

## The Essay in Tigrigna: An Overview of the Early Period<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

The period spanning roughly from 1942 to 1952 witnessed arguably one of the most intensive and vibrant political debates in the Eritrean history. Centered on the question of the future of the country, and using the platform of the fledgling newspapers, Eritreans of varying and conflicting political persuasions and visions argued their positions in essays characterized by civility and elegant literary style. In fact, it is amidst this political milieu that the *essay* in Tigrigna acquired its full-blown form. Thus, to a great extent, the consolidation, if not the emergence, of the *essay* in Tigrigna is, as Ghirmai Negash put it, ‘a product of the heated political polemics about the future of Eritrea’ in the 1940’s.

This paper tries to present an overview of the essay in Tigrigna in its early phase. By virtue of its exploratory character, it attempts to present, rather copiously, examples of the different types of Tigrigna essays written during the 1940s. One of its main tasks is to show how the consolidation and maturity of the *essay* in Tigrigna is inextricably linked to the political debates of the day. On top of this, it tries to provide the political, ethical and epistemological context within which the *essay*, as a distinct genre, emerged and operated, and explores their stylistic and literary qualities.

It must be noted that, with the exception of a parenthetical and cursory observation made by Ghirmai Negash, little has been done on the *essay* in Tigrigna in general and the essays written in the 1940s in particular. It is not that these writings have not been noticed earlier. They do figure in the historical works of Alemseged Tesfai, though he looks at them primarily as source documents and does not identify them as *essays*; and Tiquabo Are’sse has produced an anthology of selected essays penned by Woldeab Woldemariam. Only people do not recognize them as separate generic category and no systematic analysis has been done on them. Many people use the words ቃገጽ and ጽሑፍ, Tigrigna words for *article* and *essay* respectively, interchangeably.<sup>2</sup> The aim of this essay is to clear the confusion.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay has greatly benefited from fruitful discussions with my classmates in the Introduction to Literature classes, Dr. Yonas of the department of Eritrean Languages and Literature, and from the untiring and stimulating guidance of Professor Tej.N.Dhar.

<sup>2</sup> Eventhough the difference between *article* and *essay* is not watertight, the conscious attention given to language and the various rhetorical and literary devices employed for aesthetic reasons in the latter are some of the distinguishing factors. In the pieces discussed herein for example, the pervasive employment of poems, imaginative dialogues, parables, metaphors, repetition, imagery, hyperbole, verses and stories from the Bible, and anecdotes distinguish them from ordinary and vapid articles.

## Context

The arrival of the British in Eritrea in 1941 and the subsequent limited civil and political liberties they initiated ushered in a period of intellectual and cultural vitality. The main fora in which these intellectual and cultural activities found expressions were the newspapers among which the *Eritrean Weekly News* stood out. Immediately after its first print on August 31 1942, the *Eritrean Weekly News* became a big hit. All along its ten years of publication, it ran 522 issues, each of four (occasionally six) pages (Negash 1999: 115). This amounts to a huge corpus of ‘a total of more than 2100 pages or some three million words’ (Ullendorff Cited in Negash 1999: 115). After the British Military Administration allowed the creation of political parties in the second half of the 1940’s, many other Tigrigna newspapers like *Hbret* (Union), *Hanti Eretria* (United Eritrea) and *Mebrahti Eretria*, which served as official mouthpieces of the political parties, flourished. Other newspapers like *Brhan*, which featured non-political writings, also got into print. Beside creating democratic space and promoting political engagement, the newspapers made an indelible service in vastly improving the modern grammatical and stylistic tone of the Tigrigna language. Hundreds, if not thousands, of essays, articles, and poems of high literary value were produced. And it is in this period and through the medium of the largely political newspapers that the *essay* as a distinct prose composition came into its full form.

Even though the *essay* in Tigrigna flowered around this time, the question of its beginning is far from being settled. According to Negash it was ‘discovered’ as a literary form in the 1940’s (Negash 1999: 119). Granted that further archival research has yet to be done to make a conclusive statement possible, nevertheless, there are some indications that lead us to assume that it went way back before this period. A letter written to the editor of the *Eritrean Weekly News* by a one Bairu Oqbit on June 1, 1944 for example, referred to essays written in *Meleekti Selam* and *Nay Elet Were Eretria*, a periodical and a newspaper published under the auspices of the Evangelical Church and the Italian colonial government respectively. The writer claims that beginning from 1909 *Mele’ekti Selam* featured pieces on ‘spiritual and earthly’ matters written by Eritreans from different places including Somalia and the Sudan. In addition to this, the mastery and elegance with which the *essays* of the 1940’s were written further suggests that there might have been some exercises prior to that period.

## Development

Right from the beginning of its publication on August 31 1942, the *Eritrean Weekly News* featured essays touching on wide-ranging issues: opinion pieces on the ongoing Second World War; warnings and lamentations on what the writers perceived as moral failure and decadence; the importance of education and its ‘civilizing’ effect; attacks on supposedly harmful and backward traditions such as arranged and underage marriages, slothfulness, political corruption, and nepotism; strong admonitions against brutal exploitation of peasants and proposals calling for land reform; account of the development and structure of the Tigrigna language; history of Eritrea and prominent local heroes; and descriptive and comparative analyses of different political

philosophies and practices. Thus, right from its inception, the *essay* in Tigrigna, is programmatic in the sense that it emerged out of a serious concern for what the essayist thought as fundamental political and cultural problems, and found its maturity in that programme. In fact, personal or autobiographical essays were somewhat rare.

Most of the essays written between 1942 and 1944 were written in the Addisonian mode<sup>3</sup>. They were aimed at exposing existing follies and caprice, absurd fashions, and ridiculous customs; educating the people about social manners; and promoting self-discipline and moderation. Even though the structure and the content of many of these essays invariably involve some form of storytelling, they also have a touch of the Baconian aphoristic style<sup>4</sup>. For a better look at the kind of writing style and the marvelous use of language and profound ideas they express, I quote some samples taken from different essays.

Most of the Tigrigna essays written in the Addisonian mode focus on issues the essayists thought useful for ‘civilizing’ their compatriots. Curiously, but not unexpectedly, what the writers try to sell to their readers as markers of modernity and civilization and the condescending manner of their presentation remarkably resembles what the colonial educational system tried to inculcate in the minds of the colonial subjects. Most often, the subjects of the *essays* were hygiene, dressing codes, work ethic, and marriage. One such essay is the one written by Teweldebrhan Xgeyesus and published in the *Eritrean Weekly News* on October 26, 1942, under the title *Upholding One’s Own Dignity (ከብረት ርእሰኛ ምሕላው)*. The essayist, without being feminist in the Western sense, builds a case sympathetic to women. He writes:

ንሕና፡ ኤርትራውያን፡ ብጀግንነት፡ ብልግሲ፡ ብጽብቕ፡ ጠባይ፡ ንኡዳት፡ ኢና፡ ብዙሓት፡ ሰባት፡ መጽሓፍት-ውን፡ ከይተረፉ፡ እዚ፡ ሕጂ፡ ኣብዚ፡ ተጽብጺቡ፡ ዘሎ፡ ደግነት፡ ኩሉ፡ ናይ፡ ተፈጥሮ፡ ባህርዮም፡ እዩ፡ እናበሉ፡ ብዛዕባና፡ ብዙሕ፡ ጽብቕ፡ ይዛረቡ፡ እዮም፡ እምበኣርከስ፡ ስምና፡ ኣዝዩ፡ ዓብዩ፡ ካብ፡ ኮነ፡ ነዚ፡ ጽብቕ፡ ስም፡ እዚ፡ እንበቅዕ፡ ኪና፡ ክንርከብ፡ ምሉእ፡ ተስፋ፡ ኣሎኒ፡ ጅግና፡ ማለት፡ ኣብ፡ ጸምጸም፡ በረኻ፡ ወይ፡ ኣብ፡ ሓደ፡ ውግእ፡ ወይ፡ ኣብ፡ ሓደ፡ ዓብዩ፡ ጭንቂ፡ ትብግቱን፡ ምጽማሙን፡ ዘርኢ፡ ሰብኣይ (ወይ ሰበይቲ) ኢዩ፡ ግናኸ፡ ንብረት፡ ሰብ፡ ኩሉ፡ ግዜ፡ ኣብ፡ ጸምጸም፡ በረኻ፡ ወይ፡ ኣብ፡ ብርቱዕ፡ ጭንቂ፡ ኣይኮነትን፡ እምበኣርከስ፡ ንሕና፡ እዞም፡ ብሰላም፡ እንነብር፡ ሰባትከ፡ ድኣ፡ ጀጋኑ፡ ወይ፡ ዘይጀጋኑ፡ ምኻና፡ በዩናይ፡ መንገዲ’ኹን ክንግለጽ ምኻእልና?<sup>5</sup>

[Trans.] We, Eritreans, are praised for our heroism, compassion and courteous behavior. Many people, even books, say that all these virtues listed here are innate in us. Therefore, as our repute is found great I have hope that we are found worthy of it. A hero is a man or a woman who shows pluckiness, perseverance and resolve in situations of great battle or wilderness or desolation.

<sup>3</sup> Named after an 18<sup>th</sup> century British essayist Joseph Addison, Addisonian essays are essays written for a large audience and are aimed at improving manners and morals of people by using morality tales and wit. Exposing folly and caprice, elevating peoples’ sensibility and taste, and gardening culture and civility are their main agenda.

<sup>4</sup> A style of essay-writing where the essay is organized in tight frames, and as few words as possible are used to express whatever the essayist has to say.

<sup>5</sup> All the translations from Tigrigna to English contained herein are mine. In translating I have tried to be faithful to the style and content of the original.

However, it is not always that human life is found in desolation, wilderness and war. Then in what way would we, those who live an ordinary life, be defined as heroic or cowardly?

At the end of his essay, Teweldebrhan advises his readers to respect their wives and restrain themselves from terrorizing and dominating them so that they can be found worthy of a heroic stature.

Another *essay* written by Woldeab Woldemariam to educate and admonish the public and published on the 20<sup>th</sup> of December 1943, N<sup>o</sup> 69 of the Eritrean Weekly News, talks about civilization and its meaning in the following way:

ቀደም ዘበን፣ ቺቪልታ ወይ ከአ ስልጣኔ ማለት፣ (አውራጃ ብሔራዊ ፈረንጂ)፣ እቲ ሓሳብ ሰብ ኬስተውዕሎን ኪምህዞን ኪፈጥሮን ዚኸክል፣ ጽቡቕ ዘበለ ነገር ዚሕዝን ዚጥርንፍን ብሉጽ ሓሳብ ማለት ነበረ። ስእሊ፣ ህንጻ፣ ጽርብት፣ ቅርጺ፣ መዝሙር፣ ቅኔ ምኽክል፣ በዝይውን ምስልጣን፣ ቺቪልታ ይብሃል ነበረ። ከምኡውን ለውሃት፣ ፍቕሪ፣ ትሕትና፣ ነሕድሕድካ ምክብባር፣ ነንሕድሕድካ ምትሕግጋዝ፣ ሰላምታ ምሃብ፣ አዘራርባን ወግዕን ዘተን አገባብን ምፍላጥ፣ በዝይውን ምስልጣን ከአ ቺቪልታ ይብሃል ነበረ።

[Trans.] In the bygone days, civilization (mainly in the eyes of the whites [westerners]) was all the good things the human mind can fathom, invent and create. Painting, architecture, carpentry, sculpture, music and poetry; and their mastery was called civilization. What’s more, love, compassion, humility, mutual respect, cooperation, greetings, becoming knowledgeable in the art of oratory and their mastery was called civilization.

The writer then interjects his idea by asking the question “what does civilization mean today in the West?” (ሎሚ ቺቪልታ ማለት ብፈረንጂ እንታይ ማለት ኢዩ?) and answers thus:

እነ ዝጽሕፍ ዘለኹ፣ ፈረንጂ ስለ ዘይኮንኩ፣ ነቲ ሊቅነትን ኣእምሮን ደቂ ፈረንጂ መርሚሩስ ክመዘንኹም ኪካታዕን ዚኸክል ፍልጠት ከአ ስለ ዘይብለይ፣ ነዚ ክንድዚ ዚኣክል ሕጻ፣ ደረቕ ምላሽ ንምሃብ እምብዛ ድፍረት ኮይኑ ይርእዮኒ ኣሎ። ግናኹ ከመዮ ሓደ አረጊት ምስላ ዝብሎ፣ “እንተጋጌኹ (ማለት እናተጸረፍካ) ትምሃር” ኢዩኹም፣ ስለዚ ዚመስለኒ ኣሕጽር ኣቢሊ እምልስ ኣሎኹ።

[Trans.] For I am not a westerner and for I lack the requisite intellectual genius, I feel I am in no position to give a proper answer, and I think it would be thought a faux pas on my part to attempt one. However, since, as an old saying has it, one learns from his follies let me suggest a brief answer.

Woldeab goes on to talk about what he thinks is a crass and mistaken conception of civilization in the West. He satirizes the idea of confusing civilization with technological advancement and the undeserved emphasis given to material life over what he called “the sublime and the spiritual.” After one paragraph, he throws another question at the reader “lest we waste our time talking about others let us return to ourselves and ask what civilization means to us [Eritreans] and how we perceive it?” (ሕጂ ግን ብዛዕባ ካልኣት ክንዛረብ ግዜ ከይሓልፈናስ ናብ ዝሓ ርእስና ድማ ምልስ ንበል፣ ግናኹ ቺቪልታ እንታይ ማለትዩ? ከመይ ጌርናስ ነስተውዕሎ፣ እናበልና ንርእስና ንሕተት።) He then goes on exposing what he considers manifestations of misconceptions and vulgarization of the idea of civilization among some of his compatriots. He vehemently and sarcastically condemns the tendency among some of the youth who he says “ape what is vulgar and vile and neglect what is good in the West.” He especially makes an intensely biting remark on their views on and attitudes toward religion. With a mixture of mockery and great moral indignation he states;

እቶም መንእሰያት ደቂ ሃገርና፣ ንፍልጠትን ንሃይማኖትን ኪዓርቁውንን ኪማራቆሙዎንን ከም ዘይከኣሉ መሲሉ ይርእ ዓሎ። እቲ ልቦም፣ ነቲ ካልኣይ ሓዲጉስ ናብቲ ቀዳማይ ኣቢሉ ዘንበል ከም ዝበለ'ውን ይርእ ዓሎ። ንሳቶም፣ ናብ ሃገርም ብዝተመልሱ፣ ኣብ ዝወዓልዎ ኣኼባን፣ ምስ እተራኹብዎ ሰብን፣ ወግዖምን ክርክሮምን፣ እቲ መብዝሕታኡ ብዘዕባ “ዘይምህላው ኣምላኽ ኢዩ። ግሩም ዝኾነ ምህዞ... መስተንክር ዝኾነ ምግላጽ...ኢዩ!!! በቲ ንሳቶም ዚብልዎን በቲ ንሳቶም ዚደግምዎን፣ ሃገርና ድሕሪት ተሪፋ፣ ካብ ዓለማውን ሓሚቻ ዘላስ ያኢ፣ ኣምልኽ ስለ ዘብዝሐት ኢዩ። በቲ ንሳቶም ዝብልዎን ዝደግምዎን፣ ኣምልኽስ ያኢ፣ ንሓደ ህዝቢ ምእንቲ ከይስልጥንን፣ ቺቪልታ ከይኣትዎን ኣሲሩን ኣምባዕዚዞን ዚሕዞ “ኣቢዮ (እንተሰቴኻዮ ዜደቅስ ዓይነት ትንባኽ) ኢዩ።

[Trans.] Some of our young are unable to reconcile and balance knowledge and religion, so it looks. Their heart has abandoned the former and is inclined towards the latter, so it looks. After their homecoming [from abroad], in every meeting they attended, and with anybody they chanced to meet, almost all their talk and dispute is about the non-existence of God. What a wit... How incredible an insight!!! According to what these folks say and repeat, the reason why our country is inferior and why it is behind its peers is because of its obsession with worship [religion]. According to what these folks say and repeat, worship [religion] is an “opium” that fetters and zombifies societies from achieving civilization.

He finally warns the youth not to fall prey to this preposterous position lest they call destruction unto themselves and their country, and closes his essay with a rhetorical question “which way might be the shortest which leads to genuine civilization?” (እቲ ኣብ ናይ ሓቺ ቺቪልታ ብቅልጡፍ ኩብጽሕ ዚኸእል መንገድኹን ኣየናይኩን ይኸውን?)

The use of repetition<sup>6</sup> as a rhetorical device in the above essay, as evidenced by the use of epistrophic<sup>7</sup> and anaphoric<sup>8</sup> words such as “so it looks” and “according to what these folks say and repeat”, lend the essay a poetic and dramatic air. What is as equally striking as the style of the above essay is the issue with which it is trying to grapple with. It seems atheism was finding a good following among a good number of Eritreans who returned from school in abroad to merit such vehement admonishment from Woldeab Woldemariam.

The Addisonian Tigrigna essays of the 1940s were not or should not be seen as limited to a mere normative proselytization or moral preaching. Their critiquing of what their writers perceived as ethical malaise also inevitably had political and civic dimension to them. One remarkable example of such essays was the one written by Woldeab Woldemariam on the 31<sup>st</sup> of January 1944 titled ‘A Country.’ The essay does not merit attention only because of its content but also because it is a specimen of the high literary quality achieved through the combination of different rhetorical and literary devices in the writings of the period. A small excerpt of the essay reads:

<sup>6</sup> It is a rhetorical/literary device that repeats the same words or phrases a few times to enhance the beauty of a sentence and to stress the significance of a point.  
<sup>7</sup> Epistrophe or epiphora is the repetition of the same words or phrases at the end of successive clauses or sentences for rhetorical effect.  
<sup>8</sup> Anaphora is the repetition of the same words or phrases at the beginning of successive clauses or sentences for rhetorical effect.

ሰብ፣ ናይታ እተወልደላ ቤት ጥራይ ኣይኮነን። ሰብ፣ ናይታ ስም ዝሃበቶ ስድራ ቤት ጥራይውን ኣይኮነን። ንሱ፣ ካብታ ኪውለድ ከሎ ዝረአየቶ ቤት ኣዚያ እትዓቢ ካልእ ቤት ኣላቶ፣ ንሳ ድማ ሃገሩ ኢያ። ንሱ፣ ካብቶም ብኸንደይ ክንክንን ብኸንደይ ፍቅርን ዘዕበይዎ ወለዱን ኣሕዋቱን ኣዚዮም ዚበዝሑ ካልኣት ወለድን ኣሕዋትን ኣሓትን ከኣ ኣሎውዎ። ንሳቶም ድማ ደቂ ሃገሩ ኢዮም። ሓዲ ናይ ሓቂ ሰብ፣ ቅድሚ ኹሉ፣ ነቲ ፈጣሪኡን መድሓኒኡን፣ ማለት ንኣምላኽ ኪፍቅር ይግብኦ፣ ቀጺሉ ንስድራቤቱ ኪፍቅር ይግብኦ፣ ቀጺሉ ድማ ንሃገሩ ኪፍቅር ይግብኦ። እቲ በዚ መንገዲ ዘተር ቢሉ ዘይኸይድ ሰብ እም ሃገሪይ ኣፍቅር ኢዮ ድማ ዚብል ግጉይ ኢዮ። ሓዲ፣ ኣቦኡን ኣደኡን ሓዉን ሓብቱን ብዓልቲቤቱን ደቁን ዘየፍቅር ሰብ፣ ከመይ ኣቢሉ ወዲ ሃገሩ ኪፍቅር ይኸእል?— ሓዲ ፍርሃት ኣምላኽ ዘይብሉ ሰብከ ከመይ ኣቢሉ ፍቅሪ ህዝቡን ክብረት መንግስቱን ኪህልዎ ይኸእል?— እቲ በቲ ኣብ ላዕሊ ተመልኪቱ ዘሎ መንገዲ ገይሩ እናኸደ በቲ መሳልል ገይሩ ኸኣ እናደየበ፣ ኣብ ፍቅሪ ሃገሩ ዚበጽሕ ሰብ፣ ምእንቲ እቲ ዜፍቅር ህዝቡን ምእንቲ እታ ዜፍቅራ ሃገሩን፣ ዘሎዎ ኹሉ፣ ምስ ዜድልስ ኣረ ህይወቱውን ከይተረፈት ኣሕሊፉ ይህብ።

ሃገር ማለት፣ እምባታት፣ ጎልጎላት፣ ውሓይዝ፣ ቀላዮት፣ ኣዳራሻት፣ ሓወልትታት ኣይኮነን። ሃገር ማለትስ ሰባት ኢዮም። እቶም ኣብታ መርየት ኣበታትካን መርየትካን ዚነብሩ፣ ሕብርኻ ዚሕብርኻም፣ ልሳንካ ድማ ዚልሳኖም ሰባት፣ ንሳቶም ኢዮም ሃገርካ፣ ንኣታቶም ዘይተፍቅርም እንተ ድኣ ኹንካ፣ ሃገርካ ዘይተፍቅር ሰብ ምዃንካ ኣጸቢቅካ ተረዳእ።

[Trans.] A man is not only of the home he is born into. He is not also of the family that gave him his name. He has a home bigger than that. And that is his country. He hath parents and siblings more numerous than his intimate parents and siblings who raise him with great care and love. And they are his countrymen. A real person, worth his name, must first of all love his creator and saviour. Then he must love his home and family. After that he must love his country. One who does not love his home is wrong when he says he loves his compatriot. How can one who does not love his father, mother, sister, brother, spouse and children love his country? How can one who does not have fear of God claim to have love for his countrymen and respect for his government?.....One who loves his home and family gives all he hath, even his life, to his country. [But] a country is not the mountains, the plains, the rivers, the lakes, the spacious and sprawling palaces, and imposing monuments. A country is its people. Those who live in your fatherland, those who have the same colour as yours, those who speak the same tongue as yours are those who constitute your country. If you do not love them, you must know that you really do not love your country.

The musicality and gentleness of the rather short sentences and powerful imageries crammed into them lend the essay a pleasant intensity which cannot escape even untrained eyes. And the aesthetic gratification one can get from reading it is, in no way, lesser than its undeniably profound message. The stylistic beauty of the essay lies on the skillfull use of metaphor, imagery, and repetition. By equating love for a country with love for one’s home and family, and by making the latter a precondition for the former, the writer taps on a very strong metaphor intimate and understandable for everybody. The secret behind the vividness and vibrancy of the essay is the imageric language employed. Through and through, the reader is presented with images which appeal to his/her visual senses and thus aid him/her to easily make sense of an abstract notion as a ‘country.’ And the essay is rendered poetic due to the plenteous use of repetition as literary device. In the quoted paragraph alone a cursory word count will show over fifty repetitions<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> On top of anaphoric and epiphoric forms of repetition, epimonic type is also used in the essay. Epimone is the repetition of a word or phrase in a form of a question to stress a point. The bolded beginnings of the following two sentences taken from the essay are examples of epimonic repetition: “**How can one who does not** love his father, mother, sister, brother, spouse and children love his country? **How can one who does not** have fear of God claim to have love for his countrymen and respect for his government?” (ሓዲ፣ ኣቦኡን ኣደኡን ሓዉን ሓብቱን ብዓልቲቤቱን ደቁን ዘየፍቅር ሰብ፣ ከመይ ኣቢሉ ወዲ ሃገሩ ኪፍቅር ይኸእል?— ሓዲ ፍርሃት ኣምላኽ ዘይብሉ ሰብከ ከመይ ኣቢሉ ፍቅሪ ህዝቡን ክብረት መንግስቱን ኪህልዎ ይኸእል?)

Another essay which uses its moral arsenal for political aim is the one written by an anonymous writer on 7 February 1944 under the title ‘For Leaders and the People’ (ንሹማምንትን ንሕዝብን) in *The Eritrean Weekly News*. It reads:

ሰብ፣ ብህይወቱ ልክዕ ዚትምነዮ፣ ሹመት፣ ሀብቲ፣ ጥዕና፣ ዕድመ፣ ወሉድ፣ ከማኡ ዝመሰለ'ውን ካልእ መሕለፍ ግዜ ኢዩ። ኩሉ ተተኻኺሉ ኪመጽእ ከሎስ ፍጹም ዓብዩ ዕድል (ጸጋ) ክንብሎ ንኸእል። ስለ ዚተዓደልካዮ ድማ፣ ኣነባባር፣ ኣተሓሳዝ፣ እንተኸእልካሉ ኢዩምበር፣ ኩሉ ካብ ረኽብኩስ ዝደሌኹ ክገብር፣ ሰብ ክጎድእ፣ እንጌራ ብጫየይ ክቆርጽ ምባል'ውን ዝገደደ ዓቢዩ ሓጢአት ኢዩ ዜምጽእ። ከምዚ ዝመሰለ ሥራሕ ካብ ምግባር ግን፣ ድኻ ኳንካ ሓሪስካ ቆሪፍካ ምንባር ይሓይሽ። ብእውነተኛ ርቱዕ ሕሊና እንተመርመርናዮ፣ ሹመት ንርእሳ፣ ዓባይ መዚ (ሓላፍነት) ዘሎዎ ትሕዳር ኢዩ። ዋናታታ እግዚአብሔርን ንጉስን ኢዮቶም። ስለዚ ዋሕስ፣ መድሕን፣ ርስተኛ፣ ጉልተኛ፣ ከም ዘይብላ ርግጽ ኢዩ። ንሹመት ዝተጸወዔ ሰብ ኣቐዲሙ ንእግዚአብሔር ኪፈርህዎ፣ ሕልፈት፣ ሞት፣ ጥፍኣት፣ ከምዘሎ ኪሓስብን ኪስተውዕልን ይግብኡ። “ቀዳሚሃ ለጥብብ ፈሪሃ እግዚአብሔር” ከም ዝበለ ዳዊት። ቀጺሉ ድማ፣ ተጊሁ ንሕዝቡ ዚሓሊ፣ ዚጸዕር፣ ዚሕግዝ፣ ዚመክር፣ ኪኸውን ይግብኡ።

[Trans.] Man craves for high station, wealth, health, longevity, children and other some such past-times. It is absolutely a big fortune (grace) if it so happens that we get all these all together. But, one has got to know how to manage the blessings. Blinded, as it were, by one’s fortune, it is the worst sin to say I will do whatever the heck I want to do; to hurt people; and to take the bread of one’s friend. Rather than doing such a thing, it is better to remain poor and work in the fields. If we look into the issue with genuine and rational conscience, [possessing] power implies responsibility. Power belongs to God and the King. Therefore, it is well-known that there is neither guarantee nor an heir and legatee who can lay claim to it.

Primarily, one who is designated for office is supposed to have fear of God and to fathom that death, destitution, demise, and downfall are imminent. The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, said King David. What’s more, an incumbent must diligently help and advice his people.

In the above piece, the palpable influence the Tigringna Bible had on the conception (political or otherwise) and linguistic style of the essayist of the time is very evident. One also must note the use of Geez statements and their flavouring effect.

Among the essays written between 1942 and 1944 were philosophical and psychological essays. For example, one which appears on 7 February 1944 under the title ‘Education and Discipline’ reads:

ትምህርቲ፣ ጽቡቕ ኣተዓባብያ፣ ወይ ከእ ስነ-ስርዓት፣ ንሰብ ጥራይ ኢዩ ኪወሃብ ዚከኣል። ስለምንታይ፣ ካብ'ዚ ኣብ'ዛ ዓለም ዘሎ ኩሉ ፍጥረት ኣምላኸስ፣ ብስነ ስርዓትን ብትምህርትን እናተገርሐ ዓብዩ፣ ብመንፈሳውን ብስጋውን “ብሱል” ኪኸውን ዚኸእል ሰብ ጥራይ ኢዩ። ብመንፈሳውን ስጋውን “ዝበሰለ” ሰብ ማለትከ እንታይ ማለት ኢዩ?— እዚ ማለት፣ ነቲ ጽቡቕን ነቲ ክፉእን ኣብ ምልላይ ወይ ከእ ኣብ ምፍላይ ምብጻሕ ማለት ኢዩ። ቀጺልካ ድማ፣ ነቲ ጽቡቕ ምፍላጥ ምቕባል፣ ነቲ ክፉእ ከእ ምፍላጥ ምፍንፋን ማለት ኢዩ። ቀጺልካ ድማ ሰብነትካ ምግታእ ወይ ከእ “ጎይታ” ሰብነትካ ምዃን ማለት ኢዩ። እንስሳ ወይ ከእ ከብቲ ከይተረፋ'ውን፣ ብልማድ ወይስ ብተፈጥሮ ሓያሎ ጽቡቕ ግብሪ ኪገብራስ ይኸእላ ኢዩን። ግናኸ ምንምኳ እንተለመዳን እንተተገርሓን፣ “እዚ ጽቡቕ ኢዩ'ም ክገብሮ ይግብኣኒ ኢዩ፣ እዚ ግና ክፉእ ኢዩ'ም ክገብሮ ከቶ ኣይግብኣንን ኢዩ፣ ” ኣብ ምባል ኪበጽሕ ኣይኸእላን ኢዩን።

[Trans.] Education, good upbringing or discipline can only be given [thought] to man. For it is only man, from amongst all God’s creatures in the world, whom education and discipline can tame. And it is only man who can attain spiritual and bodily maturity through education and discipline. But,

what is maturing in spiritual and earthly matters mean? It means first being able to distinguish the difference between good and evil; then knowing the good and thenceforth embrace it; and at the same time knowing the evil and loath it. What’s more, it also means reigning in on your body and lording over it.

Let alone man, beasts or cattle can also do a lot of good things out of instinct or mere habit. But, however tamed or domesticated might a beast be, it cannot say ‘this is good so I should do it and this is evil so I should not do it’.

The essayist expressing his enlightenment-era-like humanist faith in the capacity of man to change himself through education continues “Education or discipline or good upbringing is the staff on which one props up oneself to attain perfection.” But, for this to happen the writer reminds teachers and parents of their duty to help their students and children “develop the good and subdue the evil in them” and ends his essay with the following counsel: “This is what we must aspire for and achieve: thinking on our own, loving by our hearts, eliminating the evil, tendering the good, doing what we know, knowing what we do and doing what we do with utmost love and care.” (ብዝሕ ሓንጎልና እናሓሰብና፣ ብዝሕ ልብና ድማ እናፍቀርናስ፣ ንክፉእ ምጥፋእ፣ ንጽቡቕ ግና ምስልጣን፣ ነቲ እንፈልጦ ምግባር፣ ነቲ እንገብሮ ኸእ ምፍላጥ። እሞ ንኹሉ ድማ ብፍቅሪ ምግባሩ።)<sup>10</sup>

Along the Addisonian and philosophical varieties, argumentative<sup>11</sup> and analytical essays were also written. One such essay, which falls under this category, is published on 14<sup>th</sup> of December 1942. Titled *In Defense of Resurrection* (ስለ ትንሳኤ) it presents a critical appraisal of the Italian colonial system and enthusiastically welcomes the British administration. Employing repetition as a rhetorical strategy of driving his central message home, the writer, Hru Mengstu, explains:

ኣብዛ ብርክቲ ሃገርና ንኣና ዜድሊ ኹሉ ከሎና ከም ጻፍትን ከም መጻእተኛታትን ኳና ተኸርሚናን ተሸቆሪርና ንነብር ከም ዝነበርና ዘይዝኸር ሓደኳ የልቦን። ዝመጸ ዘበለ ኹሉ ድማ ‘ዓሚላይ’ ቢሉ እናጸውዑን እናቀባጠረን ዝነበረና ዘበለ ኹሉ ናይ ኢድናን ናይ እግርናን መጣጠጡ ኸም ዝወሰዶ ዘይፈልጥ ሓደኳ ኣይርከብን። ምኽንያቱ ድማ ስለ ዘይተምሃርና እሞ ክፋእን ጽቡቕን፣ ረብሓን ወጽዓን ዚብሃል ዘይንፈልጥ ስለ ዝኾና እዩ። ምናልባሽ ሓደ ሰብ ስለምንታይ እሞ ዘይንምሃር ቢሉ ይሓትት ይኸውን። ግናኸ ይርእን ይሰምዕን ነይሩ እንተዝኸውንሲ ምኽንያት ዘይመምሃሪና ምፈለጠሞ ከምኡ ቢሉ ኣይምሓተትን ነይሩ። ምእንቲ ከይንምሃር እሞ ከይነስተውዕል ሰብ ንምጃንውን ምእንቲ ከይንምነስ ኣብ ኣእዳውናን ኣብ ኣእጋርናን ኣሲሮም ኣብ ድቕድቕ ጸልማት ደርብዮምና ይነብሩ ከም ዝነበሩ ሎሚ ይፍለጠና ኣሎ። ከይንገይሽ እሞ ከይንርእ ኣእጋርና ተኣሲርና ነበርና። ከይንጻዕ እሞ ከይንምሃር ከኣ ኣእዳውና ተኣሲርና ነበርና። ከይንጥምት እሞ ከይነስተውዕል ኣዲንትና ተዓሚትና ነበርና። ከይንዛረብ እሞ ምእንቲ ከይነእዊ ድማ ኣፍና ረጉድ መሓንገጋ ኣትይዎ ነበረ። በዚ ነገርዚ ማህሚናን ተሸቆሪርናን ንነብር ከም ዝነበርናኸ መን ኪጠራጠሮ ይኸእል? ሎሚ ግና ግዜ ተለዊጡ እዩ። ምድሪ ወጊሑልና እዩ። ኣብዚ ግዜ እዚሞ ሓለፋ እቲ ዝሓለፈ ግዜ እንታይ ረኺብናሉ ኢና ቢሉ ዚሓትት ሰብ ምናልባሽ ኣይስኣንን ይኸውን። እታ ምላሽ ኸእ ቐረባ እያ። ሎምስ ንዛረብ እኳ ኣሎና።!!.....እዚ ህያብዝኸ ንእሽቶይ ህያብ ኮይኑዶ ይሰምዓኩም ኣሎ?!

Even though everything that we need is found in this sacred land of ours, no one can fail to remember that we used to live fear-stricken and covered as strangers. There is no one among us who does not know that whoever manages to lay hand on our land has cajoled us into acquiescence and appropriated every bit of our resource. The reason was that we were uneducated and thus were

<sup>10</sup> The linguistic and literary scaffolding of this essay is similar to the ones discussed before. Especially one needs to note how repetition and pairing is skillfully employed to affect a poetic prose.

<sup>11</sup> Essays of argument that are meant to educate, illuminate, convince and influence. To push their point home, essayist of this kind use strong rhetorical devices.

unable to tell the evil from the good and the unprofitable from the profitable. One might ask why we were not educated. But if he were able to see and hear he would have known the reason and would not have asked this question. We now realize that lest we know and understand and thus long for fullness they had put our hands and legs in fetters and thrown us into total darkness. Lest we travel and thus see our legs were in shackles. Lest we work and thus learn our hands were in chains. Lest we see and thus understand our eyes were blindfolded. Lest we speak and thus voice our lamentation our mouths were muzzled. Who can then doubt that owing to all these we were living in fear and languishment? But now time has changed. Now it is dawn. One might ask what is new that we get now which was not there back then. The answer is near at hand. Now we at least can speak.....and do you think, dear reader, this is a trifling a gift?

### **Political Polemics and the *Essay***

Even though the essays written between 1942 and 1944, show a great deal of finesse, the best and elaborate essays were in store waiting for and accompanying the political debates soon to explode after mid 1944. Thenceforth, the genre saw a noticeable change in terms of style and content. Essays were written in a dense prose, with sprinklings of aphoristic statements. Many a time they were punctuated by plenteous use of hyperboles, superlatives and adjectives. This seems to be a conscious rhetorical strategy meant to drive home the message of the writer easily. One also gets the feeling that the writers were attempting to intimidate the reader into accepting their point of view by creating textual ambience where the reader is not only given the pleasure of understanding but also mystified.

While reading through the essays, one is struck by one unflinching element in them— literary elegance. Even amidst bitter and recriminatory debates, the essays do not descend into vulgarity and continue to consistently exude civility and sophistication.

Generally, the essays reflect the political tendencies and inclinations embraced by many Eritreans. It mirrors not only the clear stand taken by the Unionists and Pro-independence parties but also the confusion and political disorientation in which Eritreans found themselves in the midst of a delicate situation made worse by British connivance.

*The Eritrean Weekly News* began to feature political essays in February 1944. The first essay of this kind was written on the 14<sup>th</sup> of the same month by an anonymous writer under the title *The Fate of Eritrea* (ዕድል ኤርትራ). To see how the need to articulate the complex political issues changed the style and form of the *essay in Tigrigna*, a rather long excerpt is presented here below.

The anonymous writer begins his essay by noting that “amongst all the parties living in Eritrea, the future state or the fate of the country has become a cause for self-examination, much talk and speculation.” (ናይ ኤርትራ ናይቲ ዚመጽእ ግዜኦ ኩነታት ወይከኣ ዕድሎት ኣብ ማእከል እቶም ኣብዛ ሃገር እዚኣ ዚነበሩ ወገናት ኩላቶም ኣብ ነጻድሕድድካ ምርምርን ይመስለኒ እናበልካ ድማ ሃንዲስካን ምሂዝካን ኣብ ምትሕሰሳብን ዜበጽሕ ምኽንያት ኮይኑ ኣሎ።)

After stating that the British and Italian governments were also interested in and concerned with the issue the writer stresses that “for it is their own lives and their own affairs, and for, whatever

happened, this country is their country and home, it is Eritreans who above all are anxiously  
whelmed by this vital and crucial issue.” (ከብ ኩሉ ዝበለጸ ግና እዚ ዓብይ ነገር ወይከአ እዚ ዓብይ ኩነታት’ዚ ሩሳቶምን ገዛእ  
ጉዳዮምን ስለ ዝኾነ፣ ዝኾነውን እንተኾነ ድማ፣ እዛ ነገር እዚአ ነገርም ወይስ ቤቶም ኢያ’ሞ ኣውራ ኣውራስ ንኤርትራውያን ኢያ ከቢድዎም ዘሎ።)

Initiating the reader into the intricacies of the subject through a dense prose the writer continues;

ግናኹ ዝኾነ ይኹን ሓደ ነገር ግና ከወ.ንን ርግጽን ኢያ። ንሱ ድማ እዚ ሎሚ ነገር ኤርትራ ዘላቶ ኩነታት ኢያ። ነገር ኤርትራ  
ንሎሚ ድኣ ክሳብ’ቲ ናይ ሰላም ናይ መወዳእታ ውዕል ብኣማሓዳርነት እንግሊዝ ትምሕዳር ኣላ’ምበር ብስርዓት ዓለምስ ኣብ  
ትሕቲ ስልጣን መንግስቲ ኢጣልያ ዝኾነት፣ ናይ ኢጣልያ ግዝእት ምዃና ኢያ። እዚ ኩነታት እዚ ድማ፣ ንጊዜኡስ ብዝኾነ ይኹን  
ምኽንያት ኪልወጥ ዘይከኣሎ ኩነታት ኢያ። እቲ እዚ ኩነታት’ዝስ ቅድምቲ ጊዜኡ ኪልወጥ ይከኣል ኢያ ዚብል ሓሳባት ከኣ  
ኣብቶም ዓያሱን ደናቕርን ዝኾኑ ሰባት ጥራይ ኢያ ኪሓድር ዚኸእል።

ኣብ’ቲ ቅድሚ ናይ ሰላም ውዕል ኪኸውን ዘሎዎ ዋዕላ ወይስ ዘተ፣ ናይ’ቲ ዚመጽእ ጊዜ ናይ’ዛ ነገር እዚአ ብብዓይነቱ ዝኾነ  
ኩነታት ኣብ ቅድሚ ኣኼባ እቶም ንኹሉ ኪምድቡዎን ኪመሓድሩዎን ስልጣን ዚውሃቦም ልኡኻት ናይ መንግስቲ ሰባት ከም  
ዚቀርቡ’ሞ ብቑምነገር ከኣ ከም ዚምርምርስ ተስፋ ምግባር ግቡእን ቅቡልን ኢያ። ግናኹ እዞም ሰባት እዚአቶም ንኸመይ ዝበለ  
ወይስ ካብ መን ዝመጸ ምስክር ከም ዚቐበሉ ብኸመይ ዝበለ ኣገባብ’ውን ከም ዚገብሩዎ ሎሚ ብርግጽ ኪፍለጥ ኣይከኣልን።  
ቡቲ ሓደ ወገን ከኣ እዞም ሰባት እዚአቶም (ማለት እቶም ነዚ ነገር’ዚ ኪምድቡ ስልጣን ዚውሃቦም ናይ መንግስቲ ሰባት) ነቲ  
ዚምድቡዎ ነገርስ ነቲ ካብቶም ኣብዛ ነገር እዚአ ዘሎዉ ኣውራ ዚበዝሑ ወገናትን ዓልባታትን ዚመጽእ፣ ብምስትውዓል እተገብረ፣  
ቅኑዕውን ዝኾነ ድልዩትን ሃረርታን ከይተመልከቱን ከይተዓዘቡን ኪገብርዎስ ዘይመስል ኢያ።

[Trans.] But, one thing is real and certain. And that is the state in which the State of Eritrea is in. Even though the State of Eritrea is under British administration up until the [post-war] peace settlement, in accordance to the world order [international law] Eritrea is still an Italian colony. And this state can’t be altered under any kind of pretext. The notion that this state can be changed before its time has come can only be found in the minds of the fools and ignoramuses.

To hope that all our ideas about the future of our country have the chance to be submitted to the parties who will be delegated to legate and decide on our fate and thus they will be subjected to serious considerations and deliberations is fairly acceptable. Nevertheless, we have no way to know with certainty to whose testimonies and opinions will the power-that-be listen to nor do we know the procedures and ways they will go about doing this. On the other side, it is unseemly and improbable for these people (government officials who are responsible for adjudicating the case) to decide on the issue without taking note of and comprehending the well-thought and righteous desires and aspirations of the main parties and races in Eritrea.

The writer finally concludes his essay by proposing the partition of Eritrean into two parts; the highlands to be united with Ethiopia and the lowlands to be given to the Sudan.

As can be observed from the above excerpt and as will be amply shown in the following essays, Tigrigna had to stretch itself to accommodate the political subject-matter concerning the future of Eritrea. The crisp and poetic style that we have seen before in the Addisonian essays were, to some extent, abandoned for political essays with long, intricate, dense, and redundant sentences. And this would become typical of all the political essays of the period.

The essay which ignited the fire of political debates was one written on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of August 1944 under a pen name ‘One Eritrean’ and titled ‘Few Thoughts Pertaining to the Future State of Eritrea’

(ብዛዕባቲ ዚመጽእ ኩነታት ኤርትራ ዚትንኪ ገለ ሓሳባት).<sup>12</sup> It was so provoking that it resulted in an outpouring of inflammatory essays on the pages of the Eritrean Weekly News and set off a chain of political debates that would continue for the years to come (Tesfai 2001: 121). Without exceeding the bounds of decorum and civility lampoons were composed, ideas ridiculed, sarcasm employed, and insults traded. As the result, the Eritrean political landscape became highly polarized.

The essay begins by an explanation why the writer wants to write it. He says;

እዚ ሕጂ ዜጽሕፈኒ ዘሎ ምኽንያት እውን ሃገር ኤርትራስ ከም ሃገር ወይስ ከም መሬት ካብተን ናይ ምሥራቃዊ ኣፍሪቃ ሃገራት ዝበለጸጉ ወይስ ዝሓሸጉ ሃገር ከም ዝኾነት ኣምሲሊ ከርእያ ወይስ ከምዝሃና ቢሊ ኣይኮንኩን። እዚ ናይ ሕጂ ሓሳብይን ድልየተይንሲ ነቶም ደቅዓደይ ወይከአ ንሕዝቢይ ብዛዕባቲ ዚመጽእ ኩነታት ሃገርም፡ ህይወቶም፡ ዕላማኣም፡ ናይቶም ዚበዝሑ ድልየት እንታይ ከም ዝኾነ ንምክፋል ጥራይ ኢዩ።

[Trans.] The reason why I am writing now is not to shew or judge that the state of Eritrea, as a land or a nation, is the best or better than the Eastern African countries. My present wish and thought is to share what I think are the wishes and thoughts of the majority of my compatriots about the future of their country, their lives, and their intents.

He then continues;

በዚ ዘሎናዮ ጊዜ እቲ ኪመጽና ወይስ ኪወርደና ዘሎዎ ኩነታት ከንፈልጦ ዘይንኸእል ስለዝኾና፡ ኣብቲ ብዛዕባ ሃገርና ዚምደብ፡ ወይከአ ኣብቲ ንሃገርና ዚወርዳ ነገር እውን፡ እቲ ንሕና ክንብሎ እንኸእል ኣዚዩ ዝነኣሰን ዝወሓደን ከም ዚኸውን ኣርጊጽና እንፈልጥ ስለ ዝኾና፡ ሓሳባትናን ድልየታትናን ይደባለቕን ይናወጽን ኣሎ። እው፡ እቲ ንኣና ዚስምዓና፡ እቲ ዚፍተወና፡ እቲ ዜካትዓና ዝኾነ ይኹን ኩሉ ብዙሕ ቅወም ነገር ዘሎዎ ኾይኑ ኣይከቕዳርን ኢዩ።

ዝኾነ ኾይኑ ግና “ዶኾን” ኪበሃለሉ ዚኸእል ሓያሎ ሓሳባት ኣብ ኣየር ኣንጠጢዉ ኣሎ።ንሱ ድማ እቲ ሓደስ ካብቲ ሓደ ዚበላለጽ ጽቡቕ ሓሳባት ኢዩ። ግናኹ ካብኡ ሓደ’ኳ ኣብ ትሕቲ ምምዳብና ዚወድቕ የልቦን። ገለኣቶም- ኢትዮጵያ ንኤርትራ ክትወስዳ ኢያ ይብሉ፡ ንገለኣቶም ከአ ኤርትራ ናብ ኢጣልያ ከም እትምለስ ርግጽ ኮይኑ ይስምዓቶም፡ ገለኣቶም ድማ ቡቲ “ልቕሓን ክራይን” ዚብሃል በዚ ጊዜ ወጺኡ ዘሎ ሓደሽ መንገዲ ኤርትራ ንኣመሪካ ክትውሃብ ኢያ ይብሉ፡ ዓባይ ብሪጣንያ ንኤርትራ ውሕጥ ከም እተብላ “ዚፈልጡ” ድማ ኣሎዉ። ብዝተረፈስ ነዚ ዚመስል ካልእ ብዙሕ “ተሃብራት” እውን ኣሎ።

[Trans.] At the present time; since we are incapable of knowing what will come to pass and befall on us; since we definitely know what we can say and do in regard to the future of our country is very little and inconsequential; our thoughts, wishes and desires are confused and befuddled. If truth be told, the thing that we feel, the thing that we like, the things that we debate on will be considered worthless and insubstantial.

All the same, hoping that perchance they will be heard by the powers-that-be, we have some of our ideas suspended in the air. These ideas of ours surpass each other in their merit and worth. But, it fell not under our powers to realize any one of them. [To mention some of these ideas] some people say that Ethiopia will take Eritrea. Some people feel certain that Eritrea will return back to the Italian rule. Some say Eritrea will be given to the United States of America under the ‘Lend-lease’ program. And there are those who ‘know’ that Britain will ‘swallow up’ Eritrea. There are also many other conjectures like those.

<sup>12</sup> According to Alemseghed Tesfai, the essay is originally written by the then British military governor of Eritrea, Steven Longrigg, and is translated by Woldeab Woldemariam. Though it needs a separate and exhaustive study, it must be noted here that it seems that Tigrigna was not operating in isolation. In the specific essay, the translation must obviously have absorbed something in style from the original English.

The writer then tries to refute each idea and gradually present his to the reader:

አነ እዚ ብዛዕባ ኩነታት ሃገር ኤርትራ ዚትንኪ ዓቢይ ሕቶ ኪፍትሓሉ ወይስ ኪዕረየሉ ዚኸእል መንገድታት ክሕብር ሃረርታይ ኢዩ። ኬጽብቦ ጊዜን ስፍራን ስለ ዝደረኸኒ ግና፡ ብአዚዩ እተወሰነ ቻላት ኣቕርቦ ኣሎኹ።

ኤርትራ ብዓልየታትን ብቋንቋታትን ብወገናትን ብሃይማኖታትን ድብልቕልቕ ዝበለት ሃገር ኢያ። እቶም ኣብ መታሕት ዚቐመጡ ወገናት (ወይስ ሕዝቢ) ብገለ መንገዲ ምስ'ቲ ብትምህርትን ብንግድን ብሃይማኖትን ንኣኣም ዚመስል ምስ ሕዝቢ ሱዳን ኪሓብሩ ከም ዚደልዩ ርግጽ ኢዩ።

ዝኾነ ሹይኑ ግና እቲ ንኣይ ኤርትራዊ ወዲ ክበሳ ስለ ዝኾንኩ ኣውራ ዜገድሰኒ ዘሎስ እቲ ነቶም ቋንቋ ትግርኛ ዚዛረቡ ብዙሓት ክርስትያን ዚትንኪ ነገር ኢዩ። እዙይን እቲ ኣብ ሰሜናዊት ኢትዮጵያ ዚቐመጥ ሕዝብን ብዓልየትን ብሃይማኖትን ብያታን ብዛንታን ብትምህርትን ብልማድን ሓደ ወገን ከም ዝኾነ ኣጸቢቐ እተፈልጠ ኢዩ። እቲ ንምልእቲ ኢትዮጵያ ስልጣንን ጭውነትን ዕብየትን ስርዓትን ዝሃበ ሕዝቢ ኣብ ክልተ ኪምቀል ከኣ ከቶ ዘይግባእ ኢዩ።

ኣኹሱም፡ እታ ናይ መንግሥቲ ኢትዮጵያ መናገሻ ዘልዓለማዊት ከተማ፡ ናይ'ቲ ቋንቋ ትግርኛ ዚዛረብ ሕዝቢ መንፈሳዊት መደበር ወይስ ብልጽቲ መዝገብ ኢያ። ናይ ምሉእ ሕዝቢ ትግርኛ፡ ሃይማኖታውን ፖለቲካውን ሃረርታን ናፍቕትን ከኣ ኣብኣ ኢዩ ተዓቕኑን ተዓቂቡን ዚኮበር ዘሎ። ሕዝቢ እስራኤል ትንሳኤ 'ጽዮን' ከም ዚኣምንን ከም ዚጸበን ሕዝቢ ትግርኛውን ትንሳኤ ኣኹሱም ይኣምንን ይጸበን ኢዩ።

እምበኣርስከ፡ እዛ ናይ ኢጣልያ ምሥራቃዊት ሃገር ኣትብሃል ዝነበረት ክፍሊ፡ ካብዚ ዝብሎ ዘሎኹ ዚሓይሽ ካልእ ምምሕዳር ኣትርክብ ኮይኑ ኣይስምዓንን።

[Trans.]It is my wish to suggest ways and means of solving or fixing the big riddle pertaining to the future of Eritrea. With time and space constraints forcing me to limit myself, I here below present my opinion with few words:

Eritrea is a mélange of diverse races, tongues, factions and confessions. It is certain that those people who live in the lowlands, in one way or the other, wants to tie the knot with the people of Sudan with whom they share a great deal. But, as a Christian highlander, the thing which concerns me in the main is the issue touching on the future of the Christian Tigrigna speakers.

That the Tigrigna speakers in Eritrea and Northern Ethiopia are of the same people, of the same race, and of the same religion; and that they share the same story [history] and custom is well-known. It is improper to divide the Tigreans [Tigrigna speakers], who gave Ethiopia its civilization, culture, decorum and order, into two. Aksum, the eternal city, the seat of the Ethiopian government, is the spiritual mecca of the Tigrigna people. The religious and political longings and aspirations of the whole Tigrigna people lives in the bosom of the city. Therefore, as the Israelites believe in and wait for the resurrection of Scion, the Tigrigna people also believe in and wait for the resurrection of Aksum.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, I feel that the ex-Italian East African colony [Eritrea] cannot face a better fate than the one I am suggesting.

Even in its translation, the above essay keeps the poetry of the sort we have witnessed in the Addisonian essays. I could not establish whether this is the result of the English original or the translator's established mastery. But, judging from Woldeab's other writings his stylistic and linguistic imprints are all over the translation.

The above essay elicited a series of responses. It faced strong disapproval from left and right. One such strong confutation was written by one of the best polemicist of the period Ghebremeskel

<sup>13</sup> The comparison drawn between Scion and Aksum is highly emotive. And it is a strong example where religious feelings and beliefs were made into powerful arsenal in the public discourse battles of the period waged for the soul of the country.

Woldu on 31<sup>st</sup> of August 1944. Its title in Geez<sup>14</sup>, ኢታብኣነ እግዚአ ወስት መንሱት፣ ብዛዕባ ዚመጽእ ኩነታት ኤርትራ (*O Lord Lead Us Not into Temptation: About the Future of Eritrea*), Gebremeskel employs powerfully penetrating extended metaphor to argue for a complete unification of Eritrea with Ethiopia. His essay begins with a refrain typical of the times “even though it is not pellucid for many people what will happen or what will be considered and planned about Eritrea in the post-war peace settlement, I entreat thee to receive a humble opinion of thy fellow and forward it to your readers.” Then he goes on presenting his opinion in the most unforgettable lines of the period:

ሓደ ሰብ፣ ተኸርምዮ ዝነበረ ኣካሉ እንተዘርግሐ፣ ሓደ ሰብ ጥራይ ምዃኑ ኣይተርፎን። ከምኡውን ካብቲ ዋና ኣካሉ ርሕቕ ቢሉ ዝነበረ ናይ ሰውነቱ ክፍሊ እኩብ እንተበሎ፣ ሓደ ሰብ ምዃኑ እኳ ኣይተርፎን። ስለዚ ኢትዮጵያ ነታ ኣካላ ዝኾነት ኤርትራ ብርትዒ እንተኣከበት ከም ምስፋሕ ኮይኑ ድኣ ይርእ እምበር፣ ከም ሓዲስ ግዝኣት ምውሳኽ፣ ከም ዘይነበረካ ግዝኣት ምውሳኽ ኮይኑ ዚርእ ኣይመስለንን። ብቲ ሓደ ወገን፣ ምሉእ ኣካል ዘለዎ ሰብ ምስትርእ ደስ ይበለካ፣ ቁምጣ ምስትርእ ግን እንኳን ደስ ክበለካ ሰውነትካ ካ ከም ገለ ይገብረካ፣ ባሕርያዊ ነገር ኢዩ።

[Trans.]To separate Eritrea from Ethiopia is like separating a suckling from its mother. A person who stretches his contracted body does not fail to be one person. Or he fails not to be one body if he pulls back his stretched body. Therefore, if Ethiopia takes back Eritrea, which is part of its body, I think it should be seen not as irredentism and colonial expansionism but a mere stretching of one’s body. And frankly, when one sees a person with a full body, one feels good. But, if one happens to see an amputee, let alone feeling good, the sight would definitely nauseates him. That is in the nature of things.

In my view, the most powerful quality of this essay is its use of an apparently simple but intimate metaphor to argue for a political position which would have become, if debated in the usual prosaic manner in which political matters are discussed, a dull political editorialing. Equating separating Eritrea from Ethiopia with separating an infant baby from its mother, and equating Ethiopia’s claim on Eritrea with a natural contaction and stretching of a human body have the power of hiding a whole set of factual details and construing a political case in a manner where the reader is, if not convinced, at least thrown into uncertainty.

Many other essays supported the idea of independence for Eritrea and opposed partition or union with Ethiopia. On the 7<sup>th</sup> of September 1944, one of the most prominent politicians of the period, Abraha Tesemma, wrote a piece in support of Eritrea’s independence. Dotted with proverbs, stories and historical anecdotes, Abraha presented the idea of Eritrean independence in an alluring style. He begins his essay with a story and says:

ደቂ ናህ (ኦሪት) ማይ ኣይሂ ብዝሓለፈ፣ ዳሕረዋይ ማይ ኣይሂ ከይመጽእ እሞ ከየጥፍኣና ኢሎም ኣብ ባቢሎን፣ ኣብዚ ሎሚ ባቕዳድ ዚበሃል ከተማ ኣብ ሃገር ኢራቕ ኣል ዓረቢ፣ ኣብ ገማግም ሩባ ኤፍራጥስ ሰማይ ዚበጽሕ ግምቢ ንስራሕ ኢሎም ጀመሩ። ብዙሕ ዓመታት ብዝጸዓሩን ብዝደኸሙን ግን፣ ቋንቋ ምስምማዕ ሲኢናቶም ፋሕ ፋሕ ስለ ዝበሉ ዓንዮም ተረፉ ይበሃል። ደቂ ናህስኳ ቋንቋ ተለዋዊጥዎም ምስምማዕ ስኢኑ ይበለና። ንሕናኸ ደቂ ኤርትራ ሓንቲ ‘ትግርኛ’ ዝቋንቋና እንታይ ኢዩ ምስምማዕ ዚኸልኣና ዘሎ? ዳሕራይ ግምቢ ባቢሎን ንምጅማርግም ፋሕ ፋሕ ኢልና ኣብ ቁምነገርን ስጉምትን ከይበጸሕና፣ ጥበባትን ትምህርትን ከይጠዓምና ኣብ ናይ ናጽነት ጎደና ከይኣቶና ዶኾን ክንተርፍ ይኸውን?

<sup>14</sup> Very often, the essayists of the 1940s sprinkled their pieces with Geez words, phrases and statements to, I assume, infuse them with classical flavor almost in the same vein as Latin was used in English.

ሐሳባት ሰብ ከሉ ብሓደ ግዜ ዘይተሳማሞዎ ኢሉ ኣይኮነኩን፤ ሐሳባትና ከም መጠን መልክዕና ፍጹም ዝተለዋወጠ ከም ዝኾነ ዜጠራጥር ኣይኮነን። እዚ ድማ ብጥንቲ ዝጸንሐ ኢዩምበር ሓዲስ ክንብሎ ኣይንኸእልን። የግዳስ ከሉ ኣናጻጻርካን ነፊኻን ጸሚቑካን፤ ኣብ ዝሓሸ ንሕዝቢ ዝጠቓም መንገዲ ምእታው ኢዩ ዜድሊ ዚመስለኒ።

[Trans.] In the Old Testament, after the great flood subsided, to prevent future calamity, the sons of Noah decided to build the Tower of Babel in what is today Baghdad, Iraq El Arabiya, along the bank of the Euphrates. However, after strenuously laboring for years, they began to speak tongues unintelligible to each other and consequently got dispersed. It is said that the sons of Noah couldn't communicate amongst each other because they lacked a common language. But what is it that is preventing us, the sons of Eritrea, who speak one language, Tigriana, from coming to an understanding? Do we mean that we are going to build a modern-day Tower of Babel, get dispersed without making any progress and without tasting [the fruits of] education and art? Do we mean to fail from entering the avenues of freedom?

I do not mean to suggest that everybody must concur on one point. There is no doubt that our opinions differ as much as our looks. And this is but new. But, I insist we must collect, sift and compress these ideas and come up with suggestions which best serve the interest of the general public.

Abraha then weaves his way to his point and submit his ideas thus:

አዩ! አዩ! ንሕዝቢ ኤርትራ ከምዚ ገቢሩ ከም ኣእምሮ ህጻን ርእሱ ዜዝሮን ከም ነፋሒቶ ሓሳቡ ዚለዋውጦን ዘሎስ እንታይ ኮን እዩ? ድኽነት፣ ዕርቃን፣ ስንፍና፣ ሃኪት ደኽን ይኸውን? ትምህርቲ ምስኣን፣ ድንቀርና ደኽን ኢዩ? ኣይኮነን። ስምምዕ ምስኣን ድኣ ኢዩ። ኣርቕቕ ኣቢልና እንተሓሰብናዮን እንተመርመርናዮን ብዙሓት መንእሰያት ደቂ ኤርትራ ናይ ፖሊስን ኣመሓዳዳር ዚኸእሉ፣ ንርእሳቶም ኮይኖምስ ንዓዳቶም ኬሰልጥኑ ዚኸእሉ ኣለዉ። ከምኡ ድማ ብወገን ወተሃደር ኩባንያ፣ በጦሊዮኒ ኪመርሑ ዚኸእሉ ብዙሕ ኮናትን ጸባባን ዘሕለፉ ፍቱናት ጀጋኑ ሹምባሻት ዝነበሩ ኣለዉና። ተሌግራፍን ተሌፎንን ዜግርዮን ዜተኸኸሉን ኣለዉና። ብወገን መኪናታት ምዝዋርን ምዕራይን ዝፈልጡታ ኣጉባዝ ኣለዉና። ብስራሕ መንደቕ፣ ሓጺን፣ጽርበት ዕንጻይትን እምንን፣ ኖራ ምፍላሕ፣ እንተኮነ ሰነፍ ዘየእትዉ ደቂ ኣለዉና። ንዲሉና ዘሎ ድኣ እንታይ ኢዩ? ስምምዕ ስምምዕ ስምምዕ ምስኣን ኢዩ።

[Trans.] Ah! Ah! What might be the reason which stirs the minds of our people like kids and sway their opinions like chameleon? Is it penury? Is it deprivation? Is it ineptness? Is it slothfulness? Is it lack of education? Is it ignorance? Definitely not. It is only the lack of agreement. If we ponder on and examine the subtleties of the issue, we would find that there are politics-savvy Eritrean youths who can develop not only their country but others too. What's more, we are blessed with war-hardened heroes who can command companies and battalions; with citizens who can operate the telegraph and telephone systems; and with people who are proficient in construction, wood and metal works. Then what is it that is missing? Agreement, agreement, and agreement!

Rejecting vehemently the idea of partitioning Eritrea into two, Abraha also out rightly rejects the idea of joining Ethiopia by employing the ‘we-are-better-than-Ethiopia’ and ‘we-are-historically-different’ theses. Finally, he winds up his essay with a note of forewarning against any kind of union with Ethiopia by declaring:

ንሕና ደቂ-ኤርትራ ቀኑብ ናይ ሥልጣኔ ምልክት ዘሎና ኢና። እቲ ናይ ቅድሚ ሕጂ ዝነበረን እቲ ኪኸውን ዘለዎን ከየስተውዓልናስ ብዝኾነ ምስ ኢትዮጵያ ንተሓወስ! ንተሓወስ እንተበልና ሃገር ዜናብሩ መኳንንትን ወተሃደራትን (ኣምሓራ) ኪመጹና ግድነት ዘይተርፍ ነገር ኢዩም ተመሊስና ድማ ናብ ዕግርግርን ናብ መርገምን ምምላስና ኢዩ። “ኣታ ትማሊ ጸምካ ዝሓደርካ ጋሻ ሎሚ እውን ከምታ ትማሊኻ።”

[Trans.] We Eritreans have a little sign of civilization. To gullibly say, let's unite with Ethiopia! Let's unite! without examining the past and future scenarios, would inevitably mean inviting

Amhara soldiers and officials to come to rule over us and this would in turn definitely enmesh us in chaos and curse. As the old Tigrigna saying goes, “thou guest, who didst not eat yester night, today is not different.”

Another essayist who wrote under the pen name Hayanshufi on 21 September 1944 made a sarcastic attack on the proposals for union and immediate independence and the manner and language they were presented in. Hayanshufi writes:

ብዛዕባ እቲ ዚመጽእ ኩነታት ኤርትራ ዚትንኪ፣ ነንበይኑ ዝኾኑ ሓሳባትን ባህልታትን ዚገልጽ ዓንቀጻት፣ ብሰሙናዊ ጋዜጣ ኪዝረብ ከሎ እሰምዕ ኣሎኹ። ግናኹ፣ ሓያለ ኻብኡ፣ ጋህዲ ብዘይኮኑ ሓሳባትን ክወ.ን ብዘይኮኑ ቃላትን ስለእተሓሰበን እተዘርበንን ቅወምነገር ከምዘይረኹብኩሉ ክእመኖ እግደድ ኣሎኹ።...በኣዝዩ ዓበይቲ ግናኹ ጥራዩን ባዶሽን ብዝኾነ ቃላትሰ፣ ናይ ዝኾነ ይኹን ሃገር፣ ዚመጽእ ኩነታት ኪፍታሕ ወይስ ክምደብ ከቶ ኣይክኣልን። “ከቶ ዘይፈናትን ዘይፈላለን ሕብረት!”... “ኣዝዩ ቀጥ ዝብል ዝምድናን ሕውነትን”...ዝብል ቃላት፣ ንምስማዕ ደስ ዜብል ኣዝዩ ዓብይን ጽቡቕን ቃላት ኢዩ። ግናኹ፣ ኣብ ቅድሚ ጋህድን ኣብ ቅድሚ ሕይወትን ንብረትን ኪቐርብ ከሎስ ኪትሓዝ ዚክኣል ቅወም-ነገርን ፍረን ኣትርክቦንዮ።

ሓራ ኹይኑ ወይስ ርእሱ ክኣሉ እተወልደ ሕዝቢ ሓደ'ኳ ኣይርከብን። እዚ ኹምዚ ዝበለ ዕድል ወይስ መዓርግ፣ ተጋዲልካ ክትረኽቦን ክትበቅዎን ግድን የድሊ። ብዙሓት ሕዝብታት፣ ብቻልን ብመልክዕን ብትርኢታትን ሓርነት ዘለዎምን ርእሳቶም ከኣ ዝኸኣሉን ይመስሉ። ግናኹ መልክዕ ሓርነት ድኣዮም ዝነበሱምበር ካብቲ ናይ ሓቂ ሓርነትስ ርሑቓት ኢዮም።

[Trans.] I am hearing to essays carrying different opinions concerning the fate of Eritrea and posted on the Eritrean Weekly News. But, I have to confess that I have found most of the pieces thought and written in an obscure and unrealistic manner. It is not possible, as it were, to resolve or settle any country's problem with grandiose but hollow statements. Statement such as 'very robust relationship and camaraderie' 'inseparable and eternal unity' are big and good statements one can't help but like to hear. However, when such statements are subjected to a reality check they are intangible and fruitless. In addition, it is useful to note that no society is born free. One has to fight or find oneself fit for a fortune or prestige such as freedom. There are many people who are free in theory and appearance and it seems that they are free. However, though they don a mantle of freedom they are way far from the real one.

Finally, the writer calls all Eritreans to understand that freedom is an ‘apparition’ which is insubstantial and illusory (ሰለዚ ብዙሓት ኤርትራዊያን ሓርነትን ገዛእ ርእሰኻ ምኽኣልንሲ መንፈሳዊ ቃል ድኣዮምበር ቅወም-ነገር ዘለዎ ስጋዊ ቃል ከም ዘይኮነ ኪስተውዕልዎ ዚግብኣቶም ኢዩ።) and he proposes British or French protectorate until the Eritrean people achieve ‘political, earthly and spiritual maturity’.

**Conclusion**

In the 1940's, apart from the political, the form and content of the *essay* was heavily influenced by the prevailing epistemological and ethical ambience. Almost all the essayists were the product of a limited Italian and Mission schooling, and their highest terms of reference was religion. Even the most politically vitriolic essays bore the imprint of religious, most of the times Christian, moral principles. Sentence structures followed the form of the Tigrigna Bible, political opinions were couched in visibly religious terms, and long quotes and parables were taken from the Bible to give credence to ideas and stances. Some of the prominent essayists were Weldeab Weldemariam, Abraha Tessema, Ghebremeskel Weldu, Zerai Seqwar, Redda Mengesha, Tesfazion Deres, Gebremichael Grmu, Sahle Andemichael, and Tedla Habtemariam.

As the Eritrean political landscape became extremely polarized towards the end of the 1940s, the essay in Tigrigna picked up more stylistic sophistication, depth and number. Written within the frame of the old Tigrigna Biblical diction and syntactical structures, and greatly benefiting from the writers' ability to make use of the rich reservoir of Tigrigna oral expressive forms, the essays were powerful, vivid, animating and engaging. The impeccable style, with which Tigrigna essays were written, indeed, makes the period the classical phase of the language; and the *essay* the womb out of which all other literary genres in Tigrigna were born.

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