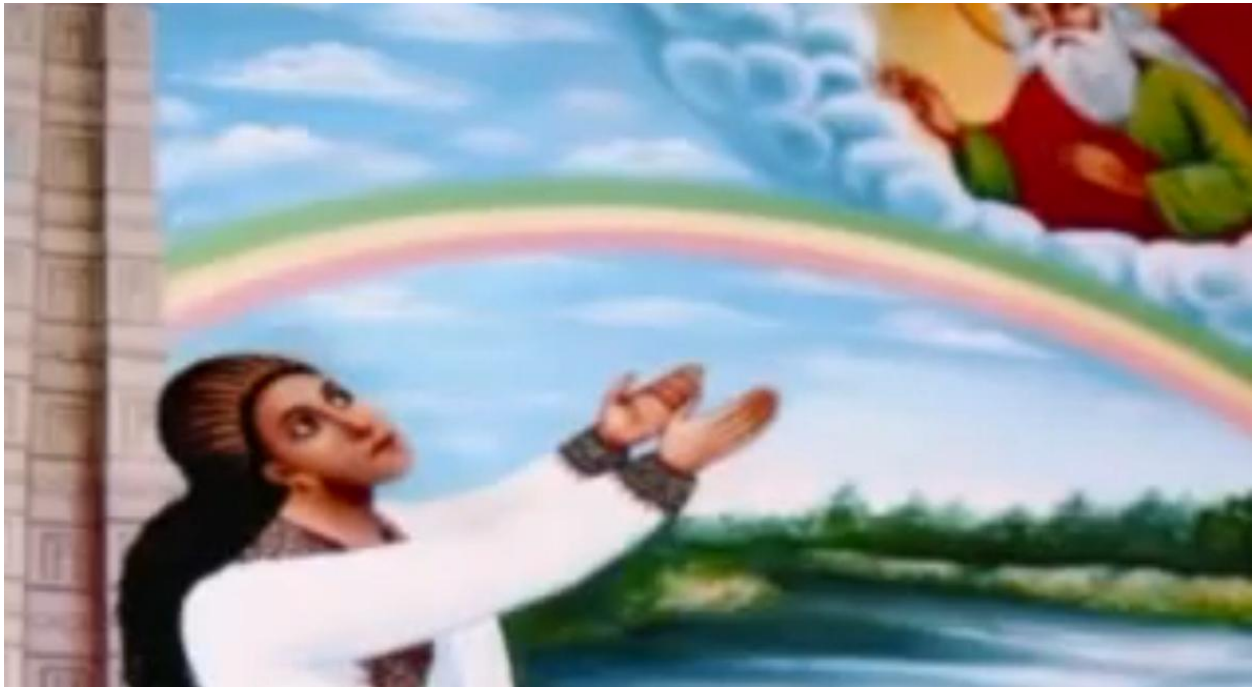
Tigrayan Modern Elites and their bizarre Love for Colonial Language

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A Reply to Fiseha Haftetsion Gebresilassie's "Choosing a Working Language in Multiethnic Nations: Rethinking Ethiopia's Working Language Policy" & Alemseged Abbay "Is Multilingualism a problematic paradigm in Ethiopia?"

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Two articles, whose authors and titles are given above have been circulating since some time, the first much earlier and the second recently The authors, Fiseha Haftetsion, and Alemseged Abbay, propose, the replacement of Amharic with

English as a national language. I waited in vain for a rebuttal to come from someone concerned.

Fiseha Haftesion's bizarre article allegedly for a feedback so he would revise it to be ready "for a publication in a reputable journal." The major part of his article was prepared during the author's "fellowship with ACCORD (African Center for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes)." Where this center is and who financed his fellowship are not stated other than his gratitude to Prof. John Daniel and Dr. Kwesi Sansculotte-Greenidge (sic) "for their constructive comments." But it is not difficult to guess who financed it. The center has an office in Addis Ababa, *Institute for Security Studies*, headed by Tim Murithi. Fiseha Haftetsion claims that quoting his article "is strictly prohibited." That is, he circulates a venomous article and prohibits the exposure of the venom in it!

I could not tell who John Daniel is, but Kwesi Sansculotte-Greenidge is identified as "a research fellow at the Centre for International Cooperation and Security in the Peace Studies Department at the University of Bradford." My understanding is that TPLF has collaborated, possibly with the United States, in establishing a virtual **University for Peace**, with centers in Addis Ababa and Costa Rica! The University has an e-publication called **Africa Peace and Conflict Journal** in whose second issue Kwesi Sansculotte-Greenidge has an article on "*Judiyya*: A Test of Traditional Conflict Resolution Mechanisms in Complex Conflicts in Darfur." One wonders what were the comments of Kwesi Sansculotte-Greenidge on this article. It would be strange if, being an advocate of African tradition, he had overlooked the insulting proposal to use in an African country a colonial language (English) in place of, not even together with, the indigenous Amharic.

But let me concentrate on the demerits of the paper: To begin with, the author is not aware that this paper can never appear in a reputable journal however he polishes it because no reputable journal accepts a mediocre and insulting composition, especially from someone who has not established his own credibility as a serious scholar. The time for defending the civilizing mission of the colonialists, which Ato Fiseha Haftetsion is doing, is over. Nevertheless, Ato Fiseha Haftetsion wants to injure the only country that has not been injured by colonialism, while nations injured by it did not know how to heal themselves from the injury they suffered. It is either ignorance or desperation or arrogance and indifference on the part of TPLF that it recruited Ato Fiseha Haftetsion for this gross assignment. His analysis, findings and recommendation cannot be worse. Look at his authorities on Ethiopian history. They are Aregawi, 2004; Alemseged, 2004; Kassahun, 2007; Getachew and Derib, 2006. These people could be politicians, or famous political activists, but none of them is known in the circle of historians. And so he audaciously makes the following points whose flaws I attach:

- Atse Tewodros is called "Emperor Tewodros IV." Who were the first, the second and the third Tewodros?
- "Among the changes introduced by Tewodros was the beginning of the use of the Amharic language in the recording of official documents." This is totally false; the Emperor did not play any role in the decision of the scholars to use Amharic as a written language. He was not borne when the decision was made. Amharic was the official language centuries before Tewodros II.
- "Kahsay Mircha, a Tigrayan, became Emperor Yohannes IV of Ethiopia." This, too, is false; there is no evidence that the Emperor was ever called, or called

himself, Kahsay, but always Kassa. The Emperor would have cut Fiseha Haftetsion's fingers if he saw him lowering him so to ethnic confinement.

- "Yohannes did not introduce any change in the status of Amharic perhaps for the sake of maintaining the unity of the empire." Totally false! It never occurred to the Emperor to change the official national language to English or any other language. Why should it occur to him? He was not a TPLFite in his mentality, but an Ethiopian who knew that Amharic is no more an ethnic language within Ethiopia.

- "Menelik expanded the empire by conquering neighboring peoples to the south of the traditional Abyssinian polity." Totally false! According to professional historians, Emperor Menelik never went beyond traditional Abyssinian polity. The manuscripts found in the Island of Zway, called Debre Tsion, are among the oldest. The Gibe regions were under Emperor Iyyasu (1674-98). See *Yeabba Bahriy Dersetoch*, p. 153 by Professor Getatchew Haile. Birbir Maryam is a living witness that Gamu Gofa, where the church is, was part of what Fiseha Haftetsion calls "traditional Abyssinian polity." Abba Bahriy, the author of *Zenahu le-Galla*, (again by Getatchew Haile) was a monk serving there until the Oromo overran the region. The renowned Professor Getatchew Haile on this subject said – “For those who read German, I recommend Eike Haberland's works, especially, his "Altes Christentum in Süd-Äthiopien," *Frankfurter Historische Forträge*, Heft 2 (1976).

- "The people of the conquered areas were forced to adopt the language and religion of the conquerors (Alemseged, 2004, Aregawi, 2004)." Totally false! No authority, much less Menelik, has ever forced any one to speak Amharic. It is only in school environment that children were forced to learn Amharic and in Amharic. Outside schools, no authority ever interfered in the use of any ethnic language.

Throughout the history of Ethiopia, all ethnic groups were free to speak in their ethnic language. At court and other governmental places, translators were freely provided by the government for those who did not know Amharic.

- "To make things worse, Amharic was imposed as the *de facto* sole official language of the empire even in Tigray, the historic core component of the Abyssinian Empire, forcing the people to not use their language for official purposes despite the fact that the Tigray people speak one of the oldest and richest of written and spoken languages." This is totally false and ridiculous; in fact, it is the mother of all lies. There is nothing of importance written in Tigrigna before the 20th century, other than the works of Debtera Fisiha (TPLF's main tributary river) who wrote *Tarik Ethiopia*, hand written at the end of of the 18th century (1899) , and the protestant convert, Haleqa Teweldemedhin Gebru (Adua/Mai MiSham) who translated the protestant bible into Tigringa (1933) and 'Zanta Eyo MisYonawuyan Ab Tigray' (The history of Missionaries in Tigray hand written – 120 pages) by Gobeze Goshu (Naidir/Axumite). Those individuals were influenced by the missionaries started to use Tigringa instead of Amharic around 1920- "not even Tigringa from Tigray" (see Dekike Teweldemedhin authored by me- Getachew Reda-2012). There was never established any traditional institution in Tigray that taught school children in Tigringa language during Emperor Yohannes or before him or during Axumite era). Manuscripts coming from Tigray testify that people in Tigray wrote either in Ge'ez or in Amharic. What a reputable journal will ever consider publishing an article which says "*Tigray people speak one of the oldest and richest of written and spoken languages*"? But this wrong imagination about the glory of Tigrigna was created by TPLF to be, unfortunately, its driving force to destroy Ethiopia through destroying Amharic and its speakers.

- "The Constitution legitimized the absolute power of the emperor [Haile Sellassie] (Art. 5) but it did not say anything regarding language. In practice, the use of the Amharic language in all the public sectors was comparable to the absolute powers given to the Emperor by the Constitution." What a confusion! Absolute power of the kings of Ethiopia was legitimized long, long, before the Constitution. In fact, the Constitution is known for limiting the power of the emperor, not for legitimizing the legitimized. And why and what was the Constitution supposed to say regarding the language that has been in use since ages?

- Regarding the 1974 revolution, Fiseha Haftetsion says, "Owing to the then prevailing socio-economic injustices (discriminatory language policy being one of the main ones), different ethno-linguistic groups began to fight the central government for equality, justice, and self determination." Fiseha Haftetsion presented this way falsely even the history we lived and witnessed. Who were the different ethno-linguistic groups whose main grievance was the language policy? The *major revolt* came from MEISON and EPRP, and these were nationalists, not ethno-linguistic groups.

- "In 1974, the resistance against the imperial rule from all corners of the society reached its peak." What has this anything to do with "different ethno-linguistic groups"? Are "*all corners of the society*" ethno-linguistic groups? And what is the evidence for the resistance against the imperial rule to have been from all corners of the society?

- "On the other hand, . . . identified as a defect in the [Derg's] new language policy [is] the imposition of the Geez script - used by the Semitic languages - on all

the other languages, as well as the continuing dominance of Amharic-speaking teachers. . ." In the eyes of this TPLF surrogate, this virtue of using one's own script for writing indigenous languages is the only crime the Derg committed. What a crime! The real crimes are not mentioned because they would remind us of the similar crimes committed by TPLF.

An accusation, such as, "the imposition of the Geez script - used by the Semitic languages - on all the other languages," comes only from someone who is functionary illiterate, because sound symbols or scripts or letters are language neutral. In other words, any script—e.g. that of Ge'ez, Arabic, Latin, etc.—can be used for writing any language. Letters are imaginary pictures of language sounds. Persian, a non-Semitic language, is written in Arabic script, a script invented by the Semites for their Semitic language. Ge'ez can be written in any script, including Latin. If according to the author "the imposition of the Geez script - used by the Semitic languages - on all the other languages," is a crime, why was imposing Latin/English on Ethiopian different languages replacing Amharic/Ge'ez not a crime?

Fiseha Haftetsion's suggestion is the non-Semitic languages of Ethiopia should be written in Latin. Here, we should ask two pertinent questions: (1) Why is the Latin script preferred over the Ge'ez script for the non-Semitic languages of Ethiopia? Latin was certainly not originally designed with Ethiopian non-Semitic languages in mind. (2) Is not the Latin script a development of a Semitic script? It sure is. We know that the Latin script is called *Alphabet*? *Alphabet* comes from "*alef bet*," a Semitic name for a Semitic invention. It is called so because the Semitic script begins with "a" called *alef*, and "b" called *bet*. The letter "b" was called "*bet*" (meaning "house") because it initially looked like a house. Our *bet* has still

preserves the form of a house: ጠ. (B). A closer study of some of the letters of the so-called Latin script would reveal how it developed from a Semitic script. For example, it is not coincidental that the Latin "t" looks like the Ge'ez "ተ", the Latin "w" looks like the Ge'ez "ወ", the Latin "m" looks like the Ge'ez "መ," the Latin "o" looks like Ge'ez "ዐ". What would we get if we write the letter "o" and put a line through it? The Latin got "Q", and we got ቀ. Both developed from a symbol created to represent the same sound.

- "Under this section, the language policy experiences of Nigeria, India, and Switzerland are examined. These countries are selected based on their similarities to Ethiopia in terms of diversity and their experiences on the subject matter." This is totally wrong. I can understand the similarity of the case of Switzerland with that of Ethiopia but not of Nigeria and India which were colonized by Great Britain and English was imposed on them. Proud Switzerland never considered using a foreign language. Similarly, Ethiopia was never colonized nor ever considered using a foreign language when it had proud leaders. The strange thing is that Fiseha Haftetsion examines the language policies of these countries but he recommends none of them. For example, he tells us that Switzerland uses all its four languages and Nigeria and India use their own local languages and English as national languages. But for Ethiopia he recommends to do away with the indigenous national language to give the place for English! Why was the need for examining the language policies of these countries?

- "The EPRDF is composed of four parties: the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the Amhara Nation's Democratic Movement (ANDM), the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), and the Southern Peoples' Democratic Movement (SPDM)." Come on Ato Fiseha Haftetsion Gebresilassie! You must

have written this to deceive your advisors. The reality, and what you and we all know, is that the EPRDF is composed of TPLF and its *Teletafis*, created by TPLF.

- "Among the indicators of ethnic exploitation for the TPLF was the imposition of the Amharic language of the Amhara rulers on the Tigray people that had its own distinct spoken and written Tigrinya language." This totally false statement is repeated. Tigray never had a *written language* other than Ge'ez and Amharic. Ask *Dejjach* Subagadis, *Ras* Alula and Emperor Yohannes, all from Tigray, what their official language was. "Amharic, of course!" would be their immediate and unequivocal reply. Check letters they wrote to foreigners and foreign authorities. All letters of communication written in Amharic even from ordinary Tigrayan from Tigray are published for all to see."Internal Rivalries and foreign threats 1869-1879 Edited by Sven Rubenson (Document 4 p/6 Assegeheng to Antonie d' Abadie, 12 Feb, 1869". See also all document or letters of communication by *Dejach* Kifleyesus Amde Michael ruler of Enderta (1747-1773) *Ras* Welde Selassie Kifleyesus (hereditary chief of Enderta -before Emperor Yohannes). Check also all Emperor Yohannes's letters. All indicated Amharic not Tigringa was traditional written language in Tigray. If it did, it never came out strong or never was favorite written language of communication comparatively to the the already favorite Amharic language by ordinary Tigrayans and by "all" hereditary chiefs of Tigray. No hereditary chife in Tigray started to replace Amharic for Tigringa. No document showed such, if at all there was any attempt. The leaders and citizens clearly understood that Amharic language and its written alphabet is born out from the womb of Ge'ez. Their names and their ancesorial names indicated Amharic names- because it is theirs, not any bodies. It is only the present deluded TPLF elites want Amharic to be eradicated from the face of the earth to be

replaced by foreign languages “English/Latin” in the name of “Globalization” (conspiracy!).

None of the them (letters/documents) was in any language other than Amharic and Ge'ez. This is what happened regarding Amharic: *The rulers who came after Emperor Yohannes inherited its use as a national language from Emperor Yohannes, just as the Emperor inherited it from his predecessors.* No politician is to be credited for it. Amharic became the national language by historical accident and popular choice.

- Regarding TPLF's Constitution, Fiseha Haftetsion laments, "Despite the extensive rights given by the TPC (Transitional Period Charter) to the nations, nationalities, and peoples of Ethiopia, article 19 of the same document declares English and Amharic texts to have equal authenticity ignoring the duty to translate the charter to any of the other languages as one could expect in situations of true language equality." What is this? Was he expecting the Transitional Period Charter, which was shelved away within months, to be translated into eighty languages?

- Regarding minorities in a given Killil, Fiseha Haftetsion states, of course, expressing the position of his bosses, "The minorities may be ‘indigenous’ people to the area that have their defined territory within the states or ‘immigrants’ who came in search of economic opportunities from the other regions." What a fallacy! What a distortion! And what an ignorance! He does not understand that we, all people of the world, came at different times to a given region from another "in search of economic opportunities from the other regions." He is not aware that popular movement is an ongoing process. He does not see how, by ignoring this

historical fact, he is creating an Adam and Eve for every ethnic group in the world. Are the Semitic language-speaking Gurages, who live in the south, "indigenous" or "immigrant"? The fundamental point is, however, that no one who lives anywhere in his own country, including Fiseha Haftetsion Gebresilassie, can possibly be called an immigrant, just because he/she lives outside his/her birth place. There is no Ethiopian Diaspora who lives in Ethiopia.

- After applauding TPLF's policy that children of what he called "immigrants" to learn their primary and kindergarten education in the language of the Killil they live in as guests, Fiseha Haftetsion regrets that "children in Addis Ababa are forced to learn their primary and kindergarten education in Amharic, regardless of their ethnic backgrounds." What a contradiction! Whose are these children, of the indigenous or immigrants? He and his likes—"immigrants," according to his classification—want to live in Addis Ababa and benefit from the policy TPLF designed for the "indigenous" people!

- In a nutshell, Fiseha Haftetsion Gebresilassie's disappointment is "the predominant position given to the Amharic language by explicitly recognizing its importance as a language of country-wide communication, despite the historic association of the language with oppression and discrimination." Has English, the language he wants to replace Amharic, no association with oppression and discrimination in Africa? Actually, the historic association of Amharic was not with oppression and discrimination but with the legacy of preserving the unity of the nation.

- "Despite the privileged status given to Amharic, there is no certainty of advantage associated with speaking the language for Ethiopians Rather it

symbolizes the dominance of its speakers, negatively affects the promotion of other languages." Who are "*its speakers*"? As far as I know, the majority are those who gave up their languages and adopted Amharic during the process of national unity. Amharic was initially the language of the Amharas of the region of Amhara Sayint. The rest of those outside that region, including those who founded the Shoa-Amhara dynasty in 1270, have been from the different ethnic groups (Tigrayans included). One can call them the Amharicized or naturalized Amharas or "nationalized" Ethiopians. Furthermore, dominance comes, as Fiseha Haftetsion knows, from the barrel of the gun (as TPLF did it), not from speaking a given language. Nevertheless, he and his group can be like the rest and part of them as soon as they speak Amharic.

- "Adopting English as the sole official working language of the Federal Government of Ethiopia by displacing the position of Amharic would have two advantages. (1) it would contain potential violent conflicts over language use and (2) maximizes economic benefits from global employment and business opportunities."

With this bold statement, Fiseha Haftetsion nullified all the cases he examined in the preceding paragraphs, Nigeria, India and Switzerland, none of which ever thought shamefully of throwing out their national languages in favor of a foreign language. The two advantages the author listed do not exist; at least, we have no evidence for their existence. They are his creations. If there is any violent conflict regarding the use of Amharic, it is what has been nurtured and promoted by his TPLF. The second in his list of advantages is most ridiculous: Indians are not at a disadvantage because they have their national languages besides English. For his information, English-speaking American business is moving to India.

Of course, Indian parents and their children used English to communicate among each other (this is undeniable) . What does that show you? That shows the indigenous language is surely but slowly fading away from the brain file of the Indian population, because the colonialist language “English” is intentionally by elites choice (not by ordinary citizen) made to replace Indian language. It is now happening in Ethiopia as we speak. That is why Tigrayans such as Alemseged Abbay and Fisiha are advocating English as the language of the new world order (Global market) should take over the place of Amharic as a neutralizer to the Amharic which we are told by Tigrayans “the hate for Amharic language is live inside the mid of the 80 some ethnic Ethiopians. (what a distortive and hateful elements Tigray is producing in this era!)

Fiseha Haftetsion Gebresilassie's and Alemseged Abbay's problem is their ignorance of their country's history and their hate of the historic position of Amharic. Both wants to believe that Amharic is **still** a language of an ethnic group with which his ethnic language has to compete, because he saw many of us speaking it as "mother tongue." What he could not see is that it happened so over centuries ago when our ancestors gave up their mother tongue in favor of Amharic. Amharic was the lingua franca of the entire Horn of Africa until the documented invasion of the country by the Oromo in the sixteenth-century. The advice Gragan gave to his invading army was that they dress like the Christians and speak Amharic like the Christians so people would not recognize that they were the invading forces. He led the example by speaking Amharic; and the strategy worked well for him. We read this interesting story from Gragan's own chronicler who wrote in the *Futuh al-Habasha*.

The following is taken from an article Professor Getachew Haile wrote over a quarter of a century ago, under the title, "The Unity and Territorial Integrity of Ethiopia," *The Journal of African Studies*, vol. 24,3 (1986), pp. 465-87. He quote it to show how widespread was the use of Amharic.

When Zer'ay Deres, an Eritrean, was recruited in Asmara in 1936 to go to Rome as an interpreter; he was interviewed by an Italian official, as follows:

What is your religion?

Catholic.

Does this descend from your parents?

No, my parents are Orthodox. I changed [my religion] when I was in school.

Is your wife now used to [living with you]?

Yes, she is. After all, our religion would not allow her otherwise.

How many languages do you know, anyway?

I know my own language only.

What! Didn't they tell me that you know Amharic?

It is about that, too, that I say I know my language.

Do you know Amharic very well?

Yes, I do.

The fact that Amharic is spoken on a national level and is used as a national language along with English has become Professor Alemseged Abay and Fiseha Haftetsion's pain in the neck. He dismisses as unlikely TPLF's argument—an evil machination in itself—that English will replace Amharic in the long run, if both are used on a national level. "It is sometimes said," he argues, "that whatever the constitutional situation English will in the end dominate anyway." His example against this hope is the Nigerian case: "that in the Nigerian case English has not

succeeded in replacing or displacing other Nigerian languages or in dominating, undervaluing, or marginalizing them."

To encapsulate this guy's destructive advice to the TPLF is **Stop this evil Amharic by all means while you have the power to do it—before it is too late.** Both may not know but TPLF is doing exactly this, slowly but surely, using the flimsiest reason for justification.

Part II will continue on Alemseged Abbay's paper next time.

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