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Personalia

In memoriam Aberra Jembere (1928–2004)

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Personalia

ideal that social anthropology should not remain an affair of Westerners researching the “exotic” other.

In 1994 he joined Asmara University as a lecturer and researcher, and was instrumental in building up the Department of Anthropology and Sociology; he also served as the Department Chair. As the only Kunama academic to be a member of the Constitutional Commission (1995-97), he had the chance to participate in the drafting of Eritrea’s Constitution. He also served on the Electoral Board, and the Ministry of Education Committee for Writing Children’s Books, thus being quite influential in the promotion of Kunama literacy. Well integrated in an international network of academics, being widely published and believing in the necessity of a steady exchange of ideas and research findings, he regularly participated at international conferences and served as a visiting scholar at: Yale University (Agrarian Studies Program, Institution for Social and Policy Studies, 1992–94), Leiden University (*Afrika Studie Centrum*, 2001) and in Japan (Japan Society for the Promotion of Science), among others. As a member of an authorized delegation from Asmara University he attended the XVth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies in Hamburg (July 2003), presenting the results of his research on the Aari and discussing them, e.g., with younger Japanese colleagues following in his footsteps in that area. When he came back from a subsequent research stay in Rome, the complicated political situation in his country led to a short imprisonment and the immediate dismissal from his post, due to his participation at the conference, which was misunderstood as being an “Ethiopian” conference. Retiring to Haykota in his native Kunamaland, he soon after contracted cerebral malaria.

He is survived by his parents, his wife Aster Beyene and his daughter Amaale. His planned and much expected research on Kunama history could not be finished, but he will be remembered as a most helpful, adaptable and openminded researcher, encouraging his students and helping foreign scholars as a well-informed advisor.

In memoriam Aberra Jembere (1928–2004)

Jon Abbink, African Studies Centre, Leiden,
and Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam

Dr. Aberra Jembere, a notable Ethiopian public figure and scholar of law, died on 23 March 2004 in Stockholm, Sweden, where he had been undergoing medical treatment. His funeral took place shortly afterwards in Addis Ababa at the Trinity Cathedral cemetery, in a major public ceremony at-

tended by several thousand people. His unexpected passing is regretted by many friends and colleagues in- and outside Ethiopia.

Aberra Jembere was born in the village of Ad'a in central Ethiopia in 1928. His parents were of peasant background and divorced when he was still young. He was a talented and hardworking student, passed his elementary and secondary schooling and went on to study law and public administration (B.A. 1962, Bachelor of Laws 1967) at Haile Selassie I University (now Addis Ababa University [AAU]) in Addis Ababa. He worked as an administrator, lawyer and teacher. Until 1974 he held various positions and public functions in Ethiopia, among them Secretary-General (Vice-Minister) of the Ethiopian Council of Ministers, Head of Legal and Parliamentary Affairs in the Prime Minister's Office with the rank of Minister of State (until 1974), administrator of the Haile Selassie I Foundation, Secretary-General of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church head office, and Director of the Ethiopian Red Cross Society. He was intimately familiar with imperial politics, having started his career as civil servant in the Private Secretariat of the Emperor.

In the time of the *Derg*-government (1974–1991), Aberra Jembere was imprisoned for eight years in the dungeons of the Grand Palace in Addis Ababa, without any charges ever brought and often in fear of execution, which happened arbitrarily to many of his co-prisoners. His prison experiences are described in his book *Agony in the Grand Palace* (Addis Ababa, Shama Books, 2002). When he was released in 1982, he devoted himself with characteristic enthusiasm and energy – to make up for the lost years, so to speak – to public life, to teaching at AAU, and also research on Ethiopia's legal history. The project to write a book on this was initiated during his prison years. Later, Aberra Jembere also became an advisor to the Ethiopian Minister of Law and Justice and a member of the National *Shengo* (Ethiopian parliament). In addition, he became active again as a member or chairman of numerous administrative boards and committees of civic organisations, charities and international organisations in Ethiopia, among them the Red Cross and the Rotary Club. During his life he received various high state honours, e.g. the Order of Menilik II, the Order of the Star of Ethiopia (two grades), and the Gold Medal and Certificate of the Ethiopian Red Cross for his national and international work for the Red Cross Society.

Until his death, Aberra Jembere was an assistant professor of Law at AAU's Faculty of Law, where he worked since 1984. In 1996 he embarked upon a dissertation project for his Ph.D. in Law, for which he received a visiting scholarship at the African Studies Centre in Leiden, the Netherlands, and which he successfully defended in 1998 at the Erasmus Univer-

sity in Rotterdam (his dissertation was revised and published in 2000 as *An Introduction to the Legal History of Ethiopia, 1434–1974*). This study was the first English-language overview of the history of Ethiopian law and describes the main features of its unique development on the basis of indigenous customary law and Roman-Byzantine law traditions in use in the country. It has interesting sections on the customary law traditions of the various major ethnic groups and addresses the issue of legal pluralism.

Immediately after his doctorate, Aberra Jembere developed a sequel project on the recent legal history of Ethiopia since 1974, the manuscript of which was near completion when he passed away. He also contributed papers and articles in both Amharic and English to scholarly journals, conferences and encyclopaedias, and wrote literary and biographical works, e.g. on the Ethiopian Patriot Bälay Zälläqä (*Abba Kostir*, 1997) and one in press on *Ras Abäbä Arägay*. Other book manuscripts were virtually ready for publication when he died, some remained unfinished. Aberra Jembere participated in dozens of international conferences on law and on Ethiopian studies. His last international scholarly appearance was in Hamburg at the 15th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies in July 2003, where he presented a paper on the constitutional history of Ethiopia and acted as a session chairman.

His academic achievements at a relatively late age, and his evident joy in pursuing his scholarly and writing activities, were exemplary for many younger people and made him an unforgettable person, always active and developing new projects. His energy and sense of urgency to advance the field of legal studies in Ethiopia as well as to contribute to his country developing a harmonious blend of tradition and modernity in a changing world, were very inspiring. Aberra Jembere described his youth, his education and his career in a moving autobiography called *Dirsan Hiywoté*, written in 1994 and hitherto unpublished. While he encountered his share of problems, his account is without bitterness.

With Aberra Jembere a unique member of the older generation of devoted Ethiopian public civil servants has passed away. He was a remarkable human being, fundamentally committed to the development and well-being of Ethiopia and its people, deeply concerned about fair governance and accountable public policy. He was a generous and sympathetic person, always ready to help others, e.g. younger colleagues, and to extend his hospitality to those who sought him out. He remained active until the end of his life. His well-attended funeral in Addis Ababa in late March 2004 demonstrated the broad range of his contacts as well as the appeal and reputation that he had among many people in Ethiopia and elsewhere. Aberra Jembere is survived by his two sons Nurilliñ and Temesgen and other relatives. We mourn the passing of an excellent colleague and great friend.

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