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In memoriam Merid Wolde Aregay (1934/35–2008)

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In memoriam Merid Wolde Aregay (1934/35–2008)

ALESSANDRO TRIULZI, Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale”

Merid Wolde Aregay passed away on 31 December 2008, leaving a wife and three children (two sons and a daughter). It is hard to believe that Merid is no longer with us. For all those who for many years used to pace the long corridor in the second floor of the College of Social Sciences at Arat Kilo leading to the Department of History of the Addis Ababa University (AAU), the thought that ‘Prof. Merid’ would not be there waiting for you, a broad smile on his face, is hardly tolerable. For years, since the early 1970s, Merid has been there, a loyal, friendly, compassionate scholar, a witty yet self-effacing presence at the University of Addis Ababa, like in all other gatherings, both formal and informal, and important moments in the life of its History Department.

The Department was Merid’s second home. He would come every day, often including Saturday, to his office to receive students and friends, always ready to welcome a close friend or a foreign guest with the same openness and enthusiasm. No one could claim as much influence and critical enquiry, fairness and friendship, among the Department’s staff. No one could get as much respect and consent. Because Merid was not only a good scholar, but a just and open human being, whose intelligence matched his

warmth, and scholarly and family endeavors always prevailed over career and academic positions.

His research work was exacting as was his modesty in referring to it. Born in °Adwa in 1927 E.C. (i.e. 1934/35 A.D.), he got his first degree in what was then University College of Addis Ababa (UCAA, now AAU) in 1956 and an M.A. degree in Education from Harvard University in 1957 as well as an M.A. in History from the University of Chicago in 1959. The one year master after his graduation from UCAA was afforded to him as one of the bright young people sent to the United States immediately after their graduation.

He never consented to publishing his Ph.D. thesis (*Southern Ethiopia and the Christian Kingdom 1508–1708 with Special Reference to the Galla Migrations and their Consequences*) which he discussed at the School of Oriental and African Studies in 1971 as one of the first modern-trained Ethiopian professional historians to be trained abroad. He was the first Ethiopian scholar who seriously engaged himself with the Oromo question then arising among scholars and at large in the country. Equally, he was the silent, supportive and most influential force in the Department of History behind Sven Rubenson's *Acta Aethiopica*, well beyond its 3rd volume of which he was one of the co-editors. Indeed, throughout his life Merid appeared to many as the epitome of the Ethiopian scholar in its truest sense, a person of honor and justice, deeply imbued in the tradition and culture of his country, yet endowed with a curiosity for things foreign which made him a modern traditionalist of the best kind.

As such, Merid knew several local languages beside Amharic (ፕጥጥጥጥጥጥ, ገጥጥጥጥጥጥ, some Oromo) and several European languages beside English (Italian, French, Portuguese). He read a lot from different sources, and learned from them. When foreign guests visited him during their stay in Ethiopia, he always enjoyed the gift of a new book above other amenities. He used to take them out, at a private restaurant near the campus, and fed them there, as he said, in recompense.

But food and thought was not the only thing we shared with Merid. In 1972, after returning to Addis Abāba from the 4th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies which had been held in Rome at Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei in April that year, Merid headed the first Departmental project of collection of oral sources in the Ğimma area, the first of a consistent attempt by the Department of History and Institute of Ethiopian Studies of the AAU, then Haile Sellasie I University, to recover local sources through many of its B.A. and later M.A. students as a way to balance the royal chronicles' bias towards the history of the political centre. And again, 30 years later, when the Department headed a project of collecting 'local sources for development' sponsored by the Italian Cooperation, it was Me-

rid again who led the Department to the Heritage cause, and provided strong support for both staff and student involvement.

As scholars, students, old friends and colleagues of ‘Prof. Merid’, we are all deeply shocked by his departure which we can only mourn in silence and sadness, but also in thankfulness and joy for having had Merid as a ‘compagnon de route’ at some moment or period of our own lives. May his memory be an example for the younger generation of Ethiopians and Ethiopisants.

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Alessandro Triulzi

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In memoriam Diana Mary Spencer (1923–2009)

EWA BALICKA-WITAKOWSKA, Uppsala University

Diana Spencer first travelled to Ethiopia in 1964 to join her husband, Oscar, a United Nations adviser stationed in Addis Abāba. Having acquired a good knowledge of Arabic while they lived in the Sudan, she began to study Amharic in Ethiopia with a private teacher and later on in the Mission Language School in Addis Abāba. Inspired by books on Ethiopian history and travellers' accounts she set about to explore the cultural centres of the country, travelling by public busses and staying in modest countryside hotels.

In 1965, after a successful trip to Wag, Lasta and Amba Gəṣān, which resulted in important discoveries of unknown churches, manuscripts and art objects, Diana Spencer joined a research project on the history of Ethiopian art carried out by the “Friends of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies”. In this capacity, she travelled alone and extensively by mule and on foot, making some 20 trips between 1967–1975 to remote churches and monasteries in the Ethiopian highlands in search of rare manuscripts and paintings. To further this research, she studied in a traditional ecclesiastic school attached to the church of Baʾātā Maryam in Addis Abāba, where she learned Gəʿəz and Ethiopian church literature, together with theology and liturgy. She graduated at the level of the *qəne bet*.

The difficult and adventurous travels she undertook gained renown among the officials of the Ethiopian government and the hierarchy of the Ethiopian church, who encouraged her by providing letters of recommendation and important information concerning the rural network. Some of her expeditions were supported by the Crown Prince Asfa Wäsān Həylā Śəllase and the Patriarch *abunä* Theophilos.