

Part 6-አልብደኒ ወዳድ - Memorial Speech by Daniel Jacob

Memorial Speech for Tekie Alibekit

Below is the little speech that I had prepared in memory of Tekie. I knew that most people if they knew English, it would be as a 3rd or 4th language, so I did not get too sophisticated with vocabulary, I wanted to be easy to understand. Regarding the adoption of the "ng" letters by the Gurage people, I co-authored this paper last year that reviews the history of Gurage writing. In Section 3.5 it discusses the letter adoption in 2013.

<https://www.unicode.org/notes/tn49/UTN49-Gurage-Orthography-v1.pdf>

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Memhir Tekie was a friend, he was my teacher, my collaborator, and as I saw him from far away, he was a star in the night sky that shone so brightly.

I like to think that I first met Tekie in July of 1998, in Addis Ababa. This is where I first became aware of him, though he may never travel there. At that time, I was working with an Information Technology organization that had the task of helping the Ethiopian Standards Agency establish a national standard for the Ge'ez alphabet.

We had just had a workshop on the topic and the next morning a man phoned us who had not been able to attend but was very desperate to meet us to show his alphabet letters so they be included in the standard. He said that he had not been able to sleep the whole night because he was so worried about it, and begged to meet us. So, we agreed of course and made an appointment to meet him at Addis Ababa University.

This man was an Agew educator named Gebreyesus Argaw, he was either an Awngi or Xamtanga speaker, he must have been in his mid-60s years of age and had been a public-school teacher his entire professional life. But he had to teach in Amharic because the school system used an Amharic curriculum and no materials were available in the Agaw languages. This was a very typical problem in Ethiopia at that time. He loved his language and was so afraid that Xamtanga would be left behind again, and the language would gradually be overtaken by Amharic.

To show us the letters of his language, he had in his hands a little orange book with the title "ብሊና ክታብጉዲ ግብራ ጋቡኸዲ", Tekie's first book. And he clutched it like it was the most precious thing he owned. Though the book was about Blin and not his language, seeing the letters that he needed for his language in a book gave them legitimacy. That's how powerful the book was to him, it gave his language validity, and he wanted the Agew to have the benefits of writing their language as he saw the Blin had.

It was a very emotional meeting and I took down the book citation. Sometime in 2000 or 2001, I was able to meet Dr. Kiflemarim by email and he introduced me to Tekie. I was so grateful, I bought two copies of the book, and later in 2001 at a conference in Silicon Valley,

in California, United States, I delivered one copy to Dr. Joseph Becker who was the Vice President of the Unicode Consortium and had been the champion of Ge'ez script in this international standard.

I placed Tekie's book in his hands and told him that *"...this is a book that your technology cannot print. So this is our goal, we want to be able to publish this book in the Unicode standard. When we can do that, Unicode will support the Blin language and we can see it as successful."* And because he could hold such a book in his hands he understood, it was no longer a hypothetical problem, but a real one that he was holding. He encouraged us to proceed.

Tekie and I would continue to communicate and work intensely on the matter and by 2004 it was accomplished. I know as a publisher that these kinds of books are not written for the author to make a profit, they are written as an act of passion and love for one's language and people. This book that Tekie had written, out of love for his language and people had traveled around the world and changed it. This love that Tekie gave us would improve the fate not just of the Blin people and language, but that love traveled to the Agew of Ethiopia and improved the future for the half million Awngi, and the 200 thousand Xamtanga who are in the same Cushitic language family.

But it did not stop there, his love would reach the Basketo language, from the Omotic family in southern Ethiopia with 100,000 speakers, who would begin to use the letters and a New Testament was published with them. Then by 2013 that love reached the Gurage language in central Ethiopia, an Ethio-Semitic language, whose population is 1.5 million, who adopted the letters for their language which they use with a different sound. Tekie lifted up all these people, more than 2 million.

Yet these people will never know what Tekie has done for them. But we do, we know, and we will remember.

Whenever I see the ng letters on a computer screen or mobile phone, I see Tekie's hand and know that his love is with me. The world today would indeed be much different without our dear friend Memhir Tekie, may he rest in peace.