

BOOK REVIEW AND COMMENT

Abyssinian Heritage Development Center, ታጋይ ሰይ አብራካ ሲዩ-አብራካ ተወሰኛ የዘገባ ጽሑፍ ረገጣ [Tagaie Siye Abraha: Ye Hwahat Q'wsena Ye Zegotch Mebit Regetaa], Washington DC, 2004.

By Tecola W. Hagos

It has always been my hope that people who had/have special access to certain facts on the inside workings of political parties or movements, whose archives are not easily accessible by the general public, will be writing books and articles to teach us all the secrets of the “Temple” and to save us from rumor-mongering. To some extent, my wish seems to be fulfilled in the book under review. However, my general supportive statement is not a blanket endorsement of the book by Abyssinian Heritage Development Center,

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(hereafter *Tagaie Siye Abraha* or *Tagaie*), but simply a generic expression of my desire to see more works written by individuals who have had unique experiences in political movements share with Ethiopians their knowledge, aspirations, hopes, and disappointments. Such timely participation would elevate to new heights our discourse on Ethiopia.

Now, on another question of endorsement, I am completely supportive of all demands to help free Siye Abraha and all other political prisoners (now forgotten), including Tamrat Lyne. It is unfathomable irony to me to see that ex-officials and collaborators of Mengistu Hailemariam, the brutal murderer of tens of thousands of Ethiopians, are back in office glowing in the sunlight of their success as devoted servants of a treasonous leader, while the great heroes of the liberation of Ethiopia are unjustly condemned under made-up crimes and rotting in prison. Euripides or Sophocles would not have written a greater Greek Tragedy than what Meles Zenawi has done to his former comrades-in-arms. Meles Zenawi with his ersatz understanding of real-politick blundered in a major way by prosecuting and imprisoning such freedom fighters thereby lowering his own worth and cheapening the sacrifices of all other freedom fighters and liberators of Ethiopia from the clutches of the worst dictator in Ethiopian history. The *Aradas* and the *Mehale Sefaris* are laughing their heads off watching this cheap drama of self mutilation.

The book *Tagaie Siye Abraha* is written in Amharic, which undertaking is commendable in itself. It is not a voluminous book, but rather on the short side considering the weight of its subject matter. Siye Abraha, the main protagonist in the book, is the mercurial but tragic figure in the unfolding history of the TPLF and its aborted mission of liberation and vision of socialism. One could easily identify the life history of Siye Abraha the individual, who is now illegally incarcerated, as an uncanny mirror-like reflection of the breath taking rise and tragic fall of the TPLF organization itself—an organization that was

completely betrayed and gutted from the inside by embedded agents of Eritrean liberation movements of all kinds, specially by individuals such as Sebhate Nega, Meles Zenawi, et cetera, and from the outside by the leadership of the EPDM and its successor organization ANDM - Amhara National Democratic Movement. I am not white-washing any of the atrocities and treasonous acts committed by the TPLF as an organization in its rise to power now that it has been vivisected and its innards exposed for all to see and contemplate. One aspect of TPLF's disservice to Ethiopia was in allowing a handful of its leaders, who are still in power now transformed as part of the new "Shoa-Amhara-Aradas-Meles-Mehale Sefaris" power recovery structure, to blind-side the people's movement of the original freedom fighters into a secessionist movement promoting the interest of "Eritrea" by overriding the interest and the national unity of Ethiopia.

This book *Tagaie Siye Abraha* has many constructive qualities. It shows us how the last minute action and counter-action took place that resulted in the expulsion of twelve Members, almost half of the Central Committee of the TPLF (hereafter referred to as Dissenters or Dissidents). However, the Book lacks certain degree of specificity in terms of proper dates of events and specificity of circumstances. This may be due to the extreme secretive nature of the TPLF and facts filtering out in piece-meals rather than as coherent whole from that organization. For example, I would be interested to know who Meles used as his go-between when he mobilized the forces against the Twelve Dissidents. Who were the individuals who handled this delicate operation? What was going on with Tsadikan and his group of insiders? What was the incentive for making such individuals take up such a lost cause of Meles Zenawi and turn it around into a resounding victory? What was the role of Kinfе Gebremedhin, the Security Chief, in all this? Was he killed by Meles or his group in order to silence him from disgorging damaging information about Meles and the corrupt Tigray Development Association (TDA) and the people involved? The Authors have attached as an Appendix a very valuable document, the decision of the TPLF Audit Committee on the petition of the expelled Central Committee Members, the Dissidents, which is quite illuminating concerning the procedural labyrinth one has to deal within the TPLF administrative structure.

In Part One and Two of *Tagaie Siye Abraha*, a kind of biographical sketch of Siye Abraha is attempted, which falls far short of what I would have liked to read. This was one place where the myth or the truth of the rumor that Siye Abraha and eight or nine of the other Dissenters were in fact supporters of Meles Zenawi, and a few of them including Siye Abraha were fellow conspirators with Meles Zenawi against Aregawi Berhe and later Sebehat Nega and helped Meles Zenawi to become the leader of the TPLF. What exactly was the relationship of Siye and Meles? It is an accepted fact that Siye Abraha was not on good relationship with most of the Twelve Dissenters, and because of that when Siye was thrown out of the Government in 1992, it was based on general consensus of both the Politburo and Members of the Central Committee

of the TPLF not just the decision of Meles Zenawi. How is it possible to reconcile this obviously contradictory situation with the idea that the TPLF leadership worked through consensus? The book should have helped us resolve those issues and others, but it did not to my great expectation. It left us with more questions in our mind on those specific questions.

The book *Tagaie Siye Abraha* at some length has expounded upon the critical problems between the Dissenters and Meles Zenawi and his supporters. The Authors have concluded that there was genuine difference of opinion, both strategic and tactical in regard to the future role of the TPLF and the political and economic life of Ethiopia in general. The Authors are suggesting that Meles and his supporters did not want to participate in the second General Assembly in ten years to critically review the performance of the organization and that of the leadership. Of course, what Meles wanted to hide is his treasonous activities by staling and sabotaging the efforts of Ethiopians and the Ethiopian Army from countering the aggression of Issaias Afewerki who started the conflict by bombing civilians and school-children in Tygrei. Although there is some reference to the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea on the issue of the boundary that led to a vicious war, there is very little background material as to the relationship of the TPLF and EPLF or other Eritrean movements. Some discussion of the role played by Siye and the other Dissidents in the interaction between the TPLF and such other movements would have helped readers understand the core reason for the boundary conflict. May be that issue needs a book of its own in the future.

In late 1991 and 1992, I wrote a controversial policy paper that warned the TPLF leadership among other things the subtle “*Mehale Sefaris* and Ex-Mengistu Officials” spearheaded manipulative scheme using the cover of EPDM to create division in between members of the leadership of the TPLF. I did not get any support from any of the Dissenters, and I left with disgust the Ethiopian government at the end of 1992 because I realized what was happening. Even in my 1994 book, *Democratization?...*, which I wrote through 1993 while I was in exile, I discussed precisely what was going to happen with the TPLF, its coming disintegration, and the ascendance of power by the “the *Mehale Sefaris*” in the guise of the EPDM (ANDM - Amhara National Democratic Movement). I even predicted the technique that was adopted by Addisu Leggese and company that included first the promotion and championing of Meles Zenawi as a great democratic leader respectful of the interest of the *Mehale Sefaris* against the other members of the TPLF such as Siye Abraha who were vilified with lies as narrow nationalists. My anticipation did happen; Meles Zenawi is now the new Menilik the Third, till his demise in the future complete takeover of power by the *Mehale Sefaris*. So much for the sacrifices of tens of thousands of patriotic Ethiopians, mostly Children of Tygrei fighting against the murderous Mengistu’s army.

The most interesting and illuminating part of the Book is Part Three. In Part

Three, Chapter Two of *Tagaie Siye Abraha*, there is substantial material exposing how the leadership of the former EPDM (ANDM - Amhara National Democratic Movement) led by Addisu Leggese conspired with all kinds of shady characters *Mehale Sefaris*, Mengistu's ex-officials, people in the Diaspora et cetera and promoted the political ambition of Meles Zenawi at the cost of the long term political and economic developmental interest of the people of Ethiopia. This Chapter is one of the best chapters with first class analysis and precise identification of the forces and individual ambitions that molded, created, and revived the chauvinistic narrow "Shoa-Amhara" destructive political power that had caused so much suffering in Ethiopia since the time of Menilik II.

To their great credit the Authors of *Tagaie Siye Abraha* have gone to great length to distinguish the heroic acts of several members of OPDO and their leader the former President of Ethiopia, Negasso Gidada, from the opportunism of the leaders and members of the former EPDM (ANDM - Amhara National Democratic Movement) organization. The contrast is quite disconcerting. Negasso Gidada deservedly is appreciated and duly credited for his wisdom and statesmanship in trying to bring some order and democratic processes under circumstances that easily would have deteriorated into chaos. The Book precisely documented the reasons for the conflict between Meles Zenawi and the former President, and how Meles attempted without success to intimidate or corrupt that upright man. In the long-term history of Ethiopia, Negasso Giddada is the winner, and history will be much kinder in treating him with approval for his moral strength and democratic vision than it will treat Meles Zenawi and his treasonous associates.

Maybe because of their magnanimity, the Authors of *Tagaie Siye Abraha* did not focus on disruptive elements in the Ethiopian communities both in Ethiopia and around the world. It seems that the Authors have overlooked the concerted activity of some Ethiopians other than the leaders and members of EPDM and its successor organization ANDM - Amhara National Democratic Movement within the country such as Kassu Illala and his handful of Wollita and Gurage cronies who mobilized their constitutive ethnic members in support of Meles Zenawi. It is a fact that a number of Gurage businessmen are doing what they had done for Mengistu Hailemariam's regime through their mercantile participation of slightly modified "ayer bayer" corrupt exploitative system of business. This is not to blame all Wollita and Gurage people, but to indicate the problem posed by a few who have had unusually high degree of involvement with the corrupt Ethiopian leadership.

It would have been also a good balanced criticism of the corruption of the regime of Meles Zenawi had the Authors included the economic corruption unleashed on Ethiopia by Tigray Development Association (TDA), Relief Society of Tigray (REST), Mega et cetera with their octopus like tendrils reaching every aspect of the Ethiopian economy. Another missing part is a

discussion on the role played by individuals in the Diaspora, mainly *Mehale Sefaris* in Washington DC, around the Radio voice of AndeEthiopia, who coordinated and orchestrated the propaganda against the Twelve Dissenters and Siye Abraha in particular labeling those heroic figures including the late hero Hayelom as narrow ethnic nationalist. These *Mehale Sefaris* in the Diaspora have been coordinating their effort with that of Meles Zenawi and the EPDM and its successor organization ANDM - Amhara National Democratic Movement, long before the war with Eritrea. I consider this lack of discussion about those individuals and groups in the Diaspora, the collaborators of Meles Zenawi and his *Mehale Sefari* supporters, with their ex-officials of Mengistu collaborators, as a major oversight in the book.

Some Tygreans in the Diaspora, after realizing the double dealings and treasonous activities of Meles Zenawi, launched the Tygrean Solidarity movement in order to counter the vicious propaganda and accusations of narrow nationalism waged against them by the “Shoa Amhara” supremacists, the *Mehale Sefaris*, and ex-officials of Mengistu in the Diaspora. It is to be recalled that those groups of people had just lost their entrenched Ambassadorships, Ministerial posts et cetera and other appointments by the Government of Mengistu Hailemariam, and were trying to recover the political power they lost by inserting such emotionally inflammatory wedges of ethnicity between the people of Ethiopia and one of its constituent groups, the Tygrean people, just after the TPLF fighters overrun the remnant of the Government of Mengistu Hailemariam in 1991. The citadel of dissent and harassment was Washington DC, with rabid Radio Stations as their mouth pieces, against the newly formed government lead by the TPLF.

However, the Tygrean Solidarity movement seems to have failed to see the tactical pitfalls in the in-fighting that is still going on within its leadership and that is eating away at the core of Solidarity. The organization is being thorn to pieces and destroyed by agents of Meles Zenawi, Issaias Afeworki, “Shoa-Amhara” supremacists and *Mehale Sefaris*, and foreign nations. This is a serious problem that may require special attention and full devotion. Most of us had anticipated that the Solidarity movement is only a stepping phase leading to a far wider and more focused political movement. The fracturing of the TPLF was a good opportunity for Tygreans overall to start fresh on another liberation journey. The process is still underway.

The other important issue in *Tagaie Siye Abraha* is its minimal treatment of the efforts or activities of the Twelve Dissenters after they lost power, especially their effort if any to infiltrate or openly use the Tygrean “Solidarity” movements around the world. It would have been helpful to readers if the Authors had devoted few pages on that issue. As far as I can surmise the immediate activities of some of the Twelve Dissidents was not helpful to the Solidarity movement. In fact, it created a disruptive atmosphere which resulted in much fracture of the Tygrean community. It was also an embarrassment to the Dissidents to be

rejected outright by the leadership of almost all of the “Solidarity” movements around the world even though there were a few sympathetic groups to the plight of the Dissenters. Just to recap, I am of the opinion that the response of the Tygrean Solidarity movement in general would not have been as negative as it turned out to be toward the Dissenters had Solidarity been approached by the Dissenters with a degree of political savvy.

Judging from the behavior of at least one of the Twelve Dissenters, especially considering some elements in his speeches, the Dissenters seemed to have assumed mistakenly that the mere fact that they were in collision with Meles Zenawi would simply wipe out reservations and downright grudges for previous misdeeds/atrocities committed on Tygreans in Tygrei during the seventeen years of struggle by the TPLF and its leaders, which includes the Twelve Dissenters as well, and that they will be embraced by every member of the Tygrean Community in the Diaspora, forgetting the fact that a number of Tygreans in the Diaspora (wrongly at times) think of themselves as victims of some kind in the hands of the TPLF. In short, the Twelve Dissenters should have humbled themselves and admitted their mistakes and allowed new leadership to emerge in the Solidarity movement rather than try to use the movement to promote their ambitions or to get back at Meles Zenawi. The Dissenters should have realized that they were already spent bullets. Thus, the result of such short-sighted approach against truly formidable group of enemies is the fact that we are still barking at Meles Zenawi with no bite even to his heels. Had we been a little less egotistical and willing to see qualities of leadership and intellect in others who were wedging tremendous individual fight against the enemies of Ethiopia and helped them in their efforts, we would have covered much political ground and removed Meles Zenawi and his cronies by now.

Contrary to the propaganda and lies perpetuated by the *Mehale Sefaris*, the Book has pointed to readers how destructive Meles has been to the People of Tygrei. The people of Tygrei have rejected Meles completely as a leader. I wish the Book has provided us some statistical data on such important facts of persecution and oppression going on in Tygrei. It would have helped us to understand the degree of severity of the political suppression that is imposed on Tygreans drastically curtailing their movements, their livelihood, and their fundamental human rights far worse than anywhere else in Ethiopia. Tygreans are now faced with a puzzling new political reality as can be deduced from the narration and analysis of the book. With the “*Mehale Sefaris*” back in power with Meles Zenawi as their puppet-king, a crowning achievement for a group of people who got us into the colonial equation in the first place. There is an uncanny resemblance to the situation created by Menilik II at the beginning of the Twentieth Century with what is going on in Ethiopia with Meles Zenawi as figure-head and the *Mehale Sefaris* and ex-Mengistu officials running the show. Emperor Menilik created dissention among the warlords of Tygrei, fueling old rivalries between members of the Sebagadis clan and that of the Mirach family that in turn were further divided up into smaller groups some supporting

Yohannes's son and others supporting other members of the family. [For example, Empress Titu, Menilik's Empress, was in favor of Mengesha Yohannes whom she preferred over any other descendants of Sahle Selassie (for Menilik had no son at the time) and was hoping some day Mengesha will be Emperor with her sister as Empress.] The bottom-line was the fact that Menilik effectively had marginalized all legitimate claims to the Ethiopian Throne that he had usurped from the rightful Heir of Yohannes IV. The legacy of that illegitimacy, later passed down through deceit to Haile Selassie, is one of the reasons that our history has been dragged through the mud down to the dictatorship of Mengistu Hailemariam and subsequently to Meles Zenawi, an individual who does not even pretend to be proud of Ethiopia as his nation.

The shameful legacy of some of our leaders in the past who sold out our patrimony for political advantage is being repeated now. I have no confidence in the leadership of any *Mehale Sefari* or anyone who is a puppet of the *Mehale Sefaris*. We Ethiopians have suffered enough by their deceit, greed, betrayal, and treason. It is absolutely necessary now to change the political game and start fresh without the trickery played on the people of Ethiopia by such people for so long. We have to stop them from destroying us completely by marginalizing our growth and development as a people by using us as their tools simply to protect their political and economic strong-hold of the City of Addis Ababa. Even those who were frothing from their mouths with hate when Ambassador Berhane was here in Washington DC because they could not stomach to see anyone outside of their group in place of power or honor, are now purring contentedly as pussycats once they succeeded in having their *Mehale Sefari* Ambassador in place. Who wants to count such individuals as comrades in the struggle to liberate the people of Ethiopia from generation after generation of abuse and oppression? Those of us who see in Ethiopia not only our great heritage but also the last true civilization of our race have to form new alliances among ourselves, and even consider forming some kind of rearrangement with all the people of the area including those in "Eritrea" to start our new liberation movement from the dominance of the new *Mehale Sefaris* now in power with Meles Zenawi as their puppet-king. Existing demographic and physical layout of Ethiopia is not the only configuration possible, for we are more than capable to restructure or recreate Ethiopia in our own image. Addis Ababa is the symbol of this cancerous growth on Ethiopia that we have to remove with all that it symbolizes such as greed, corruption, filth, prostitution, human degradation, et cetera if we are to save Ethiopia from destruction. We have to free ourselves from the downward pull of this sinkhole of a place that has sucked our wealth, dignity, and humanity dry. It is the vortex of all that is wrong about Ethiopia for the last one hundred years.

It is not in vain that our brothers and sisters fought and suffered decades of hardship only to win battles for treasonous leaders who turned on them, and lose the war by giving up their hard-won victories to the children of Ethiopia's worst enemies: the *Mehale Sefaris*. No more manipulation and abuse: this is where we

draw the line. If we cannot have a free democratic Ethiopia because of the manipulation and deceit of the *Mehale Sefaris*, then the *Mehale Sefaris* will not have either an Ethiopia that they can freely exploit at their leisure as their parents have done for generations. No more silent tears of disappointment of millions of Ethiopian families watching the plight and hopelessness of their growing children, while a handful of *Mehale Sefaris* educate their over fed and spoilt children in foreign lands. No more suffering of Ethiopians with hunger and famine, while the *Mehale Sefaris* are stuffing themselves with *Brendo* and *Kitfo*. No more homelessness of millions of Ethiopians, while heartless *Mehale Sefaris* are living in luxurious villas and mansions. No more dirt-poor Ethiopian grandmothers pulling themselves down streets into Addis Ababa twice bent over under the weight of humongous bundles of dry branches and leaves on their bleeding backs, while *Mehale Sefaris* zip by them in their luxury limousines and expensive Mercedes and Volvos.

Even if we say that the book *Tagaie Siye Abraha* has simply scratched the surface of our problems, nevertheless, we must consider it as a great contribution to our understanding of the deceit and manipulation that has taken place behind closed doors in the last thirteen years in Meles Zenawi's EPRDF and Government. I realize that I may be expecting far too much from the current Ethiopian political leaders, after all how much generosity and nobility of judgment can one expects from tiny men who were simply pushed to the forefront of history by circumstance and chance. Maybe that is one reason why the Authors of *Tagaie Siye Abraha* did not find it worthwhile to investigate deeper and incorporate their findings about the political spider-web that Meles Zenawi has worked hard to stretch all over Ethiopia. This is not to say that the authors have not provided us with an overall picture of the grave situation Ethiopians are confronted with in the Government of Meles Zenawi.

The fact that the Authors of *Tagaie Siye Abraha* did not find it necessary to identify themselves by name has puzzled me to some extent. Has this diminished the value of this very interesting book? Not at all, but it may have added some degree of doubt as to its purpose it being perceived as a propaganda piece by the Dissenters in order to regroup themselves. Of course, that can only be perception, for the Dissenters are as much at odds with each other as they are with the government of Meles Zenawi. On that score, this book may have suffered more because of form rather than because of some substantive hidden agenda. Moreover, the whole incident is like a Chinese doll within a doll. What really happened is far more complex than the version that was sold to the public by the Government and accepted by the Dissenters. I will not offer an alternative narrative. All in all, the book *Tagaie Siye Abraha* is worth reading, and I commend the authors for taking this initiative to share their views with us.

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