



## Aethiopia 12 (2009)

International Journal of Ethiopian and  
Eritrean Studies

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BAIRU TAFLA, Universität Hamburg

Personalia

*In memoriam Däggazmač Zewde Gebre-Sellassie (1926–2008)*

Aethiopia 12 (2009), 221–223

ISSN: 1430–1938

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Published by

Universität Hamburg

Asien Afrika Institut, Abteilung Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik

Hiob Ludolf Zentrum für Äthiopistik

#### Personalia

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#### In memoriam

#### *Däggazmač* Zewde Gebre-Sellassie (1926–2008)

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Scholars of African history often compare the passing away of a knowledgeable person to a library consumed by conflagration. That is precisely what happened when the Ethiopian luminary, Dr. *Däggazmač* Zewde Gebre-Sellassie (Zäwde Gäbrä Šəllase), died of illness in Addis Abäba on 15 December 2008. He harmoniously combined oral tradition with profound western education; and, he readily availed of them to any academic who sought his assistance. His popularity among all walks of life was immense. His funeral, which took place at the patriotic cemetery of the Trinity Ca-

thedral, was attended by a huge crowd of mourners. The lawyer, *Ato Tāšomā Gābrā Maryam* who read out the eulogy, praised him for his contribution in the making of the various Ethiopian codes of law. A week-long exhibition of his works and photos, accompanied by speeches of scholars and family members, was also held in his memory at the main campus of Addis Ababa University. The focus was on his academic excellence, his extraordinary ability to remember events of the past, his redoubtable integrity, his jovial personality, his astounding adeptness, and his playful wit. Space does not allow us to assess each of these qualities and, hence, brief mention will have to be made only of his academic activities and official appointments.

Dr. *Däggazmač Zewde* was born on 12 October 1926 in the village of *Ĝäldu* in the subdistrict of *Mečča*, to the north-west of Addis Abāba where his father was relegated. He received his rudimentary education in Addis Abāba under a tutor and went to school in Jerusalem and Cairo respectively where his mother, *Wälättä Ĕsraʾel Šəyyum*, stayed during the Fascist occupation of Ethiopia. After the liberation, he enrolled at the H.S.I secondary school in Addis Abāba and subsequently joined the University of Exeter, England, where he studied English literature. This was followed by legal training at Oxford, at the conclusion of which he was called to the Bar, Lincoln's Inn, London. After a long interval, during which he held various public offices in Ethiopia, he returned to Oxford and earned his Dr. phil. in the composite field of history, politics and economics.

Since his return home in the early 1950s, he held various offices, including that of deputy prime minister. The *Who's Who in Africa* (London 1975, page 1167) summarily lists them as follows:

“Economic attache, later Head of Press, Information and Administration Division, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1951–53, Director-General of Maritime Affairs, 1953–55, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Public Works, Transport and Civil Aviation, 1955–57, Mayor and Governor of Addis Ababa, 1957–59, Ambassador to Somalia, 1959–60, Minister of Justice, 1961–63, Permanent Representative to the United Nations, 1972–74, Minister of the Interior, March–May 1974, Minister of Foreign Affairs, May 1974–75.”

“1975” mentioned in the above citation is of course inaccurate, because he had already given up his office in November 1974 on account of the Provisional Military Administrative Council's (*Därg*) summary execution of high government officials of the previous regime. Instead, he went in exile and eventually became vice-president of the United Nations Economic and Social Council, and subsequently worked for several years as advisor to the

secretariat of the United Nations. Throughout his services, he received national honours from at least seven sovereign states, including the Federal Republic of Germany.

Most of the official positions he held within the Ethiopian government were actually not of his choice, but rather royal obligations, though he executed all duties with great devotion. In spite of his aristocratic descent and close relations with the imperial house, Zewde apparently did not attach himself to a particular political camp. As far as political upheavals of the region are concerned, he believed in the resolution of conflicts by mediation in accordance with the tradition. Together with some prominent Ethiopians, he tried to mediate between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 1998, and in the national tug-of-war that ensued from the contended parliamentary election of 2005. Basically, his interest lay in academic activities, and he would certainly have preferred to be attached to the university.

In 1963, he begged for an imperial dispensation to be relieved of his political appointments and returned to Oxford where he remained as senior member of St Anthony's College until 1971. Besides, he held several academic positions elsewhere: visiting lecturer at the University of California, 1965; Fellow of United Nations Training and Research (UNITAR), 1975; and 1975–76, Fellow of Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars, Smithsonian Institute. A monograph he wrote under the auspices of the last institution entitled: "Eritrea and Ethiopia in the Context of the Red Sea and Africa" still awaits publication. Another work which has remained in ms. form is the "Historical Perspective of Drought and Famine in Africa, a study for The Club of Rome". Among his published works, the most prominent one is the impeccable monograph on the second half of the nineteenth-century: "Yohannes IV of Ethiopia: A Political Biography", Oxford, 1975. Time did not allow to compile all his articles published in various journals and collective works. Perhaps the last published essay has been "Continuity and Discontinuity in Menelik's Foreign Policy"<sup>3</sup>.

*Däggazmač* Zewde returned to Ethiopia after the fall of the *Därg* and continued to live in Addis Abäba. But it was not altogether a happy life, though he tried his best not to show it. Many of his relations, peers and friends were gone; his house, which had been confiscated by the *Därg*, was never reinstated to him; and above all, he lost his only son, Ezana, in an accident in New York. Zewde was survived by his wife, *W/o Šähay Ar'aya* and their two daughters.

<sup>3</sup> Published in: PAULOS MILKIAS – GETACHEW METAFERIA (eds.), *The Battle of Adwa. Reflections on Ethiopia's Historic Victory against European Colonialism* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2005) pp. 89–132.