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**Review**

FASIL YITBAREK, *Soaring on Winged Verse: The Life of Ethiopian Poet-Playwright Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin*

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## Bibliographical abbreviations used in this volume

- AE* *Annales d'Éthiopie*, Paris 1955ff.
- ÄthFor* Äthiopistische Forschungen, 1–35, ed. by E. HAMMERSCHMIDT, 36–40, ed. by S. UHLIG (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner (1–34), 1977–1992; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz (35–40), 1994–1995).
- AethFor* Aethiopistische Forschungen, 41–73, ed. by S. UHLIG (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998–2011); 74–75, ed. by A. BAUSI and S. UHLIG (*ibid.*, 2011f.); 76ff. ed. by A. BAUSI (*ibid.*, 2012ff.).
- AION* *Annali dell'Università degli studi di Napoli 'L'Orientale'*, Napoli: Università di Napoli 'L'Orientale' (former Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli), 1929ff.
- BSOAS* *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* (London, 1917ff.).
- CSCO* Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 1903ff.
- EAE* S. UHLIG, ed., *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, I: A–C; II: D–Ha; III: He–N; in cooperation with A. BAUSI, eds, IV: O–X (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010); A. BAUSI in cooperation with S. UHLIG, eds, V: Y–Z, *Supplementa, Addenda et Corrigenda, Maps, Index* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2010, 2014).
- EMML* Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library, Addis Ababa.
- JAH* *The Journal of African History*, Cambridge 1960ff.
- JES* *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, Addis Ababa 1963ff.
- OrChr* *Oriens Christianus*, Leipzig–Roma–Wiesbaden 1901ff.
- PdP* *La Parola del Passato. Rivista di studi classici*, Napoli 1946ff.
- PICES 8* TADDESE BEYENE, ed., *Proceedings of the Eighth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, University of Addis Ababa (26–30 November) 1984*, I–II (Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies–Frankfurt am Main: Frobenius Institut, Johann Wolfgang Goethe Universität, 1988–1989).
- PICES 10* C. LEPAGE and É. DELAGE, eds, *Études éthiopiennes: Actes de la X<sup>e</sup> Conférence internationale des études éthiopiennes, Paris, 24–28 août 1988* (Paris: Société française pour les études éthiopiennes, 1994).
- PO* *Patrologia Orientalis*, 1903ff.
- RIÉ* É. BERNAND, A.J. DREWES, and R. SCHNEIDER, *Recueil des inscriptions de l'Éthiopie des périodes pré-axoumite et axoumite*, I: *Les documents*, II: *Les planches* (Paris: (Académie des inscriptions et belle-lettres) Diffusion de Boccard, 1991).
- RRALm* *Rendiconti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei, Classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche*, Roma, 1892ff.
- RSE* *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, Roma, 1941–1981, Roma–Napoli, 1983ff.
- SAe* *Scriptores Aethiopici*.

## Reviews

Christian oriental studies, yet—although Littmann also wrote sketches of Ethiopic literature and edited texts, as the others did also in a few cases—their main focus was always linguistic. The comparative approach, which is characteristic of the field of Christian oriental studies, was only marginally present in their cases.

With the limitations I have described—which are to some extent unavoidable in such works—the volume will certainly remain a reference work for the history of Christian oriental studies. An index of proper names, which is unfortunately not provided, would also have been appreciated.

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FASIL YITBAREK, *Soaring on Winged Verse: The Life of Ethiopian Poet-Playwright Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin* (Los Angeles, CA: Tsehai Publishers, 2013). xii, 243 pp. Price: US-\$ 24.95. ISBN: 978-1-59907-056-8.

This book by Fasil Yitbarek (Fasil Yötbaräk) is the first book-length biography of the eminent playwright and poet Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin (Şäggaye Gäbrä Mädhän, 1936–2006). Both politically and artistically, Tsegaye was one of the giants of modern Amharic literature. Because of his overtly critical attitude to power abuse by the EPRDF, he and his works have met with a negative reception from the current government. Generally reluctant to talk about himself and his work,<sup>1</sup> towards the end of his life Tsegaye asked Fasil Yitbarek to write his biography. The book, in conformity with Tsegaye's explicit wish, was to be based solely on recorded interviews with him in Amharic. However, his death in 2006 abruptly cut short their 'biographic' meetings. Because Tsegaye was able to bring his life story only up to the year 1974, Fasil had to employ other, external sources to cover the remaining thirty-two years of the playwright's life. The result is that the biography is clearly unbalanced: whereas the years 1936–1974 take up thirty-two chapters in one hundred and fifty-seven pages, the years 1975–2006 occupy only eight chapters in forty-seven pages. But it is only this second, smaller part which is strictly speaking a biography. The first, larger part, based as it is on interviews, is closer to a memoir, except that it has a third-person narrator. On the dust-cover of the book, Wendy Belcher describes it as an 'authorized biography'. However, the fact that Fasil and Tsegaye never brought their interviews to an

<sup>1</sup> See R.K. Molvaer, *Black Lions: The Creative Lives of Modern Ethiopia's Literary Giants and Pioneers* (Lawrenceville, NJ–Asmara: The Red Sea Press, 1997), 269–274, here pp. 269–270.

end and that Tsegaye never read even a preliminary version of the book, might be called this judgement into question.

The biography begins with the unfortunate encounter between Tsegaye's father, Gabre-Medhin (Gäbrä-Mädhən), and *Ras* Täfäri, the future Emperor Ḥaylä Šəllase I, at Merkato in Addis Abäba. As a result of this meeting, Gabre-Medhin decides to leave with his wife Feleqech Dañe (Falläqäčč Daññe) for Bodda, a village near Ambo. There Tsegaye is born as the fifth child and the first son of the couple. Fasil notes that Feleqech prayed to St Gäbrä Mänfäs Qəddus to give her a baby boy and offered the child to serve in the church (pp. 22–23). In Molvaer's account, by contrast, we read that his mother promised the little Tsegaye to the saint 'for having saved them from the fire when their home was burnt down'.<sup>2</sup> This and a few more discrepancies between Fasil's book and Molvaer's short biography, based (according to Molvaer) on sources provided by Tsegaye himself, are passed over without comment. Not only that; more importantly, Fasil does not provide any bibliographic references to the materials he uses in the book. Only by studying the 'Acknowledgements' (p. 1) and the 'Preface' (p. 3) the reader will find out that he employed any references at all.

In the first part of the book, Fasil unfolds and describes bit by bit the most important events of the poet's life. There are personal details about Tsegaye's childhood, but Fasil's account concentrates primarily on his education, his formation as a playwright and then his various work positions including as general manager of the National Theatre. Once Tsegaye is admitted to school, his parents essentially disappear from the scene. Friends, colleagues and relatives also seem to play an insignificant role in his life as portrayed in the biography. Remarkably, even Tsegaye's wife, Lakech Bitew (Laqäčč Bitäw), and their life together are given short shrift in the book. The couple's third daughter, Adey (Adäy), is introduced only at the end of the book when Tsegaye is admitted to St. Barnabas Hospital in New York where she works as a pulmonologist (p. 196). Although Fasil thanks Tsegaye's wife and daughters for their 'steadfast willingness to answer [...] endless questions' (p. 1), their voices do not come through in Fasil's narration.

In general, from the moment that Tsegaye goes to school, we learn very little about his relationships with other people. The emphasis on the playwright's achievements and leaving his interpersonal relations in the background mean that we have no chance to get to know Tsegaye as a 'whole' man. In the book, we encounter a hero who faces challenges and overcomes them, as well as a saint who has many enemies, but himself always does good. Who created this image of Tsegaye? Was it Fasil, who was so overawed by

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 271.

Tsegaye that he slid into hagiography? Or was it perhaps Tsegaye, who (in Fasil's tape-recorded narrative) wanted to erect for himself a lasting monument in his own lifetime? Fasil's style tends to be overwritten, overladen with adjectives and colourful phrasing, as if Tsegaye's artistic greatness needed to be backed up by grandiloquence. This kind of narration will make it difficult for readers to relate to the book as an 'intimate window into the writer's world' (as stated on the cover). They will find little intimacy there.

In the second part of the biography, covering the years 1974–2006, Fasil barely touches upon the playwright's life. The years 1974–1998 take up only two chapters (pp. 171–187) which revolve around a few of Tsegaye's plays, his struggle with censorship, his travel to Russia as Vice Minister of Culture (nothing about the circumstances of his being appointed to this position) and his three-week imprisonment. In 1998 Tsegaye, diagnosed with severe diabetes, leaves Ethiopia for the USA where he stays with his family till his death in 2006. This last phase of the playwright's life is described in the final six relatively short chapters (pp. 189–218). In this second part of the biography, written after Tsegaye's death, the unitary image built up previously falls apart. This happens because here, for the first time, we have a chance to hear a voice other than Fasil/Tsegaye's own narrative voice: we hear directly what Abate Mekuria (Abbatä Mäk<sup>w</sup>əryä, Director of the National Theatre) and Ayalneh Mulatu (Ayyalnäh Mulatu, a poet and playwright) say about Tsegaye. In his interaction with Abate (pp. 173–174) and Ayalneh (pp. 179–182), the playwright appears as a brusque and rude egotist rather than a supportive colleague. Also, we read that Tsegaye came into overtly hostile conflict with the actors of the National Theatre, which led to their five-month imprisonment (pp. 183–184).

At this point readers may have started to ask questions. How can we know from this book what Tsegaye was really like?

Nevertheless, Fasil provides many valuable details about Tsegaye's life in a wider context. He shows how it was inextricably linked with contemporary events, both local and national. Some chapters include descriptions of Tsegaye's works such as *Ġoro dāggəf* (pp. 119–120), *Yäkärmo säw* (pp. 123–125) and *Oda Oak Oracle* (pp. 141–144). Fasil's preface is followed by an introduction by Heran Sereke-Brhan (Heran Säräkä Bərhan), the editor of the book. Based on the depiction in the book, she gives a summary of Tsegaye's life, which itself could stand as a short biography. The book ends with a glossary, six appendices<sup>3</sup> and an index. The biography is illustrated with many photographs.

<sup>3</sup> But why are the dates in Appendix I, on *Education & Awards*, given in the reverse chronological order than those in Appendices II–V?

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Fasil's book is well worth reading, not only for its portrayal of a leading figure of modern Ethiopian literature, but also as a demonstration of how hard it is to write an 'objective' biography.

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*Literatura na świecie* 7–8, (2014) (516–517), index no. 364088, Title of issue: *Etiopia* ('Ethiopia'). 423 pp. Price: PLN 16.00. PL-ISSN: 0324-8305.\*

The Polish-language monthly *Literatura na świecie* ('Literature in the World') is considered to be one of the most prestigious literary publications in Poland, presenting the most significant contemporary literary texts from around the world, as well as selections of poetry, critical texts, essays, interviews, and so on. It began publishing in 1971 with the aim of presenting fragments of world literature in high-quality translations, published for the first time in the Polish language. Each issue of the journal chooses a special focus, concentrating, for example, on the literary output of a particular author, in a given language, from a specific country or region, or on a chosen topic. The reviewed issue (no. 7-8/2014) is the first ever devoted to literature from Ethiopia and was edited by Anna Górecka, Jerzy Jarniewicz, Andrzej Kopacki, Michał Lipszyc, Piotr Sommer, Andrzej Sosnowski, Marcin Szuster, Anna Wasilewska, and Nina Gackowska.

The issue begins with a fragment of Səbḥat Gäbrä Əgzi'abəḥer's Amharic text *Letum aynägalāñ* ('I will not see the end of the night'). The excellent translation from Amharic into Polish was undertaken by Magdalena Krzyżanowska (pp. 5–61). The book was first published in French in 2004, translated from the Amharic by Francis Falceto with the participation of the author. A short introduction to Səbḥat's text written by Falceto has also been included in this issue of the journal (pp. 62–69). What makes Səbḥat's text interesting is that it was long considered too scandalous to be published in Ethiopia, and the first publication in Amharic only occurred in 2004 (with many fragments omitted), the same year as the publication of the French version (on the basis of the full manuscript), even though *Letum aynägalāñ* had been written some forty years earlier, in the early 1960s. The fragment included in the journal portrays a part of Ethiopian life rarely encountered in Ethiopian literature, openly painting a picture of the nightlife in Addis Abāba, including rather explicit descriptions of various sexual encounters,

\* Webpage of the journal: [www.literaturanaswiecie.art.pl](http://www.literaturanaswiecie.art.pl).