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## **THE IMAGINED NATION**

### **Eritrea in Beyene Haile's Fiction: A reflective essay**

The first Italian who set foot on the present day Eritrea's soil is an Italian missionary by the name Giuseppe Sapetto. When I learned this in my elementary school history class it was not as difficult as cramming all the dates of battles and treaties which gave this land and that land to this emperor or to that noble. The name was catchy and it rhymes. Giuseppe Sappeto, a big bearded white priest who tricked the locals about his clandestine mission of doing a survey work for the soon to follow Italian intruders. Every kid in my class remembered that name and probably imagined the rest of the story very well. I could say we had the imagination of the story of the Italian colonization of Eritrea.

Then Italians left and the British came, dismantled, and took away the cable transport and railway the Italians left to their nearby colonies and handed over Eritrea to the Ethiopians in a short time. With the young mind of a fourth grader, I tried to imagine how Eritrea with that cool cable transport thing and trains could have looked like and it was annoying to think that they took it away. But, I was also not happy that the British who I was thought, introduced a democratic political system and expanded education did not stay longer to colonize us. I imagined it as a sort of rejection. A colonial rejection, that would be.

Fast forward now, the Ethiopian king's occupation of Eritrea and Mount Adal upon which Idris Awate fired the first revolutionary bullet. From there on there is the biggest chunk of Eritrean history which is the 30 years armed struggle against Ethiopian occupation. After Eritrean independence in 1991, books were written, films were made, documentaries kept

coming on the only one national TV channel – all reflective of the heroic Eritrean liberation struggle and its victory.

My imagination of the nation, and I can speak for most people from my generation, especially those who went to school, started with that old treacherous priest and ended with the victory of the heroic fighters who defeated the largest military in Africa at the time. Most of us had never had a colorful imagination that went back way beyond colonial times; and sadly couldn't imagine far in to the future too – because no imagination comes out of thin air or let's say - is completely original; but, is in fact a recreation from existing pieces, and where those pieces don't exist, it neither can.

It's beyond the scope of this essay to discuss either the lack of imagination or possibly the conflicted imaginations of the non-fictional Eritrean nation by non-fictional Eritreans and its consequences. But, I want to discuss an author, not only regarded as Eritrea's finest prose writers, but one who fascinates me with his tremendous love for his people exhibited through his characters on every page and a dedication and an effort to help readers imagine a new nation state in all its aspects. An extraordinary writer who attempted two formidable, hard to reconcile, tasks in one go: a great and enjoyable literary book and a great social and political critic as well as a roadmap to his imagined version of the nation through his later two books – *Dukan Tiberh* and *Titsbit Bahgu*. *Dukan Tiberih* means Tiberih's store and *Titsbit Bahgu*, both abstract words – *Titsbit* means expectation and *Bahgu*'s more literal meaning could be 'his wish' but in the context of this book, 'His dreams' fits better. Thus, the title's meaning is approximately, 'The expectations of his dreams'. The under tone here, as the book is narrated in first person, is 'The dreams I expect to be fulfilled are here in the book' or 'These are the dreams I wait for'.

Before I proceed, I have to say his attempt was a great success at least through the eyes of many critics and a growing number of his cult-like readership.

Publicly, Beyene Haile wrote three books and a play. The first, *'Abidudo Tibluwo'* now also in English translation was written in 1962 when Eritrea was still under Haile Sillasié's occupation and obviously differs thematically from his other publications which were written after Eritrea's independence and upon which this essay focuses on. Yet, even the main character, Mezghebe, in this early novel that precedes his next work by a period of almost forty years, shares a common trait to most of the author's characters in his latter books in the way that they are always in search of a deeper meaning in their life that they are often asked to sacrifice their worldly positions which brings about a huge struggle, inner conflict and spiritual torment. Mezghebe is a sculptor who is crazily in love with his art that he sacrifices everything including the relationship to his family to that end. From Dukan Tiberh, or Tiberh's shop, Guulay, is a mystic painter who abandons his higher education because of, quote: "too many unanswered questions which tormented his life" and he had to seek out the answers elsewhere (Dukan Tiberih, Pg 14 ).

Here are some characters from Dukan Tiberih and Titsbit Bahgu: Habte, an odd and socially awkward photographer who comes from his exile in Sweden and is very excited about capturing and recording the newly found freedom in Eritrea through his camera's lenses. Tsegay from Dukan Tiberih who dedicates his life to reforming the education system and Azamit from Titsbit Bahgu an ex-fighter who becomes a children's book writer and believes that is where the nation building starts. Guulay's father, a wise old man who collects artifacts and turns his house in to a museum and a library of ancient Eritrean books. The list goes on. What's common amongst these giant memorable characters and what gets them to interact amongst themselves, thereby producing dialogues of deep and highly poetic prose that is has become the authors authentic and recognizable writing style is, the adamant search for their inner truths always brings them to one place: that is their nation: Eritrea. To be precise, their "Imagined Eritrea".

A recurring point of argument throughout the two books is how the different characters have differing prisms through which they see the present and the future of their Eritrea and their roles and strategies in relation to that vision. The narrator's voice in the last book, *Titsbit Bahgu* who is concerned about this addresses his role like this (Pg.42):

“I am rushing to record history. There are too many scattered facts and everyone is pointing up their own little pieces of facts. I know there is the ancient and then the modern Eritrean history; and I am dealing with the latter. My purpose is to combine these scattered facts and relate them to the grander historical truth. Those who did not relate their facts to the grander historical truth have not only been unable to find meaningfulness but are also being hindrances to other seekers of truth.”

On another page of the same book Ahmed Idris, a character who likes to philosophize, from the stage in a play cries out in desperation:

“Oh, the truth has been shattered! Broken to pieces! Grinded! Dispensed! Who is going to bring it together! Who is going to knead it, shape it, give it beauty and life! We the historians couldn't do it! Let the artists try!”

Such poetic cries appear throughout the two books from characters who seem to be agonizing about the people in power and leadership who lack the imagination and creativity to lead the nation to prosperous future. These “unprogressive scholars” whose knowledge is mostly book based are repeatedly referred to as “*Qelem kemesat*” - whose rough literal translation may be “Ink people” but used to describe scholars who lack in imagination and an intimate knowledge of their society. As described in the book, they are the most prone to colonial mentality and are accused of carrying it over in to the new generation.

Through his extremely introspective characters the author suggests many ideas to free Eritreans of the shadows of colonial mentality. Once, he borrows a Danish fairy-tale by Hans

Christian Anderson called “The nightingale” to demonstrate his idea. In this tale, there is a king of great fame and riches who is visited by other kings from all over the world and this king takes great pleasure in showing them around his magnificent palace. When they get back, however, they write him letters that speak of their admiration for the beautiful songs of a bird they have been enjoying at night from their beds. The king is dumbfounded at first for he never knew of the bird nor heard the singing. Finally, a poor peasant girl, who was the only person who knew of the bird and had been enjoying his songs all the time, helps them find the bird and thereafter they all discover peace, love, and healing through his magical songs (Dukan Tiberih, Pg 387).

A character called Abdu in Dukan Tiberih (Pg 251) in a typical Haile’s poem-like prose declares: “Neither our artist nor the journalist have yet relished the songs of their land’s nightingale. When they start to listen to the songs of their sea, listen to the counsel of their mountains, notice the hidden symbols from their skies, listen to the heartbeats of their young, to the hopes of their people, and to the last words of their martyrs, then they shall see change!”

As mentioned earlier, the characters’ main struggle and engagement is about putting themselves in the process of the building of Eritrea. This being said, it is striking to notice the level of seriousness that underlies the author’s not so covert attempt to represent through the characters’ discussions all the main faculties of what constitutes the successful making of a nation. He introduces the artist, the educator, the psychologist, the philosopher, the historian, the economist and the architect. It is refreshing and informative to the reader how each character plays this role with impressive knowledge and depth of insight. These are, however, means to induce in to the readers mind four main values as evidenced throughout the text. These are in my observation: historical perspective, vision, purpose, and authenticity. The

author seems to subtly lead the reader to his fully imagined Eritrea and leave him with the un-uttered yet audible question at the end of his reading that says: Don't you like this?

The ancientness of the present day Eritrea is a recurring theme in both books. In *Titsbit Bahgu*, the narrator suggests (Pg 56) that once the buried ancient temples and stones are uncovered by archeologists, they would have a big impact on the architecture, the arts and the science of the nation. In *Dukan Tiberih*, Guulay's father resents those who say Eritrea is a new nation. He says "I am not one of those who say Eritrea is a new born nation. I know it for its ancientness. It is not small and it is not just created. Enough of this belittlement! We have had enough of it!"

Architecture is discussed in *Dukan Tiberih* whereby Abdu explains a newly published book titled "Flowering stones" by an anonymous Eritrean writer. The philosophy of the flowering stones, he explains, is, that by creating pockets of communities throughout towns and cities in the nation whose main purpose is chiseling out stones, very effective job of converting the great stones of the country in to museums, schools, libraries, temples and offices could be accomplished. He emphasizes on the capability of the individual to know the type and purpose of the stone being curved out and to have an understanding of how it is going to match with other stones and fit in to the intended wall. Of course, typical to the author's prose, this carries a deeper symbolic representation. One of the coded messages is the need of allowing individuals to be stakeholders in the building of the nation by empowering them to be direct participants in the building process, which is one of the definitions of democracy. The other message is communicated more precisely by the same character, Abdu, much later in the book where he uses the analogy to explain management, the role of the individual and the need of a clear vision that should transparently be shared with the public. All these, of course, were in stark contrast to the reality of management in the physical Eritrea at the time

the author wrote the book. Abdu further describes that understanding architecture is the main key to understanding any of the main national institutions.

“Architecture is not just about buildings!” he states. “There is the architecture of an idea, the architecture of an administration, the architecture of economy, the architecture of trade, the architecture of politics! What is there that can’t be architected!” (Dukan Tiberih pg 361)

Beyene Haile’s books are the most notable works of Eritrean literature that has garnered critical acclaims based on their artistic and creative merits; but, it is about time that they should also be discussed about, explored and admired for the insightful and thought provoking statements and questions regarding national identity, nationalism, management, politics, education, art and other important topics that Eritreans are facing in this shady time in their history. Dr. Ghirmai Negash in his remarkable review of Dukan Tiberih in 2009 calls the characters in the book “Heroic characters” and it is a very fitting description. His characters are sometimes, also described as being larger than life. However, they are not anything like comic book super heroes or extraordinary beings that are endowed with powers beyond the reach of the ordinary person. The characters are relatable in a human level.

Fifteen years after the publication of Dukan Tiberih, the struggles of the characters in the book has not become outdated but rather became even more relevant and interesting. Because, as opposed to the imagined nation of the author, the actual nation has become a nightmarish place for its people whose dreams are not so different from the dreams of the fictional characters suggested through the powers and freedom of literature.

In fact, in one passage in Dukan Tiberih (Pg 316) that talks about the moment Guulay, the mystic painter, does an intricate painting that has the figures of the map of Eritrea and a Sphinx, the depiction of the Sphinx seems like a prophetic warning about what may befall to the nation if wrong choices were made. The textual description of the narrator tells the reader

that the Sphinx awaits a person on a crossroad just outside a village and poses a riddle. A right choice of the answer is to be followed by a blessing for a great fortune and prosperity; whereas, a wrong choice is to be followed by a curse of making more wrong choices, until eventually, making one wrong choice after the other finally leads to the doom of the entire village.

I don't like to think that the actual nation is already doomed beyond salvation. I would still like to think that we are still at the cross road and still facing the Sphinx's merciless questions that we yet have to make a choice of an answer to. Indeed, all Eritreans have each of their own riddles and are expected to make their own individual choices; however, if like the characters in Beyene Haile's book, the individual is committed to search for the inner truth that is informed by knowledge and guided by a strong imagination, maybe there is the hope of a meeting somewhere in the depths where the collective choices would converge along the lines of a common vision and lead the nation towards a brighter future that resembles the imagined nation of Beyene Haile where everyone has the opportunity to carve his own stone of his dreams and it would perfectly fit in to the wall as a result of having the same Imagined nation, or what we usually call a united vision.