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## Personalia

*In memoriam Andreas Eshete (ፎንዳላ ገሰገሳ, 1945–2024)*

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around him—he quietly intervened to solve issues for people whose life circumstances or trajectories were challenging or otherwise insurmountable and took a personal interest in the professional development of promising students. Another friend and colleague, Masresha Fetene, the then Vice President for Research at the AAU, recalls that Andreas was a teacher who would weep over the injustices his students endured. Andreas’s academic focus on topics in justice, poverty, and freedom from hunger were not merely intellectual pursuits but lived values.<sup>2</sup> It seemed tolerance was engraved in him—for him, the formative value of modernity<sup>3</sup> and his core commitment to individual liberty aligned in his private life as it did in his public engagements and teaching philosophy.

Andreas Eshete was born in Addis Abäba on 23 Yäkkatit 1937 EC (= 2 March 1945 CE), to his father Əšäte Täsämma and his mother Mänbärä Gäbrä Maryam. He completed high school at the Mənilək II School, co-authoring his first work titled ‘Self-help in Ethiopia’ with Richard Pankhurst when he was 13, which appeared in *Ethiopia Observer* in 1958. He left Addis Abäba for college, completing his first degree in Philosophy at Williams College in New England, later earning his PhD in 1970 from Yale University in the same discipline. He was only in his twenties when he began teaching philosophy at Brown University, the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), the University of California Berkley, and the University of Pennsylvania. He later joined the School of Law at Addis Ababa University and went on to lead it as its president in 2003.

In his academic work, Andreas was above all a student of liberalism and its greatest exponent—despite, or precisely because of, his own socialist convictions. He often spoke of the impact that the publication of John Rawls 1971 book, *A Theory of Justice*,<sup>4</sup> had on him.<sup>5</sup> He immediately recognized the challenge that Rawls’s depiction and defense of a social democratic vision of liberalism presented to socialist, and other, detractors of liberal political morality. His early

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Andreas Eshete, ‘Implementing Human Rights and a Democratic Constitution in Ethiopia’, *Issue: A Journal of Opinion*, 21/1–2 (= *Focus: Toward a New African Political Order: African Perspectives on Democratization Processes, Regional Conflict Management*) (1993), 8–13, 9.

<sup>3</sup> Andreas Eshete and Samuel Assefa, ‘Reflections on Expanding Ethiopia’s Democratic Space’, in Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, ed., *Reflections on Expanding Ethiopia’s Democratic Space: Aspirations, Opportunities, Choices*, contributions by Mohamed Salih, Andreas Eshete, and Samuel Assefa, This publication is the outcome of a conference jointly organized by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Ethiopia (FES) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) in September 2018 (Addis Ababa: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2018), 42–49, 48.

<sup>4</sup> J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA–London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971).

<sup>5</sup> I’m grateful to Samuel Assefa for the information presented in this section.

essay, ‘Contractarianism and the Scope of Justice’,<sup>6</sup> was one of the earliest leftist attempts at a Marxist response to Rawls’s seminal work. In moral philosophy, Andreas is particularly remembered for his article titled ‘Fraternity’,<sup>7</sup> in which he made the case for fraternity as a fundamental public ideal. The other two ideals thrown up by the French Revolution—liberty and equality—had long afterlives in the two most important political ideologies of the modern age, liberalism and socialism, respectively. Fraternity’s vexed association with modern nationalism encouraged hostility amongst liberals and socialists alike. Andreas, however, viewed fraternity as a foundational value, essential for the true realization of the two other ideals.

Andreas’s political activism began during his time at Williams College, serving as a Freedom Rider during the Civil Rights Movement. At Yale, he was involved in the student strikes and the 1970 May Day Rally in support of members of the Black Panther Party on trial in New Haven. This was also the time when Andreas became a founding member, and occasional president, of the Ethiopian Student Union in North America (ESUNA),<sup>8</sup> as well as an editor of its flagship publication *Challenge*. By his own agency and by dint of circumstance, Andreas belonged to *that generation* (ያ ትውልድ, *Ya Təwlədd*, as they are dubbed) of revolutionary Ethiopians of the 1960s, whom he considered ‘the midwives’ of Ethiopian modernity. Andreas, along with others in the leadership of the ESUNA, played a pivotal role in transitioning it from a non-political, cultural, and social network to a pointedly political organization committed to radical change in Ethiopia.

Later, he was among the earliest members of the መላ ኢትዮጵያ ሶሻሊስት ንቅናቄ (*Mälla Ityopya Sošalist Nəqənnəqe*, known as MEISON following the Amharic acronym), or the ‘All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement’.<sup>9</sup> Ethiopian students of the 1960s, although belonging to different leftist parties and groups, drove the revolution of 1974 which uprooted Ethiopia’s monarchic system in hopes of replacing it with an egalitarian Marxist-socialist state that would address Ethiopia’s glaring problems: poverty and the question of nations and nationalities. The latter dealt with how to understand the different groups of people in Ethiopia and the history of subjugation they incurred by Amharic-speaking administrators. The question that was primarily opined critically but rather shortly by Walleign Mekonnen in

<sup>6</sup> Andreas Eshete, ‘Contractarianism and the Scope of Justice’, *Ethics*, 85/1 (1974), 38–49.

<sup>7</sup> Andreas Eshete, ‘Fraternity’, *The Review of Metaphysics*, 35/1 (1981), 27–44.

<sup>8</sup> First known as the Ethiopian Students Association in North America (ESANA), then later renamed to the Ethiopian Students Union in North America.

<sup>9</sup> Though he would shortly leave the party.

1969<sup>10</sup> entertained the idea that Ethiopia had existed as a prison of different peoples, nations, and nationalities, who were under the cultural—and related economic—subjugation of Amharic speakers, and that either a solution had to be found to maintain the equality of all, or a means of self-governance had to be allowed if the solution of protecting equality for all remained elusive.

Andreas had published two pieces on *this* national question in *Challenge*, the first under his own name and the second much debated piece under the pseudonym ‘Tumtu Lencho’. These pieces took issue with the blanket endorsement of nationalist movements for secession.<sup>11</sup> His contributions were widely received as mounting a hostile pushback against this powerful new current within the student movement, leading to his denunciation by a generation of younger student activists and even demonstrations against him being an ‘old-guard reactionary’. The irony here is how, decades later, he was again denounced for his stance on the national question, albeit this time for his sympathetic reception of a new constitutional order that enshrined the right to self-determination up to, and including, secession.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, whereas in his younger years he was denounced for failing to show solidarity with the movement for Eritrean independence, he was criticised for displaying excessive solidarity and identification with the newly independent Eritrea in the 1990s. He was famously accused of downplaying the number of Ethiopians forcibly removed from Eritrea in the humiliating display of ‘exchange of citizens’ prior to the devastating war between the two countries from 1998–2000. He was also unpopular for supporting the Meles Zenawi regime (the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front, EPRDF, 1991–2019, though Meles Zenawi himself died in 2012) after the May 2005 elections, or at least for the public silence he exhibited. A close personal friend of Meles and his family, many puzzle about how the usually sagacious Andreas was able to *tolerate* the

<sup>10</sup> See Walleign Mekonnen, ‘On the Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia’, *Struggle*, underground student publication of the Haile Selassie I University Students’ Union (USUAA), 5/2 (1969).

<sup>11</sup> Two friends corroborated the story, one of whom is Samuel Assefa. My attempts to find the article in *Challenge* have been unsuccessful. It should be noted that the somewhat polemical two-page introduction to the piece was not by Andreas but was added post-submission by the editors of *Challenge*.

<sup>12</sup> See Article 39 of the 1995 Ethiopian constitution: Federal Negarit Gazeta 1995. ‘Proclamation of the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia’, ፌዴራል ነገረት ገጽግጽ. *Federal Negarit Gazeta*, 1/1 (21 August 1995), 1–38. A transcript of the English part is accessible at *World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO)* (2025), <https://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/et/et007en.pdf>, accessed on 22 October 2025.

somewhat bellicose arrogance displayed by this regime. Such controversies seem to have characterized Andreas's political and intellectual life.<sup>13</sup>

And here, our task haunts us. Primarily, is there necessarily a contradiction or are these simply the result of having lived a life in public since a very young age? For those who assume there is a contradiction, should we then understand the intellectual Andreas as being separate from the political Andreas, and place him among the great intellectuals of our world who could not live their philosophies because of politics? Or is our job to present the evolution in Andreas's life—and to reflect with curiosity on how a generation who 'midwived' modernity had to navigate currents within and beyond their personal lives and times to propel change?

There are, naturally, staunch opponents to the characterization of a conflicted legacy. In a memoriam published in the *Boston Review* by a group of prominent academics and Ethiopia watchers, Andreas was hailed as 'the embodiment of fifty years of the progressive movement in Ethiopia'.<sup>14</sup> Tekalign Woldemariam, another close colleague and the vice president of the AAU from 2008 until 2011, suggests that part of the reason for this idea of a contradiction is that Andreas was the kind of man to harmonize seemingly contradictory things and stood as a

<sup>13</sup> Since what follows in the coming pages is an intellectual portrait, I write here some of the things Andreas was involved with following the change in government in 1991 which brought him back to Ethiopia. He had since then served in various capacities and across a wide range of positions. Andreas was professor of philosophy at the AAU, and from 2003 until 2011 its president. (The AAU Website says 2003 though other sources write 2004, <https://www.aau.edu.et/presidents>, accessed on 22 October 2025). He was also advisor to the Prime Minister of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (Meles Zenawi, head of state from 1991–2012), and UNESCO Chair for Human Rights, Peace and Democracy. He was Chair of the Federalism Forum hosted by Ethiopia; member of the Association for the Return of the Maqdala Ethiopian Treasures; Chair of the Commemoration of the Centennial of the Battle of Adwa; Coordinator for Constitutional and Governance Issues at the Inter-Africa Group; Chair of the Interim Board of the African Union Human Rights Memorial Project, member of the Scientific Committee on Labour History of Africa; Deputy Chair of the Tana High-Level Forum; and Member of the Board of Forum of Federations. This information is gathered from the following: Yale University, *Yale Young African Scholars* (2025), <https://africanscholars.yale.edu/people/andreas-eshete>, accessed on 22 October 2025, while other obituaries which were also of some help, for instance: Ephraim Isaac, J. Cohen, Abdul Mohammed, Mulugeta Gebrehiwot, A. de Waal, and Solomon Dersso, 'Remembering Andreas Eshete', *Boston Review* (2024), <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/remembering-andreas-eshete/>, accessed on 22 October 2025; Mehari Taddele Maru, 'Andreas Esheté (1945–2024): A Tribute', *The Elephant* (2024) <https://www.theelephant.info/analysis/2024/09/19/andreas-eshete-1945-2024-a-tribute/>, accessed on 22 October 2025.

<sup>14</sup> See fn. 13, 'Remembering Andreas Eshete', *Boston Review* (2024).

maverick who would not explain himself to all until closely asked to explain his reasoning. And he always had one. ‘He was a listener, and as long as nothing was contradictory for him, he saw no reason to explain himself’, he adds.<sup>15</sup> In a similar vein, Samuel Assefa points out that Andreas saw the EPRDF as the true heir of the student movement and the tradition of the Ethiopian left. As such, according to him, rather than the charges of political inconsistency and intellectual dissonance, sometimes hurled at Andreas, he might have more legitimately been accused of stubborn adherence to his youthful commitments and of being too true to his earlier self.

In a quest to encourage readers to reach their own conclusions, I share some of the activities Andreas was engaged in to explore the balance of a life lived in the public eye.

In the years of the EPRDF rule, Andreas tried to maintain his integrity as an independent thinker, philosopher, and influential intellectual. He appeared to embrace the government’s political project of ethnic-federalism (also known as multi-national federalism), though he was often critical, especially about aspects of judicial reform. He was appointed president of the AAU two years before the May 2005 elections, which was a period of relative freedom of media and of politics in general in the country. Andreas had the liberty to implement some of his visions of elevating the AAU to a humane center of knowledge and a space of open dialogue, tolerance, and discussion. In line with this vision, the university was host to the first few debates of the May 2005 elections, which proved to be immensely popular. He also envisioned autonomy for the university and independence from state intervention. For instance, Andreas deviated from the reach of EPRDF’s ideological influence empowering the director of the AAU Press to publish such works as a collected volume titled *Ethnic-Federalism*,<sup>16</sup> which contradicted the government’s description of its projected vision for the country.

Meanwhile, government demands manifested in its expectation of an accelerated launch of graduate programs and equally fast-paced expansion of the university system—unrealistic in the face of limited trained faculty and resources.

<sup>15</sup> One can also watch the speech that Tekalign Woldemariam gave at a memorial service held at the AAU for Andreas: የፕሮፌሰር አንድሪያስ አሸቱ የቀብር እና የሽኝት ፕሮግራም ከአዲስ አበባ ዩኒቨርሲቲ እስከ ቅድስ ስላኤ [sic] (*Yäprofesär Endriyas Ešäte yäqäbär ənna yäšəññət program kät Addis Abäba Yunivärsəti əskä Qəddəs[t] [Š]əllase*, ‘Professor Andreas Eshete’s funeral and funeral program from Addis Ababa University to Qəddəst Šəllase church’) n.d., (YouTube channel) ኮሮጆ ሜዲያ – Korojo Media, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LiVX7Smo7K4>, accessed 22 October 2025.

<sup>16</sup> This is: D. Turton, ed., *Ethnic Federalism: The Ethiopian Experience in Comparative Perspective*, with an Afterword by Christopher Clapham, East African Studies (Oxford: James Currey; Athens, OH: Ohio University Press; Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2006).

The university was accused of getting in its own way and bottlenecking the process that now involved training and teaching students to serve as instant faculty members in the then exponentially burgeoning tertiary education landscape across the country. Andreas responded by increasing admission numbers of graduate students and working to increase its resource capacities through recruitment of academics and researchers from among the Ethiopian diaspora. He also reluctantly adopted the Business Process Re-engineering (BPR) assessment model imposed by the Ministry of Education.<sup>17</sup>

Protecting students was also important to Andreas. Following the May 2005 elections, he and the then acting president of the university (Samuel Assefa) resisted government demands to rush re-opening the university amidst a highly volatile political situation. Andreas and senior leadership also instituted the rights of Muslim students to worship on campus in direct opposition to government mandate. Samuel Assefa says part of the confusion is that since the fall of the monarchy, it was never made clear which idea of secularism Ethiopia's governments considered binding: protection of the state from religion, or that of religion from the state. In cases where political highhandedness was allowed within the AAU, as when Oromo students were suspended for a limited time for holding a sit-in demonstration on campus, Tekalign Woldemariam said, 'Andreas attempted to transform the university into the platform of discussion and public relevance he envisioned for it, while keeping student activism within certain limits'.

Beyond his deep personal connection to literature, theatre, and the arts, Andreas built institutions to elevate study and excellence in these fields.<sup>18</sup> He used the occasion of creating the new multidisciplinary arts college to name it Skunder Boghossian College of Performing and Visual Arts after the pioneer artist, housing theater and arts departments. Similarly, in a nod to the founders and notable contributors, the School of Fine Arts was named the Alle School of Fine Arts and Design, and the theater department after the playwright Yoftahe Nəgusse. Notable theatre director Abatä Mäkuriya was invited to teach and develop experimental performance projects at the university to further his decades-old effort of cultivating young actors and directors. Yared School of Music was brought into the AAU system, and its academic curriculum made into an accredited degree program.

<sup>17</sup> One can read more here: Abebe Teklehaimanot, Belayneh Yibeltal, Mekbib Alemu, Mesay Gebremariam, Workneh Negatu, and Abye Tasse, n.d. 'Business Process Re-engineering (BPR) in AAU: Resource Mobilization Process, Situation Analysis (AS-IS) Report', <https://www.ethiopianreview.com/pdf/001/AS-IS%20Resource%20Mobilization.pdf>, accessed 22 October 2025.

<sup>18</sup> The information here and in this section are taken directly from correspondences with Heran Serekebrhan, to whom I am grateful.

Andreas also oversaw the transport and long-term stewardship of formative works by modernist painter and poet Gebre Kristos Desta from Germany to Addis Abāba. They would be housed as part of the permanent exhibit in the newly renovated home of the former Crown Prince turned Gebre Kristos Museum of Modern Art in partnership with the German Goethe-Institut Addis Ababa. Andreas also found a permanent home for the then newly forming Ethiopian Academy of Science and the Arts in the home of *Blatten Geta* Hərüy Wäldä Śəllase. Further, appointing Masresha Fetene as head of the Addis Ababa University Press led to a doubling of the number of publications annually, including works that had been out of print for decades.<sup>19</sup> Related to this, a lively culture of reading and hosting book launches was encouraged through book festivals and discussion programs.

After leaving the university, Andreas appeared occasionally on TV or radio to discuss philosophy and political history. Other times he would be seen on TV arguing for or against some government initiative, for instance, as seen with his discussion of the need for holding elections in 2020 when the government of the time attempted to use COVID as an excuse to postpone. He was also a vocal opponent of the war in Təgray (November 2020 to 2022) and the suffering unleashed there,<sup>20</sup> making repeated calls for a peaceful resolution.

Over the years, Andreas hosted gatherings at his home in Sar Bet, inviting a wide assortment of friends from all sorts of backgrounds and worldviews. This is also how I met him, for the first and last time. A bunch of us were gathered in a living room that at the same time felt like an ethnographic museum and an art gallery (a testament to his cosmopolitan tastes in art, photography, and literature), where for the afternoon he remained seated in a corner, smoking cigarettes, a quiet observer of the group gathered. I had to leave early, and he lowered his head a bit and said only, ‘መልካም ግድብ’ (*mälkam bä‘al*, ‘Happy holidays’), as I walked out headed to a feast of St Gäbrə’el that day.

<sup>19</sup> A prominent example is Mängəstu Läm̄ma [= Mengistu Lemma], መጽሐፈ ትዝታ ዘአለቃ ለግ ኃይሉ ወልደ ታሪክ (*Māṣḥafä təzzəta zä’Aläqä Läm̄ma Həyly Wäldä Tarik*, ‘Book of memories of Aläqä Läm̄ma Həyly Wäldä Tarik’) (Addis Abāba: Addis Abāba Yunivärsiti Pres, 2003 EC= 2010/2011 CE).

<sup>20</sup> The following recent report by *Le Monde* outlines the horrors that took place, with an indication of about half a million victims of rape and sexual violence during the genocidal war: M. Duhamel, ‘L’ampleur des violences sexuelles “génocidaires” subies par des centaines de milliers de femmes lors de la guerre du Tigré dévoilée dans un rapport’, *Le Monde* (22 October 2025), [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2025/10/22/1-ampleur-inedite-des-violences-sexuelles-genocidaires-menees-lors-de-la-guerre-du-tigre-pointee-dans-un-rapport\\_6648903\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2025/10/22/1-ampleur-inedite-des-violences-sexuelles-genocidaires-menees-lors-de-la-guerre-du-tigre-pointee-dans-un-rapport_6648903_3212.html), accessed on 22 October 2025.

In the end, perhaps what can be said with some certainty is that Andreas lived with a practiced awareness that transformed any hint of complacency with fearless self-reflection guided by the master virtues<sup>21</sup> of integrity and constancy. How to then remember Andreas would be as the easy-going street-smart Addis Abäbe, a towering Ethiopian intellectual, and a living, evolving testament of the Ethiopian Student Movement; a man with a rare and winning wit and charm.<sup>22</sup>

### Selected Bibliography of Andreas Eshete

The following is a selection of articles that were published and found through research spanning several months. It is, however, impossible to list here all the articles that Andreas wrote, including his *Challenge* articles. I hope that in the future it will be possible to gather as much of the philosopher's notes, writings, and unpublished material from Addis Abäba and elsewhere and produce a larger list.

#### 1958

Pankhurst, R. and Andreas Eshete, 'Self-Help in Ethiopia', *Ethiopia Observer*, 2/11 (1958), 354–364.

#### 1970

—, *The Social Structure of Freedom*, PhD Dissertation, New Haven, CT: Yale University (1970).

— 'Appraisal by an Ethiopian', in L. W. Doob, ed., *Resolving Conflict in Africa: The Fermeda Workshop*, Yale Fastback (New Haven, CT–London: Yale University Press, 1970), 85–103.

#### 1974

—, 'Contractarianism and the Scope of Justice', *Ethics*, 85/1 (1974), 38–49.

#### 1981

—, 'Fraternity', *The Review of Metaphysics*, 35/1 (1981), 27–44.

#### 1982

—, 'Character, Virtue and Freedom', *Philosophy*, 57/222 (1982), 495–513.

#### 1983

—, 'Does a Lawyer's Character Matter?', in D. Luban, ed., *The Good Lawyer: Lawyers' Roles and Lawyers' Ethics* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983), 270–285.

<sup>21</sup> Andreas Eshete, 'Character, Virtue and Freedom', *Philosophy*, 57/222 (1982), 495–513, 501.

<sup>22</sup> One can listen to his interview with Maaza Birru on Sheger FM: ሙአዛ ብሩ ከእና አንድርያስ እሸቱ ጋር፡ ክፍል 1 ሸገር ኤፍ ኤም (Mä'aza Bərru kǎ'Andrəyas Əšäte gar, kəfəl 1, Šəggär ef em, 'Mä'aza Bərru with Andrəyas Əšäte, part 1, Sheger FM') n.d., (YouTube) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_t9Kjmah6Wc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_t9Kjmah6Wc), accessed on 22 October 2025.

**1985**

- , 'Review of Bhikhu Parekh, *Marx's Theory of Ideology* (Baltimore, MD–London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1982)', *The Philosophical Review*, 94/2 (1985), 281–286.

**1989**

- , 'Beyond National Self-Determination: A Comment', in *Conflict and Conflict Resolution in the Horn of Africa: Proceedings of the First International Conference on the Horn of Africa, May 17, 1986, New York* (New York, NY: Center for the Study of the Horn of Africa, New School for Social Research, 1989), 23–28.

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**2001**

- , 'The Protagonists in Constitution-Making in Ethiopia', in G. Hyden and D. Venter, eds, *Constitution-Making and Democratisation in Africa*, African Century Publications Series, 6 (Pretoria: Africa Institute of South Africa, 2001), 69–43.

**2007**

- , 'Preface', *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 40/1–2 (= *Festschrift Dedicated in Honour of Prof. Richard Pankhurst & Mrs. Rita Pankhurst*) (2007), viii–ix.

**2009**

- , 'Foreword', in Salah M. Hassan and C. E. Ray, eds, *Darfur and the Crisis of Governance in Sudan: A Critical Reader* (Ithaca, NY–London: Cornell University Press, 2009), 10–11.

**2012**

- , 'Modernity: Its Title to Uniqueness and its Advent in Ethiopia', in Elizabeth Wolde Giorgis, ed., *What is 'Zemenawinet'? – Perspectives on Ethiopian Modernity* (Addis Ababa: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2012), 10–26.

**2013**

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**2018**

- and Samuel Assefa, 'Reflections on Expanding Ethiopia's Democratic Space', in *Reflections on Expanding Ethiopia's Democratic Space: Aspirations, Opportunities, Choices*, contributions by Mohamed Salih, Andreas Eshete, and Samuel Assefa, This publication is the outcome of a conference jointly organized by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Ethiopia (FES) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) in September 2018 (Addis Ababa: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2018), 42–49.