

A Book Review: በስግዲረዲ ንርቀርዲ. *Besikdira and Its Children*.

(Novel based on event sin Besikdria 1970)

Author: Paulos Tesfaldet (2013). Författares Bokmaskin, Stockholm, 102pp.

By Kiflemariam Hamde



Besikdira and its children, በስግዲረዲ ንርቀርዲ is the latest Blin literary work, in the fiction genre, mainly based on historical, real events in Eritrea since 1960s. The book consists of 21 chapters opening up with a Preface and Acknowledgement. In this review, I find only point out the main story lines. The narrative is centred around, but not limited to, the massacre in the village of Besikdira, 15km east of Keren town. After burning seven villages the previous days, the uninvited Ethiopian army visited Besikdira in November 30, 1970 only to destroy it. The officer (ሻምበል) Teshome, and his Amharic-speaking troops, also including Eritrean-born Kumandos, posed two immediate questions to the people in Tigrigna (only 5 adults could speak it) as the people did not understand Amharic: (1) if the village is free from bandits (ሻፍታ, *shifita*)ⁱ, in his own words bedbugs and fleas), and (2) if they were either Muslims or Christians. Mr Mender Beimnet, the village

chief, and Mr Tesfu Almedom responded that they did not know of any bandits and that the people belonged to both Christianity and Islam. Upon learning that the people did not want to get separated along religious lines, the troops forced the inhabitants into the village Mosque and shot them down indiscriminately, killing 118ⁱⁱ civilians 11 of whom were pregnant mothers, 20 were children, and the rest were youngsters and adultsⁱⁱⁱ. The author narrates in his fictional work about the details in the killing. The next day, December 1, 1970 was the turn of Ona village, only 4-5 Kms north east of Keren, when the military forces headed by Colonel Welana massacred almost 800 civilians indiscriminately, and without any notice. There was no question that the people supported the liberation movement since 1962.

The story starts off with the general political instability since the 1960s when the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) confronted Ethiopia's domination after the latter had annexed Eritrea as its 14th Province, revoking the UN arranged Federation (1952-1961). As the ELF was active in the Western lowlands, Ethiopian atrocities increased heavily and the apex of that came in the fall of 1970 when the ELF ambushed and killed General Teshome Ergetu, head of the Second Military Division in October 1970. He was heading toward his new headquarters in Keren town to crash the ELF and the people, to 'dry the sea in order to catch up the fish', i.e., to target the civilians in order

to weaken and consequently destroy the ELF. Those massacres are put in this context, and one man's life was to be compensated for by around 1000 within less than 24 hours in Besikdira and Ona. Interestingly enough, the author accounts for how the atrocities became catalyst and intensified struggle for independence.

In his fictional description, the author exemplifies the events in a life of a nuclear- and extended family members, the inhabitants of Besikdira, its environs, the Sekwina district, the Senhit Province, events all over Eritrea, the fate of youngsters in their yearning for freedom, justice and equality, and finally, the inflicting cruelty of Ethiopian soldiers. The centre stage actor becomes the family of Fickak and his wife Afiet, their only son Terexbe^{iv} who got married to the beautiful Melika and begot two sons, Aybu and Abbe. Unfortunately, on the bloody Monday massacre at Besikdira where the people were forced into a small mosque only to be shot down, ((አልገ, አግቅዕዳ, p. 57-60) the young wife of Terexbe, and the mother of the two, Malika, fell dead alongside the other 117 victims in the mosque. Survivors discovered that it was her bold that they were covered by, and that her younger son suckled her dry breasts for milk.

On the one hand, Paulos beautifully crafts the Blin language to narrate how the family not only suffered physically the painful events of the period such as imprisonment (when Terexbe was imprisoned, (ገሻዎ p. 32-37), continued house-burning (48-49), sexual harassment and abuse but also in terms of psychological inhumation. He also describes in detail some more events, such as forced displacement (ገግዳ, p. 49) etc., On the other hand, Paulos depicts how the Fickak family enjoyed the good sides of life, often highlighting underlying cultural values and societal norms, entertaining daily communal routines such as coffee break, child rearing and development, engagement, initiation rite, Blin-style brethren hood, story-telling (*dannar-jigna*, p. 12-13), neighbourly life (*gor-dannar*, 14-17), wedding festivities (*ferwenter*, p. 24-28), youth love, socialization and friendship (*wrznnet*, p. 12-15), pastoral life, initiation rite ceremonies (*Hiche, shngalle, kxan*, p. 18-23), wealth-sharing, development, dreaming for peace, avoiding hatred or disagreement, war and conflict.

The family exemplified the fate of Eritreans at that time. Terexbe was imprisoned (p. 32) because a certain informant (ፈኩታ) spied to the *Amhara*^v that Terexbe was a member of the village *lajnet*, with the responsibility for collecting the monthly dollar per family, *qesem*, which every Eritrean adult had to contribute for the liberation movement, i.e., ELF. Malika was shot dead in the Mosque, and Terexbe's parents were also dead because they could not bear the pain. Eventually, once on age, the two brothers joined ELF and the EPLF, respectively, in order to *revenge* their mother's loss in the Mosque, leaving Terexbe alone in the house (pp 77-80).

The reader also finds a lot of Blin liberation songs, praising the independence and rebuking the enemy, such as –“*Na Shugutl: Shebab Axnima genjew DeAritl*”, literally, aren't the youth reside in Deari in such a tender age” (p. 34). +A recurring worry of the author, however, lies in the never-ending disagreement between the two ‘siblings’, ELF and EPLF, that “resulted in unnecessary loss

of Eritrean lives and consequently, prolonged the independence day to 1991” (interspersed in the overall text). Paulos also notes the series of Ethiopian war crimes and major massacres and since 1961 in Eritrea, narrating the events not only as they occurred but also rhetorically in their connection to the dreams of people to live together in good or bad times, peacefully.

Finally, in 1980, the ELF and EPLF clashed in Halhal, the worst event which occurred to many Eritrean families who sided with the wrong side (p. 99-100), and Aybu shot down his own brother Abbe ‘simply assuming that he was the foe. Aybu was not alone in that incident as many other Eritreans also shared that fate’, narrates the author. The story culminates in an eventual meeting of the EPLF fighter Aybu and his father Terexbe after the latter wanted to meet his son, Abbe. Unfortunately, Aybu was forced to reveal the truth, and finally exclaimed, “Daddy, I will tell you a taboo, (ኤቢ ዲደት ድውየከ ግን), I killed my own brother even I if rejoiced at first when I thought I won over the enemy in that civil war” (p. 99). “That is the fruit of disagreement among brothers and sisters”, laments the author (p. 99-100). Disappointed, sad and frustrated, Terexbe returns home and continued living alone. Terexbe had only one hope, supporting the even much more independence movement for which he was imprisoned and waiting for the return of his only remaining family member alive, Aybu – “as did many Eritrean parents”, notes Paulos.

The concluding chapter (p. 102) is in fact a methodological note on the writing process. The author advises potential authors to follow standard referring system, interview the living witnesses of events in Eritrea, and coming up with a quality research work: “My advice to potential authors is that we have to write different kinds of literature because there lies our cultural capital. We praise those who have already written something, and at the same time we criticize those who did not write anything (yet). Future generations need to benefit from our literature as their heritage. Thus, I encourage you all to write about something” ... so that one can improve the style and content in the literature, to sustain existing knowledge and create new knowledge – for the sake of future generations” (p. 102).

This unique work in narrative genre is a welcome contribution to the literature in Blin with its rich documentation of knowledge of values, norms and daily lives, with substantial contents as well as presentation. በስግዲረዲ ንርቅርዲ^{vi}, ‘Besikdira and its Children’ fills a badly needed gap about historical events delving into Eritrean/Blin mentality in coping with problems and bad situation. I only commend Paulos work as one the boldest contribution so far on the emerging Blin (and other Eritrean) literature with its deep narration of events that will live for many generations to come.

As a reader, I enjoyed reading በስግዲረዲ ንርቅርዲ and I hope that this work will only be the beginning. አጃ ሀብረሽ ይዳን. Well-done a young author!

I recommend this book to anybody who is interested to know more closely the situation in Eritrea during (and shortly after) the war for independence from a local point of view. Those who want to develop literacy work in the Blin language are also recommended to read this book as well as those who want to write and learn in Blin script.

ⁱ When the Ethiopians referred to the liberation fronts as *shifita* (ሻፍታ) as bandits, Eritreans in general (excluding the *shikut*, *jasus*, and some of the *wedo-geba*) reacted that ‘they did know anything about *shifita*’, implicitly protesting that the ELF and later on the EPLF were not bandits but liberation fighters. *Yn shifita aerini*, runs in Blin.

ⁱⁱ There were more than 50 survivors, including this reviewer’s close relatives, who still narrate the sad events vividly. The victims, however were not only from Besikdira village but also from adjacent villages who were forced to settle in Besikdira in May 1970, including Sanqa, Hangol, Feledarb and Fissoruxw, victims from the latter two were passersby. The author mentions other displaced villages in the former Senhit District (p. 48-56).

ⁱⁱⁱ There are a couple of historical work on Ethiopian War Crimes (massacres) in Eritrea, including (1) Abba Teweldebrhan Geberemedhin and Abba Zerayakob Okbamikael, Capuchin friars (2001): መሪር ግፍፍ ኣብ በስኩራን ከባቢኣን (A Painful Massacre at Besikdira and its Environs), ጎምጳእ መንግስትኩ (Adveniat Regnum TUUM), 44th Year, Nrs 73/74, 2000-2001, page 1-14; (2) Amina Habte (2001), *Ethiopian war Crimes in Eritrea: A Case Study of the Massacres of Besik-dira and Ona in 1970*. BA thesis, Asmara University; Kiflemariam Hamde (2004) “The Impact of war and climatic changes on the environment in Eritrea: The Case in Senhit Villages” (www.daberi.org); (3) Downey, Marty & Hugh (1996), *On Heart’s Edge*. Arvada, CO: Mikerem Publications, and (4) (Habu (Fr. Athanasius) Ghebre-Ab (2013), “*The Massacre at Wekidiba: The Tragic Story of a Village in Eritrea*”, RSP, and (5) “*List of massacres committed during the Eritrean War of Independence*”, in Wikipedia.

^{iv} In *Besikdira and Its Children*, በስግዲረዲ ንርቀርዲ, the main actor Terexbe sharply contrasts with Salih “Gadi” Johar’s actor, *Ghebrebbi* in his 2010 book, *Of Kings and Bandits*. However, if one looks closely both fiction works, they complement each other, in many, many respects, in spite of the common geographical location and the suffering incurred to them by the Ethiopian army (and their collaborators), illustrating social life in the then Senhit area, rich in diversity of values, norms and languages. Issues of religion come close in both readings, *Ghebrebbi* being from a Muslim family, while Terexbe is from a Christian family. These are shown in the rites of passage, child development, training, and other issues. It seems to me that the authors communicated with each ‘in spirit’, without clashing, and thus made their point jointly that people can live together peacefully only if they accept and respect each other’s difference, the same way as the Besikdira residents refusing to get separated in terms their religion (to heaven or hell we got together’, expressed the late Mr. Meibetot Berih, a survivor in an oral communication with the reviewer, Besikdira, January 9th, 2007.

^v *Amharu* or *Amhara* in the text is used synonymously with Ethiopians and Ethiopia, connoting the Ethiopian Military Army.

^{vi} The reviewed work is in fact preceded by a dozen literary works in Blin, for example, the recent books by Medhanie Habtezhgi (2008), *Lexen (lekhen) axra-mewedi*, “The Ring which became a sore”, and (2010) *Enkie, (አንካኔ)* translated into Tigrigna as *lekas*. I hope to review these works also so that readers who do not understand Blin may be able to get more information on such literary work. For further works in Blin and on Blin, visit the Blin Language Forum, www.daberi.org