

BOOK REVIEW

By Solomon E. Gebre Selassie

DELIVERANCE: A Tale of Colliding Passions and the Muse of Forgiveness

Author: Professor Bereket Habte Selassie

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This is a book essentially about the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP). The author is no stranger to most Ethiopians and Eritreans. He held several positions of power in Ethiopia, such as Attorney General, Associate Justice of Ethiopia's Supreme Court, Vice Minister of Interior, and Mayor of the Eastern Ethiopian City of Harer. After switching sides by going over to Eritrea, he was mostly known as the principal architect of Eritrea's constitution which never saw the light of day. After a falling out with the Isayas regime, he is currently Professor of African and Afro American studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and he also teaches at the School of Law there.

The book is a historical novel. In stark contrast to other novels about the EPRP, such as *Mirkogna* and *Ye Suf Abeba*, the reader does not need to strain her imagination to determine the type of book Professor Bereket's *Deliverance* is. "Historical Novel" is prominently featured in the book's front cover and beginning pages.

The first question that might come up might be why Professor Bereket would be interested in EPRP to write a rather lengthy book on the subject. After all, he has written other books whose themes are mainly the reflections of his experience: "*The Making of the Eritrean Constitution*" (2003), "*The Crown and the Pen: The Memoirs of a Lawyer Turned Rebel*"(2007), and "*Wounded Nation: How a Once Promising Eritrea Was Betrayed and Its Future Compromised*" (2010).

Based on the interview he gave to Kassahun Seboka of Australia's SBS radio about *Deliverance*, some of his essays and the book under review here, Professor Bereket appears to be pushing a not clearly stated, but a highly implied theory. The working assumption seems to say that had EPRP and Meison joined hands during the Ethiopian revolution instead of waging an internecine war, the political history of the region (the Ethio-Eritrea relation among others) might have changed. Intertwined with this may be the author's possible remorse at the separation of Eritrea whose post mortem he lamented in his 2010 book.

To that effect, *Deliverance* weaves a narration of struggle, love, and unity. The main protagonists are mostly EPRP: Dr. Abera, an EPRP secret member who officially is the Prime Minister's advisor; Mersha, who is the leader of the Union of Veteran Fighters for Justice -UVFJ (more on this entity later), Alemu, who turns up to be a spy working for the Dergue within EPRP, Fikre, Abdul majid, Saba, and her sister Firehiwot, and Ayelech. Among the leaders of EPRP, there is Meskelu, who the writer tells us, in no ambiguous terms, is Berhane Meskel Redda, and Zerai who might stand in for Zer'u.

There is also a character the author brings out as an abandoned orphan left at a church's compound, and loved by the *Merigeta* and *Qes Gebez*, who later gets adopted by two EPRP militants, Yohannes and Misraq. This character is Ghebre Kristos, and his main role is to advocate for the respectability and rights of Eritreans in Ethiopia. Although the author does not flesh out whether these rights are based on purely humanitarian grounds, or if they have legal basis, Ghebre Kristos challenges the UVFJ members to take up with fervor the cause of Eritreans in Ethiopia. The author could have mentioned the kindness some Ethiopian showed to the evicted Eritreans by providing food and water for their journey. He may also not be aware of the fact that EPRP issued a press release in 1994 condemning the actions of TPLF/EPRDF in expelling Eritreans from Ethiopia.

Starting on page 181 and ending on page 198, the author shares with the reader his lawyerly talents by displaying court proceedings in the trial of Fikre as the accused EPRP "anarchist". The prosecutor, defense lawyer and the judge partake in legal back and forth. One only wished this to have taken place in real life during the Red Terror where tens of thousands were wantonly killed and jailed without the "luxury" of a court appearance.

It is notable also to singularly highlight the role of Dr. Abera. Although an EPRP member, Abera has been excessively obsessed with reconciling his party with *Meison*. However, as the fortunes of the dominant party turned sour largely due to *Meison's* alliance with the Dergue, Abera goes to Europe via Eritrea where the Isayas group showed him and his wife Mimi hospitality. In Europe he spurns the efforts of EDU members to recruit him to their cause. However, Abera's goal of uniting the two leftist parties is more noble in its aim than in its accomplishment.

The author could have talked about the collaboration between EPRP and *Meison* in forming the first major opposition front, COEDF, when EPLF/TPLF and OLF took power and re-arranged Ethiopia's politics in 1993.

The UVFJ is a vehicle the author wanted to use for his mission of peace and reconciliation. He partly translates his book's title as *Yeyiqrta Tsega*. EPRP leaders and members have now to accept their fate and make peace with TPLF/EPRDF. Mersha, as a leader of this group,

convenes meeting after meeting with leaders and members to find practical solutions. As a result of the rapprochement, Abera is made Ethiopia's ambassador to France, Fikre is a high official in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Mersha is a member of parliament in TPLF's parliament.

Although a saintly notion, and a much needed one at that, the idea of የይቅርታ ጸጋ has to result in a genuine National Dialogue and Reconciliation. For this to happen, the relatively, newly coined term ሰጥቶ መቀበል has to be the operational parameter. In *Deliverance*, we don't see any institutional changes as part of this give-and-take. The mere fact of high positions doled out to EPRP leaders does not signify change or a democratic beginning. Cooptation is not the same thing as Reconciliation. Rapprochement is a means to an end, and not an end in itself. It must result in the establishment of an independent electoral board, the unhindered and free operation of civic society and a practicing free press, among other institutional changes. For a party like EPRP and UVFJ, the main plank of *Yeyiqarta Tsega* must be a platform for social justice policies to be implemented, such as the narrowing of the gap between rich and poor, the eradication of famine, and a stable and settled community relation among ethnic and religious groups.

On a lighter note, the author always presents French wine at every celebration. One feels bad for Ethiopian wine makers, such as Guder. Professor Bereket sprinkles his English writing with Amharic, French, Tigrigna and Afan Oromo phrases (he may have picked the latter during his tenure as Harer's mayor). The most memorable is *Dubbin Abultu* in Afan Oromo which the elders invoke to postpone a knotty issue so antagonists take their time to cool off. Reciting a musical piece, the author says *Mohammud Mohamed (sic!) sang Aderetch Arada*, getting both the singer of the song and Mahmoud's father name wrong. Professor Bereket repeats the information he gives us about the psychoanalytic term Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) pioneered by Professor Stephen Hayes at the University of Reno in Nevada. It says one has to accept the pain with committed action to lead the life of one's choice despite the pain. UVFJ was able to deal with spy Alemu using ACT, instead of the customary torture and severe punishment. ACT is fully described first on page 254 and then repeated verbatim on page 318.

For an 84-year old scholar, these errors pale in comparison to the monumental theme he advocated for in a genre (novel) he said he enjoyed while learning the law. We wish Professor Bereket more productive years.

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