

POET LAUREATE TSEGAYE GABRE-MEDHIN OF ETHIOPIA

A Short Walk Through His Literary Park

By Professor Negussay Ayele

Belatengeta —Poet Laureate—Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin,

is Ethiopia's premier versatile and prolific man of letters. For half a century now he has been continuously productive as poet, playwright, essayist, social critic, philologist, historiographer, dramatist, synthesist, peace activist, artistic director...on matters national, continental and global. Even if he has yet to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, he has often been more appreciated and duly honored abroad than in his own land. Perhaps this is in keeping with that old Ethiopian saying to the effect that 'a prophet is often not esteemed in his own country.' In this day and age, when most of us have been preoccupied and indeed consumed by wars and rumors of wars in Ethiopia-Eritrea and elsewhere in the Horn of Africa, it seems as though there is nothing else of positive value or of grave concern that deserves or commands the attention of Ethiopians. Today we shall take time out from violence and war and reflect on the life and works of Poet Laureate Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin who is a living legend, a literary hero, and as one observer described him recently, Ethiopia's "biblical sage".

A Glimpse At Poet Laureate Tsegaye's Literary Journey

Poet Laureate Tsegaye is of the generation—numbering a dozen or so who are extant—of Ethiopian men of letters who were born during the crucible of the Fascist invasion of Ethiopia in the 1930's. As such his early childhood gestation period was molded by the trauma of that war of aggression against which his patriot father fought. Born in the vicinity of Ambo and the environs of the source of Awash River in Shewa region, the young Tsegaye was also influenced and shaped by the subcultures, languages and the blending of his Oromo and Amhara heritages. Indeed, as he was to relate later on, he considers himself as one who represented an Ethiopian amalgam or bridge between the two cultures. And it did not take long for this child prodigy not only to absorb Oromifa and traditional Zema and Qine in Ethiopic (Ge'ez) as well as Amharic in the traditional neighborhood church school but also to rapidly learn English in the contemporary modern school or Asqala. Indeed, the young genius, Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin, was barely a teen when in 1942 (Eth.Cal.), he wrote his first play, The Story of King Dionysus and of the Two Brothers, and saw it staged in Ambo Elementary School. It was watched by, among others, Emperor Haile Sellassie himself.

Young Tsegaye's educational itinerary then takes him to formal higher schooling at home (Wingate and Commercial School) and abroad (Blackstone School of Law) in Chicago where he took his Bar Exam. But his precocious self-reading of his inner needs, moods and proclivities pointed towards pastures for artistic and literary expression. And so he pursued opportunities to visit and apprentice at experimental theater and drama establishments in Britain, France and Italy in the late 1950's. In addition to writing and producing Amharic plays including *Yedem Azmera*, (*Blood Harvest*), *Yeshoh Aklil*, (*Crown of Thorns*) and *Joro Degef* (*Mumps*) during this period, playwright Tsegaye also wrote scores of short poems in English some of which are reproduced in *Ethiopia Observer*, (1965). And he wrote a prize winning essay for Fullbright Fellowship competition on *What Does World Brotherhood Mean To Me*, in 1959.

The 1960's were among the most productive years for Poet, Playwright, Essayist, Art Director' Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin. During this decade playwright Tsegaye adapted some of Shakespeare's plays including *King Lear* (which was banned), *Othello* and *Macbeth* as well as Moliere's *Tartouffe* and *Doctor In Spite of Himself*. All told, five of his Amharic plays were banned in the 1960's. He also made presentations of his research on such topics as "Art in the Life of the Ethiopian People" at the First World Black Arts Festival Colloquium organized by UNESCO in Dakar, Senegal, and on "Kamit of Black Egyptian Theatre" for the Pan African Cultural Festival organized by the OAU in Algiers. Poet Laureate Tsegaye was also at his most peripatetic mode during this decade as he criss-crossed countries and continents interpreting Ethiopia and Africa to the world and back again to relating the art and literature of the world to his own people in the continent and in his motherland. And so, poet Tsegaye sojourned in more than thirty countries—often repeatedly—in Europe, the Americas and the Middle East. For example, one of his plays, *Oda Oak Oracle*, was staged not only in Addis Ababa but also in Britain, Denmark, Italy, Rumania, Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania and the United States in 1964. He often led national delegations to international literary, cultural and peace gatherings and was invited to be resident writer, researcher, lecturer or external examiner at many institutions of higher learning as well as writer's unions the world over. This was also the decade when Poet Laureate Tsegaye nursed and nurtured a nascent Ethiopian National Theatre from 1961 to 1971. In 1966 Poet Tsegaye became the youngest (age twenty-nine) recipient of the Haile Sellassie I Prize for Amharic Literature. Poet Tsegaye also writes in Oromifa and is conversant in French as well. And in 1969 he won a Gold Merit Award as Outstanding Alumnus from his Alma Mater, the Commercial School, now College.

The prodigious Poet Laureate continued his productivity unabated in the turbulent revolutionary cum military rule period of the 1970's. He spent 1971-72 in Senegal as a Fellow of what is now named Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar. to do research on African Culture, Literature, and Black Egyptian Studies. Poet Laureate Tsegaye was awarded the Commander of the National Order of the Republic of Senegal at that time by President Leopold Sedar-Senghor. At numerous points in his career Poet Tsegaye has also been Fullbright Fellow and lectured in several U.S. institutions. In the mid-seventies, he was briefly appointed Vice Minister of the Ethiopian Ministry of Culture and Sports and in 1977-78 he was

Assistant Professor and founder/director of the Department of Theater Arts at Addis Ababa University. With all this activity (and being thrown in jail in 1975 added to the mix), Poet Tsegaye persevered in his labor of love and continued to churn out plays that depicted and critiqued the onset of the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution. Of the five Amharic plays produced by Poet Laureate Tsegaye between 1974 and 1979, three of them —Ha Hu Besedst Wer (ABC in Six Months), Inat Alem Tenu (adapted from Bertold Brecht's Mother Courage) and Melekte Wez Ader (Message of the Worker) were banned. He published Collision of Altars—a play on religious feuds and intolerance—in 1977. He also presented numerous research papers including "Africa as the Origin of the Early Greek Theatre Culture" and "Ikher of Nagada: The First Actor in the First City of Humankind" at international Africanist and Black Arts Congresses. A selection of his Amharic poems were published in 1973 under the title: Issat wey Abeba (Fire or Flower). He has also served as Secretary General (1978-79) of Ethiopian Peace, Solidarity and Friendship House.

Poet Laureate Tsegaye's literary fecundity continued blossoming in the 1980's. He produced historical plays based on the lives of Menelik (Banned), Tewodros (Banned), and on Zeray Deres as well as Gammo, a play on the Ethiopian Revolution which was also banned. He adapted Shakespeare's Hamlet for the stage (banned) and subsequently staged some of these plays and published them abroad. In 1984 Poet Laureate Tsegaye wrote a powerful long essay, Footprint of Time, delineating Ethiopia's place in world culture and history especially in light of paleoanthropological "Lucy" finds (1974) that marks Hadar area in Afarland of Ethiopia to be the nascence of humankind. During this period also Poet Laureate Tsegaye received Gold Mercury International Ad Persona Award for Ethiopian Literature (1982); he was Fulbright Senior Resident Fellow at Columbia University (1985); he was Co-winner (for the lyrics) of OAU African Unity Anthem Prize (1986) and winner of Ethiopia's Golden Red Star Award (1987).

Even if advancing age, health problems and the toll of the decades past were weighing on him, Poet Laureate continued to write, research, travel, lecture and produce dramas for the stage in the 1990's. In 1993, Poet Laureate Tsegaye's Play with an accent on peace titled Ha Hu Weyem Pe Pu (ABC or XYZ)—to create life or to snuff out life—was banned. In 1994, a reproduction of one of his earlier plays, Petros, depicting the Ethiopian Patriarch butchered by the Italian Fascists, was banned. In the past few years Poet Laureate Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin has been gracing the pages of the Ethiopian monthly, Tobia and other publications at home and abroad with a series of powerful poetic essays entitled ("Addressed To Us") and on Adwa as well as others in English. Since 1993 he has been concentrating on his on-going research project—Kabara Afraka—a study of Pre-Classical African Culture and African Origins of Religion. One can get glimpses of this study in progress in some of his recent poetic renditions in "Addressed To Us." In 1991, Poet Laureate Tsegaye also served as Ethiopia's Red Cross and Red Crescent Goodwill Ambassador. His outstanding literary contributions as well as his advocacy of peace and human rights causes have been recognized and honored by peer groups and Human Rights bodies. Accordingly, in 1994 the New York based Human Rights Watch Organization awarded Poet Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin its prestigious Free Expression Award. Poet Laureate Tsegaye also published two of his poems in English entitled ESOP and NILE in Ethiopian Register in 1997. The Congress of World Poets and United Poets Laureate International, meeting in Buckinghamshire, England in 1997, honored him

with the prestigious Gold Laurel Award with the title of Honorable Poet Laureate. And he is a member of the United Poets Laureate International.

The foregoing summary presentation of Poet Laureate Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin's major literary works and related activities should give one an appreciation of the scope and versatility of his works. And this does not include untold numbers of his poems, plays and papers that have been drafted/assembled but not yet published or staged. It should also be noted that Poet Laureate Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin has been a member of OAU's Forum 2000 Think Tank, Ethiopian Writers Association, African Writers Union and Afro-Asian Writers Union. He is listed in International Who's Who editions and also specifically on Poetry and on Dramatists as well as in Who's Who in Africa, in the Middle East and in the World's Who is Who of Authors reference volumes.

Comments on and Responses to the Poet/Playwright's Works

One way of gauging and determining what kind of reaction Poet Laureate Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin has had is to summarize and highlight salient points from the foregoing profile of the man and his works. In doing so we find that reaction to his works has run the gamut from positive responses and commensurate accolades, especially in the international arena, all the way to official censorship and banning of his work in his home country coupled with imprisonment. With the exception of the Nobel Prize for Literature, Poet Laureate Tsegaye has been duly honored by peer groups and audiences abroad. In *Silence Is Not Golden* (1995), a compendium on Ethiopian literature, Ali J. Ahmed noted that "Like his fellow playwright and compatriot, Mengistu Lemma, Gabre-Medhin's works have a healthy "obsession" with the past—the past as a powerful competitor with the present." And analyzing two of Poet Laureate Tsegaye's plays in English—*Oda Oak Oracle* (1965) and *Collision of Altars* (1977)—Biodun Jeyifo argued that these two plays are "exemplary in their passionate advocacy of the liberation of human consciousness from obscurantist, virulent and anti-human myths and modes of thought, especially those dressed in the garb of religion." A non-specialist cursory perusal of another famous poet/playwright Aime Cesaire's plays, "And The Dogs Were Silent" in (*Lyric and Dramatic Plays:1946-1982*), and "A Season In The Congo" in (*Theater and Politics:*), suggests a strong comparison of style and content with that of Poet Laureate Tsegaye. It is apropos to cite here Aime Cesaire's characterization of the poet in general in his "Poetry and Knowledge" because it is fitting to Tsegaye's pen.

"The poet is that very ancient yet new being at once very complex and very simple...who at the limit of dream and reality, of day and night, between absence and presence, searches for and receives in the sudden triggering of inner cataclysms the password of connivance and power."

While on the one hand Poet Laureate Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin has received what might be called 'good press' abroad he has not fared as well at home especially by those on the saddles of power. Despite the

fact of being awarded the Haile Sellasie I Prize for Amharic Writing (1966) it did not take him long to fall out of favor with the Emperor. In his wide ranging interview in *Ethiopian Review* in 1993 with veteran journalist Teklu Tabor, Poet Laureate Tsegaye relates how the Emperor referred to him as stubborn and gave him cold shoulders when he would not agree to court nudgings to be a palace scribe. And sure enough, down came the censor's guillotines on his works which continued right through the Derg period and the current TPLF regime. In a recent Amharic interview in *Tobia* (Vol. 6 # 1) Poet Laureate Tsegaye notes that thirty-six of his forty-nine literary works have been censored in whole or in part since he began his career in the 1950's. In 1976 he was arrested right on the set as he was directing his play on the Ethiopian Revolution, *Abugida Qeyiso*. He notes that all the regimes he has survived in have been equal opportunity hackers as far as his works were concerned. With a sense of irony he relates that in 1994 Ethiopian Television in Addis Ababa was showing clips of how, in an earlier period, armed Derg operatives were beating and shooting at stage performers and even audiences to disrupt one of his plays from being performed while at that very moment in Awasa town armed gendarmes of TPLF were actively disrupting the performance of his new play entitled *Ha Hu Weyem Pe Pu* (ABC or XYZ)—a clarion call for peace—by beating and harassing both performers and viewers. He added that when one compares the Derg and TPLF in this regard, one cannot help but be shocked by their psychological closeness rather than their contrast.

Of thirty-three plays Poet Laureate Tsegaye has produced between 1951 and 1997 more than half of them (eighteen) have been banned. Donald N. Levine, author of *Wax and Gold and Greater Ethiopia*, had said at one time—speaking especially of the 1960's and earlier—that books about Ethiopia were either banned or boring.' It is evident that the very high count of bannings and censorships meted out to Tsegaye's plays and other writings indicates how the powers that be from the 1950's through the 1990's felt threatened by the potency, popularity and impact of his pen. If such was the reaction of officialdom to his plays and other writings what about the people at large about whom and for whom Tsegaye wrote his plays? Tsegaye's plays have been extremely popular as far as rank and file audiences are concerned, and when allowed by the authorities to run their courses some of them have been on stage longer than any other plays in Ethiopian theatre. His use of highly sophisticated language has often made his writing sometimes enigmatic and brain twister for many. One may surmise that a good number of theater audiences at Tsegaye's plays are repeat participants who follow up the challenge of the plays that stimulate and beckon cerebral understanding and emotional satiation. Reidulf K. Molvaer says he had a rough time interviewing Tsegaye for his impressive profiles of Ethiopian writers entitled *Black Lions* (1997) because, among other things, Tsegaye "preferred to talk about Ibsen rather than about himself." Nevertheless, Molvaer asserts that "the plays by Tsegaye that I have seen on the stage are performed with great brilliance; the acting, the decorations, the music—everything has been well done." Although no serious critical follow-up is yet to emerge in Ethiopia on the subject, there is muted recognition that poet Tsegaye has in fact generated an Amharic poetic form or genre called *Sementyosh Qine* or *Yetsegaye Bet*. We await experts in the field to decipher, elaborate and interpret this subject to interested but lay readers. And perhaps a school of thought may develop around his literary legacies. In her July, 1997, interview in Addis Ababa with poet Tsegaye that appeared in *Ethiopian Review* (Oct. 1998), Ms. Wendy Belcher cited professor Jane Plastow, formerly of the Department of Theater Arts of Addis Ababa University, who stated that Tsegaye initiated "a new, serious, highly poetic style for Ethiopian drama, but most importantly, a style no longer

concerned with Church and morality and the exploits of the aristocracy, but with the evils of life as experienced by the poor.”

Poet/Playwright Tsegaye is at this time on dialysis treatment regimen in New York and awaiting kidney transplant. Partly due to a belated awareness of his condition healthwise, a number of “Friends of Tsegaye” solidarity and fund-raising groups have mushroomed both within Ethiopia and in the Diaspora. As a result, there is currently increasing visible interest about him and his works including a renewed literary appreciation—albeit too little, too late—in poetry recital sessions ¹, in interviews and articles in Amharic papers (for example, Kebrit, Genanaw, Ethio Time, Maebel) as well as in English media including Addis Tribune and in other Internet sites as well on what Tsegaye has meant to Ethiopian theatre and literature and indeed to Ethiopian history and integrity—not to mention also to African liberation, peace and unity. To this day his life has been a half century of giving, toiling and struggling and yet not demanding, not expecting and not waiting for anything in return. Currently, Tsegaye is being lauded as a “national treasure,” a “patriot of the pen,” “Ethiopia’s “Oak Tree,” etc. at home. One of the most potent and influential columns of the Ethiopian Amharic monthly, Tobia, is inscribed by one who on purpose adopted Poet/Playwright Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin’s name as his pen name appending only (Ar’aya) i.e. ‘model’, to it. This is the highest form of compliment to his literary stature and makes him a living legend. The Poet/Playwright’s pen also graces the pages of Tobia periodically.

One hears detracting murmurings among some elites through the grapevine vaguely about Tsegaye’s writings but more pointedly about allegations on some decision or action he took that was deleterious to someone when he had official status in the government at various times. After all, as Wendy Belcher put it succinctly, “Tsegaye has not always been praised. Foreign journalists have sometimes found him hard to interview; his public has sometimes found him hard to read, and his colleagues have sometimes found him hard to work with.” It is par for the course for any person who does anything, let alone so much writing and involvement in public affairs for so long as Tsegaye had done, to be criticized, faulted and questioned by somebody in some way, and some criticisms may have grains of truth. Nevertheless, with regard to the authenticity, quality, content, form and/or artistic value of a written work, the proper and professional way of evaluating or criticizing literary output made public in print is via public print media—especially among academics. In this regard, we have yet to see sustained substantive (not snippets or potshots) critique in writing—positive, negative or the balance of the two—by Poet Laureate Tsegaye’s Ethiopian peers on his literary works. One does, however, get oblique references to some lingering issues and perceptions in certain quarters with regard to Tsegaye and his works through interviewers who keep asking him about them. We shall deal with some questions focusing on his ‘predilection for tragedy’ in his plays, his ‘attachments’ to certain regimes being too close for comfort, his use of ‘abstruse language’ in his writings... and a sampling of Tsegaye’s responses to them in the following segment of this article.

Tsegaye On Tsegaye: Autobiographical Vignettes

Of late, one is graced with increasing numbers of interviews of Poet Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin in print or should one say that increasingly his interviews have had better visibility. Subsequently, we get better glimpses into the recesses of his complex persona and to try to decipher what the mindset of this genius is like and how he responds to queries concerning his works. When asked recently in a Tobia interview what he likes most and what he does not, Poet Laureate said,

I crave for knowledge.

I envy tolerant, peaceful folks.

I am frightened by ignorance.

I loathe violence.

In his conversation with Teklu Tabor in 1993 he responded to critics' charges or perceptions about his "close attachment" to the past Ethiopian governments and through his works, in the following straightforward manner:

Not that I lack in due humility, but I am often accused more of being a little too candid, too direct, too choosy and even too "stuck up" both in customary standing and in my work, that I have always been at odds with authorities..... I was imprisoned by the past governments, in connection with my creative works; and now I am "discreetely" pensioned away by the present government and abused publicly by its official and semi-official media again in connection with my literary works. At the end of my imprisonment, Mengistu's regime threw me out of my job for five and a half years, for not conforming my writings to its "ideological" wills. I may have a lion's share in taking the risk and in influencing the past governments to establish some of the existing cultural institutions like the National Theater, the Addis Ababa Art School, the University Creative Arts Center, the University Department of Theater, the City Municipality Theater and Arts Gallery, the Ministry of Culture and Sports Affairs, the National Theater Apprentice Actors Group, etc. and I have still not failed to try to do the same to strengthen and widen these institutions by the present government as well. But no, I did not and do not have personal "close special attachments" with any of these governments.

In a recent (January, 1999) issue of the Amharic paper, Kebrit, Tsegaye was asked why most of his plays were tragedies Playwright Tsegaye replied that he is only reflecting the predominant conditions of the Ethiopian people whom he portrays in his dramas. He elaborated on the point by saying (translation from the Amharic is personal and unofficial):

Manifold wars and violence have been visited upon the common people relentlessly to snuff out freedom from the Ethiopian soul—the one distinguishing characteristic that makes the Ethiopian what he is and that enables him to walk with his chin up no matter what his material condition may be. So, the Ethiopian continues to sustain war and suffering in order to preserve his freedom. Ruling elites have been exploiting his willingness to sacrifice all for freedom. Feudal lords set the people to fight one another internally even as they fight against external enemies. Because of his extraordinary love of freedom, the Ethiopian bears any burden and goes to any length without food, without shoes or enough clothes and supplies to fight and die for his freedom. This is what has won the Ethiopian respect among fellow Africans and many others. Even as we speak it is this uncompromising love of freedom that makes him vulnerable to vultures within; he has yet to relax. It seems that succeeding regimes devise new ways divide, exploit and consume him/her for their own selfish ends and to build their power on his shoulders. I like to go out and communicate with the common folks of Ethiopia—the peasant, the patriot, the soldier, the traitor, the housewife, the priest, the sheikh etc...It is from them that I learn about my country and people. And generally their comments are accompanied by near tears; their stories are mostly melancholy; their memories are bitter and tragic.. It is that which I reflect in my writings. That is why my plays dwell on tragedy.

This is an eloquent statement on the meaning of art mirroring, amplifying and clarifying life.

Molvaer relates in his book that in the course of one of his lectures at Addis Ababa University, students asked Tsegaye why he wrote in such a “difficult” language, to which he replied that “*he considered it as one of the duties and responsibilities of an author to help expand and enrich the language, and—as it were—to create a literary language suited for modern times and appropriate for modern literature.*” It is all the more remarkable that the Amharic of Tsegaye—a product of Oromo and Amharic bilingual background—is so lofty, sometimes abstruse and even esoteric for most readers. He has explained that it is precisely because he started out as a child absorbing simultaneously Amharic, Oromifa and Geez that he has acquired the kind of language skills and proficiency. Tsegaye was also asked questions related to his background and his Ethiopian identity. He expressed his strongly felt belief in Ethiopian unity in 1993 thusly:

On the other hand, I have also made it clear, and time and again express in my works, that I stand for and support the cultural, lingual, political, historical, and social identity and autonomy of the “nationalities,” but that “secessionism” is my nightmare and not my dream. The word “diversity” should not be narrowly interpreted to mean “secessionism,” as the present government seems to advocate and practice, but the equal and independent enrichment of our national culture by rich and potent cultural resources of all the “nationalities.” If you put “secession” first, you have put the cart before the horse. ...I often have the sad experience, particularly in these days of over-tribalized frigid politics, of being even by my close and intellectually “liberated” Amhara-Tigrai-Eritrean friends, only as someone all too Oromo, and by my close Oromo and “minority” friends only as someone all too Amhara, but by the grace of God I have known from early boyhood I am only an Ethiopian, only an African and only a simple human being.

Tsegaye related a traumatic event that occurred when he moved from Ambo to Addis Ababa in the early 1950's and was filling a form to attend high school. A Ministry of Education functionary shouted at him rudely that he should fill “Galla” (Oromo), not “Ethiopian,” in the slot for “Gossa” or tribe as he had done,

because his paternal grandfather's name was Qawasa, and therefore he was a "Galla." Having gone through, outgrown and outlasted such rude experiences, Tsegaye says that he feels *"most provoked when some cockeyed, crudely politicized upstart tries to preach me on what it is like to love and respect my own people, be it Tigreans, Eritreans, Oromo, Amharas or other "nationalities." I have proved this both by my public standing and by my works, and have paid prices for it, even before their present political organizations and fronts ever came to be born."* He added that "Vive la difference" does not necessarily mean "kill the Unity."

Thoughts on Tsegaye's Contributions and Legacies: A Summation

The variety, scope, depth and volume of Poet Laureate Tsegaye's productions are such that one approaches the subject ever so gingerly and diffidently. Still, one can begin to indicate in what ways Poet Tsegaye stands out among his peers in Ethiopia and a few of his major contributions. One of the unique qualities or gifts of Tsegaye is his uncanny ability to successfully juggle so many activities and involvements simultaneously as no other Ethiopian artist or public figure has done. He has an encyclopedic mind, a universal heart and a Herculean energy. In the 1993 Ethiopian Review interview, Tsegaye was asked if his work as poet, playwright, director, Shakespeare translator, Egyptologist and historiographer of Africa's classical cultures (and one might add, philologist) would not confuse him and even bog down his efforts. His crisp cogent reply was, "No. On the contrary, the one field enlightens the other; the one even lights up the path that has not been too clear in the other instance. One field of work or study only throws light on the hidden secrets of the other." The culmination of his life's work is no doubt expected to be reflected in his forthcoming magnum opus, KABARA AFRAKA which, he says, has claimed over thirty years of research. It is of note that Tsegaye has been working on African Origins of Civilization and African/Ethiopian roots of Theatre, Languages, Religions...in world history long before the publication of Martin Bernal's Black Athena and the emergence of 'Afrocentricity' in black academic circles in the United States. This theme and dimension of Tsegaye's work has so far been wrapped in his poetic renditions in Amharic and in English.

Another unique feature of Tsegaye's life and work, as yet not recognized or fully appreciated, is his personal role of introducing, interpreting and popularizing Ethiopia and Ethiopian culture to the world, especially in academic, literary, artistic, liberationist global fora for the past five decades. It is safe to say that no other individual has done so much consistently for so long to lift and hold high Ethiopian culture far and wide. He has explicated the legitimate place and value of mythology in the development of history. Many of his plays are Ethiopian adaptations of classical European playwrights including Shakespeare, Brecht, Moliere because to Tsegaye intercultural communication and dialogue is a two way road. And so, he has done his best to make his fellow Ethiopians understand and appreciate foreign writers and dramatists. In the introduction to her 1997 interview, Ms. Wendy Belcher has advanced perhaps the best profile to date of the poet/playwright when she said that "Tsegaye is devoted to an African reading of the West and an Ethiopian reading of Ethiopia."

Yet another distinguishing characteristic about Tsegaye is his perseverance in the face of continued harassment, imprisonment, censorship, intimidation, blacklisting, etc. As noted earlier Tsegaye's plays have been systematically censored and banned since 1951 through the Haile Selassie era, the Derg era and the current TPLF period and yet he has remained undaunted as he continued to produce plays and potent and trenchant poetry for posterity. While we are aware of what has seen some daylight in his works we still do not know what is in store in his unpublished 'submarine' writings. Tsegaye's perseverance is in keeping with characteristic Ethiopian trait serenaded by corollaries like, consistency, predictability, reliability, hope, faith and sense of duty. Tsegaye has no illusions about the nature of the cultural environment with regard to creative, artistic and products of independent thinking prevalent in Ethiopia within which literary personalities like himself operate in. He noted in Kebrit (cited earlier) that his travails as a man of letters started in 1966 when he won the HSI Prize. At that moment someone said to him somewhat prophetically, "Tsegaye, I won't say congratulations to you. Now, you are really in deep trouble; may God help you." He adds that "Addis Ababa does not say, 'More Power To You...'" Elsewhere in the world writers are at least encouraged to go on, even if they are not always materially rewarded as they should be, at least they are encouraged. But, in our land (in Ethiopia) the distinguished work of an author is only recognized and hailed after he has been ruined. Witness the cases of Yoftahe Negussie, Abe Gubegnaw or Bealu Girma. We have to do something about such negative aspects of our culture."

One final point to touch on with respect to Tsegaye and his legacies has to do with his quintessential Ethiopian patriotism. Among his distinct qualities, are Tsegaye's respect for history and his positive appreciation of culture at large and Ethiopian culture in particular. Tsegaye's father raised the sword to fight for freedom against the Italian Fascists in the 1930's; Tsegaye, as it were, continued the struggle in the form of the word and has carried it high and aloft to this day. His has been not just patriotism but heroism of the pen—for a change—in a country and culture wherein generally heroism issued from the gun. And Tsegaye's pen or the word has been an effective and potent medium for his patriotic expression. In one of his recent interviews in Tobia, he stated that "Culture is 'Life' whereas censorship (by the state or anyone else) is a 'sickle.'" One is creative and the other is destructive. His love for his country, the people, the culture, the history, the heritage, the humanity and the uncompromising love for freedom exudes and explodes through much of his writing. But it would be a grave mistake if by this one were to conclude that Tsegaye's writings about Ethiopia and his sense of patriotism represent uncritical acceptance of things as they are or glibly whitewashing the negative side of Ethiopian culture. Quite the contrary; Tsegaye has kept boring through the distasteful and disdainful aspects of Ethiopian life without letup. Hence, his popularity among the common people and his subjection to harassment and censorship by the ruling regimes for nearly half a century.

Likewise, it should also be noted that the present article is neither meant to be an exhaustive literary criticism in the professional or academic sense nor a deification of Tsegaye, the fallible human being. This undertaking is only a modest, non-specialist and personal portrait of Tsegaye's literary contributions to posterity—not only what he says but how beautifully he says it. It is done with commensurate awareness that he has yet to be studied properly by his own peers, in his own country and in his own language which, one hopes, will take place in the not too distant future. If the endeavor here whets

appetites to read and know more about this extraordinary Ethiopian intellectual giant, something worthwhile will have been achieved. The regrettable fact that Poet Laureate Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin has not yet been nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature so far is, in large part, due to the fact—ironic as it may sound—that he has been writing mostly in his native language Amharic (used only in Ethiopia), and most of his works have not been translated into other widely used lingua franca. At least in part a contributory factor is the failure by his compatriots to translate or otherwise familiarize the wider reading and studying public with his works and their intrinsic edifying value in the first place. It is still not too late to do that. What is equally unfair and unfortunate not only for Tsegaye but for several others who deserve the same recognition is that the traditional system placed within Ethiopia for many decades whereby a properly constituted body of elderly literati and wise persons that would have been normally empowered to screen, evaluate and then bestow the prestigious traditional literary title of *Blatengeta* which roughly stands for Laureate of the Word/pen, has not functioned now for at least the last twenty-five years. So, outstanding literary artists like Tsegaye are losing out at both ends—nationally and internationally. It is earnestly hoped by this writer that either or both situations will be rectified while Tsegaye is still around with us.

Let us conclude our sojourn at Tsegaye's literary park with a few samples of his description of Ethiopia and Ethiopians as well as where he is at. In his superb 1984 essay, *Footprint of Time*, he painted Ethiopia this way, "Here is the land where the first harmony in the rainbow was born. We walk on the bed rock of our planet's first continent. Here is the root of the Genesis of Life; the human family was first planted here by the evolutionary hand of Time....We walk on the footprints of the evolutionary ancestors of Man." In the 1997 *Ethiopian Review* interview, Poet Laureate Tsegaye was asked what it meant for him to be an Ethiopian and what would he tell an American visitor about it. His response, in part, was:

A simple human being, conscious of African civilization, African culture. Conscious of world civilization, world culture, of equality, of world brotherhood. I think that has been what the ancient history of Africa, the ancient history of Ethiopia has meant and means to us. So, as we go to America to learn, the Americans must also come here to learn. To humble themselves before the ancestors, not to be arrogant, that's what Ethiopia means.. You don't begin knowing yourself halfway. You don't start from Europe, because Europe started from Africa. It started in Ethiopia and Egypt.....I would tell an American friend to go to Washington for the July 4 celebrations, and see Americans worshipping the temple of the sun at the Washington Monument (which is a facsimile of Aksum obelisks)...It is my stone, my temple of the sun...and you are still worshipping my temple of the sun—a mutual heritage.

In a telling poetic self-portrait Poet Laureate Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin recently had this to say about his persona:

Having dawnless dreams

Treating unhealable wounds

Nursing stunted plants

Straightening other folks' lives

Never have I lived for myself