

Prolog

Mihreteab Gebrehiwet

“Hey, there is so much clutter around the house!” complained my wife. “Please, whatever you deem trivial, shred and dispose of it!” tendered her advice. That’s when I embarked on a tedious task of rummaging through piles of old documents, pamphlets and letters. To my surprise, I stumbled on a nugget with historical etching, an article from 1993 written by our beloved Dr. Ghidewon Abay Asmerom: “**Reflections on our coming Referendum.**”

The article has a cogent, graphic way of depicting the myriad sacrifices laid at the altar of freedom. The Tigrigna transliteration of Referendum as “the fruit of the blood” alludes to the fact that a torrent of sacrificial blood from multiple generations was necessary to bring about the independence of Eritrea and the apocalypse of Ethiopian rule. Winning the war militarily was not enough. The stamp of approval for statehood was imperative. The name of the game, the last phase of the arduous and tortuous struggle, was Referendum. Eritreans embraced it as their defining moment while advocates of greater Ethiopia lamented it as an ill-advised and regrettable crossing of the Rubicon. The ill-wishers predicted Eritrea’s future to be bleak for “lack of economic viability and ethnic/religious harmony”. Oh, how they were wrong!

Yes, twenty years ago, on April 24th, 1993, Eritreans lined up in front of the voting booth to cast their ballot. They voted in favor of independence and ushered in a new era. The tribulation of bygone decades ceded its domination to jubilation. However, there were latent concerns: Will the Eritrean flag continue to wave under clear sky and serene atmosphere? Have the tempests of aggression subsided once for all? Will there be a need for new sacrifices to stem reversal of freedom? Will the truth shine and reverberate unremittingly or will there be a need to debunk lies that eclipse and muffle it?

Seven years of Eritrea’s post-independence relative peace, stability and economic development were deemed harbingers of a brighter future. Then, to every Eritrean patriot’s dismay, came an unanticipated and a ferocious jolt from the Woyane camp. The surge of this new hostility demanded a fresh sacrificial blood to be laid at the altar of freedom. Stemming, quelling waves of destruction

was a must. The subsequent intransigence of Ethiopia and the connivance of its supporters (UN, EU, AU and USA) prevented the implementation of the Final and Binding Decision of the EEBC (Eritrea Ethiopia Boundary Commission). Abdicating its role of being a fair broker of peace, the USA masterminded two sanctions to be slapped against Eritrea. Will Eritreans oppose or submit to this travesty of justice? Will Eritreans renew their resolve to stay the course to the bitter end or cave in when the going gets tough? Will Eritreans weather the prevailing situation of “No War No Peace” or seek for exists helter-skelter?

It is this situation which brings the Referendum once again to the fore. First of all, Referendum is not simply a distant, inert relic of the Eritrean history or an event devoid of contemporary relevance. Rather, it is a living, recurring, everyday event presenting us with the choice to elect liberty or servitude, to pay or eschew the necessary sacrifice for freedom. We need to ask ourselves: Are we following the right path or veering from it? Are we buying the idea that greener pastures are found on the other side of the fence, that is, outside of Eritrea? Are we abandoning Eritrea to become asylum seekers abroad? Are we absconding, disappearing using international sport events as gateway? Are we pursuing short-cuts to riches or getting involved in corruption to compensate, make up for “lost years”? Are we trying to force or expedite change by aiding and abetting subversive activities? Are we indifferent to or abstaining from the affairs of Eritrea? Are we creating a rift based on region, religion and ethnicity? All these questions are related to Referendum today. Let us once again vote as patriots with our conscience.

“Reflections on our upcoming Referendum”

by Dr. Ghidewon Abay Asmerom.

I don't know under what you can classify this writing, I cannot call it a prose for it was not written as such, it is not also a poem for its lacks the artistic touch. For sure, it is a feeling of an Eritrean, and you can read it as one.

Referendum according to Hummado, the character played by Teaerat Yohannes in the play “Referendum nemenen kemeyen”, is “fre-nay-dem”, the fruit of blood. Yes, the fruit of the blood that was paid on the mountain tops, the foot hills, the valleys, and rivers of Eritrea, in the city, towns, villages, and hamlets. The blood that was paid by elders and

children, by farmers and factory workers, by teachers and students, by young and old, men and women, Muslim and Christian, the poor and the rich, at home and abroad, in the open and underground. By the blood that has covered every square mile of our land. It is fre nay dem of our tegadelti; that of those that passed away and those that are alive. That of our martyrs. I better call them SEWOOAT for “martyrs” is not a good enough word for me to express my feeling. They were sacrificed at the altar of freedom so that we can be free from our colonial chains. These SEWOOAT were not ordinary. They were the best of the best. They were those that had excelled in everything they did and anything they attempted. If they were students, they were not average, but superior. If they were teachers they were not only teachers, but darn good educators. If they were farmers, they were not ordinary, but diligent. If they were factory workers they were not imitators, but inventors. If they were nomads they were not only cattle and camel herders, but also excellent navigators. O yes, they were the best of the best and head and shoulders above the rest. These were the people who fought for the right of others instead of their own interest. Instead of flying to America, going to Europe or sailing to Australia to pursue their own living, they lived in fox-holes, ate nothing more than a meal per weak and even that was wedi aker and korosho of tayta segem, the sour one. By now they could have been professors, doctors, engineers, and lawyers, or they could have worked hard to accumulate riches as most of us are doing; instead they walked barefoot, slept on empty stomach. These were people who were targets of those Russian MiGs and Stalin-organs “falul”. It was the fruit of the blood that was paid to fend off the first five offensives; to withstand the massive Shadushai werar, red-star campaign; to expose and defeat selahtawi werar, stealth offensive; and to come out as victors after the Bahri-Negash. It is the fruit of the blood that was paid to thresh Wikaw at Mersa Teklai; to demolish Nadew at Afabet; to uproot Mentir at the Halhal front; to wipe the naval force at Massawa; to win the attrition at the Ghindae front, and yes to clean the remnants of the enemy from the streets of Asmara at the end. It is also of the blood that has been paid since liberation clearing mine fields and working hard for dageme-hisntsa (reconstruction).

The Price of this referendum has been also paid by all other Eritreans and thus, it is also “fre nay dem”, dem of mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers. It is fre nay dem of Unna, Om Hajer, Asmara, Woki Duba, and Emberemi. How can I, after watching it in graphic videos, forget Sheeb and Massawa. Never, I will never forget it. Fre of the blood spilled in the prisons of Nakura, Adi Quala, Mariam Ghembi, Hanot Barentu, Keren, Massawa, Mendefera, last and of course not least Naqfa. This blood has been paid from time immemorial. It is the blood like Abdul kadir Kebire, Azmatch Berhe, Osman Buri, Ahmed Idris Awate. The blood of those that have been maimed, of those that have lost their sight, their hearing. Inquire it from living tegadelti, they will tell you how many

pints of blood each had lost and how many scars of bullet wounds they are carrying on their bodies. In short, you will be shocked. Ask them and listen quietly about all the complications each has from days of toiling with an empty stomach, sleepless nights, exposure to cold, and the burning sun of Metahit, Semhar, and Denkel? They can tell you how many snake bites and python fights each had. They can tell you how many close encounters each had with death. It is therefore more than appropriate to echo the words of Hummado saying our referendum is indeed FRE NAY DEM. What can I say? While uttering these words, part of me wants to cry and another part of me wants to sing. To cry about the loss that we have suffered, thinking how would SEWEETI and SEWOOE feel when they know that their struggle has come to an end. Discovering that the flag that they cherished so much, the flag they lost a limb to raise high, the flag they were tortured for having in their homes and drawing on their note books, the flag that was burned by the enemy, and neglected by the world community, is now flying in New York. I want also to sing a song for these heroes and heroines. I want to tell them their sacrifice was not in vain. To tell them that the world has now changed its attitude toward Eritrea, and Eritrea now is a free country.

It is with these thoughts that I will be going to vote on April 24th, knowing that the eyes of our martyrs will be watching me when I decide in private YES or NO. If I even dare vote NO, knowing how disappointed my brothers and sisters will be; if they ask me why, what will I answer them? How am I going to face Tecle, a friend who lost four siblings, and Zeineb who lost five children, when I see them outside the voting place? Will I dare smile at them again or look them straight in the eye? No way. How could I? If I vote NO, I would not be any different than Haile Selassie and his royal puppets or Mengistu and his brutal generals. No, I would not do that. I have made my choice – I am going to vote for the BLUE. Only then can I walk head up and embrace my fellow brothers and sisters who are also the victims of Ethiopian rule. Only then will I be able to face the spirit of Ghirmai, Tahir, Abrehet and Goitom, my classmates; Abdu Semed, my mentor; Asmar Nur, my confidant; and member Kahsu, my teacher; all of whom I lost to war. It is only after voting BLUE that I can talk of Denden, Hariena, Salina or Algena; climb the embatat of Soira, Arato and Lalemba. It is only then that I can account for what has happened at the battles of Adi Keteyo, Gerhu Sernai, Ila Bereid, Barentu, Semyenawi Sahel, Massawa and Dekemhare. Then, I can face the spirit of the one who gave her life for me and I can dare to talk to the one who lost his legs for me. Then, I can comfort the mother that has lost eight and play with Haben, the son of SEWOOAT tegadelti.

I feel like marching to the voting room with my blue flag wrapped around me, summoning the TV cameras on this planet to record it and informing sky satellites to relay it to the whole world, to pass it on to the entire universe. I want all nationalities of this planet to know. I want even the E.T.'s from Proxima Centaurus to Capella, from Vega to Northern star, the Corona Australis to the Corona Borealis, from Crux (the Southern Cross); to Ursa Major (the Big Bear); from the Horse nebula in Orion to the Andromeda Galaxy to understand that I voted YES. I want the twelve signs of Zodiac to take note. I want the kewakebti of the sky like Lihe (Pleiades), Kokeb Shewate (Ursa Major, and Nebre Tiel (Orion) to watch. Let Jupiter, Saturn, Mars, Venus and the other planets; Halley's among the comets, all the meteoroids, and the asteroids to be informed about it. Let the red giant star Betelgeuse and the bright Sirius know it; the distant galaxies record it; and the black holes capture it. I want also the Sun and the moon, our moon, that were our closest celestial observers to be witnesses. Let them keep it for billions of years to come, so that no one will come to distort history and take my descendants bondage. I cannot trust the UN, for it has betrayed me before; I cannot count on the superpowers, for they have once stabbed me at the back. Nor will I be happy with having my record kept at the OAU or the Arab League offices, for both are fools with short memories. That is why the universe at large to record it. That way, I will pass on assured that my children will not have to endure the suffering that I endured.

By voting YES, I will join even the mountains and the valleys who voted for freedom long time ago. If only they could speak, they would tell how many times they were bombed, and what type chemicals were sprayed on them. They can tell how barren they have become from Napalm fires and mortar shelling. If only they could tell how many land mines they are carrying. It has been quite a while since they heard the singing of birds, the sound of animals, and the whistle of shepherds.

The basic principle of our struggle was that of self-reliance. It was the struggle of our people, and it was our people alone who waged it. It was a struggle based on the aspirations, the dreams, the desire for justice and our progress and not, as some chauvinists have us believe, on the aspirations, dreams or ambitions of half a dozen organizations, or a group of persons who are in contradiction with the actual interests of our people. OURS WAS UNIQUE! Our struggle was made by our people. We did not liberate our land by bringing in foreigners or hiring mercenaries. We did not invite foreign generals to draw our war plans, nor did we consult the bosses in Berlin, Moscow or Havana on what to do. We started it alone; we finished it alone. Our question was clear when we started and is clear now. It is FREEDOM, FREEDOM, FREEDOM. Ask a five year old child, she can answer it as articulately as a law graduate would. We will vote

YES for independence and we will walk out of the voting room shouting, “goodbye rulers.” From the very beginning we knew well against whom we were struggling! If there are some who want to say “Aufwiedersehen” or “until we see you again”, our answer is “Auf nimmerwiedersehen” or “never see you again.”