Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin, an acclaimed Ethiopian playwright

Obituary, Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin, Ethiopian Poet Laureate, Dies at 69

By JESSE McKINLEY, New York times, Mar 9, 2006

Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin, an acclaimed Ethiopian playwright who was also the country’s poet laureate, died on Feb. 25 in Manhattan, where he had lived since 1998. He was 69. His death was announced by his family.

Born in the small mountain town of Boda, near Ambo, Mr. Tsegaye became one of his country’s most prominent literary figures as well as an international emissary for its culture. Considered by some to be Ethiopia’s greatest playwright, Mr. Tsegaye (pronounced say-GAY) wrote more than 30 plays, most in Amharic, Ethiopia’s official language, and translated many Western works into Amharic, including those of Shakespeare, Brecht and Molière. (His native tongue was Oromifa, but he was also fluent in Amharic, several other African languages and English.)

He was even more prolific as a poet, publishing countless poems on topics from war (his father had fought for his country during the Italian occupation, 1936 to 1941) to peace. Steeped in the mythology of his region, he viewed the history of Ethiopia – an ancient kingdom with a tradition of independence from colonial powers – as symbolic of a continent’s pride and potential.

"In order to bring about a better future, one must learn from the past," Mr. Tsegaye said in 1993 interview with The Ethiopian Review. "You cannot build a future based on hatred because hatred is the enemy of hope."

Ayele Bekerie, the director of undergraduate programs for African studies at Cornell University, called Mr. Tsegaye "a pioneering figure" who used "the medium of poetry to advance the idea of national unity among the diverse populations of Ethiopia," a nation that Mr. Tsegaye saw as too often splintered by coups, uprisings and famine.

"To him," Mr. Bekerie said, "the stability and unity of Ethiopia lay in its respect for different cultures."

From an early age, Mr. Tsegaye excelled at school and at 13, wrote his first play, which was staged at his school and seen by Emperor Haile Sellassie, the final Ethiopian monarch. (Mr. Tsegaye was buried at the national cathedral in Addis Ababa, in the same compound as the emperor.) A scholarship student, he graduated from the Blackstone School of Law in Chicago in 1959. But dramatic ambitions soon impinged...
on his legal career, and by 1960, he had studied experimental theater at the Royal Court Theater in London and the Comédie-Française in Paris.

From 1961 to 1971, he was the artistic director of the Ethiopian National Theater, and in the late 1970’s, he founded the department of theater at Addis Ababa University, the nation’s largest. In 1964, his wrote "Oda Oak Oracle," a play steeped in Ethiopian legend but written in English; it had productions in Britain and the United States, and elsewhere around the world.

A decade later, as the national theater’s general manager, he was arrested and held without formal charges after the country’s military junta, the Derg, banned his writing. Over the years, other regimes would also forbid the production of Mr. Tsegaye’s work (18 of his 33 plays were banned at one time or another), but he eventually saw his work mounted either at home or abroad. Mr. Tsegaye traveled, spreading the word of Ethiopia’s ancient and modern culture through lectures, essays and international conferences.

In 1998, Mr. Tsegaye was forced to leave Ethiopia to receive treatment for kidney disease. He is survived by his wife, Woizero Lakech Bitew, of Manhattan; his daughters, Yodit, Mahlet and Adey; and his sons, Ayenew, Estifanos and Hailu.

Despite his poor health, he was active until his death. In 2002, the newly formed African Union adopted one of his poems as its anthem.

"All sons and daughters of Africa, flesh of the sun and flesh of the sky," the anthem reads, "Let us make Africa the tree of life."

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