EDWARD ULENDORFF

Tigrinya (Tagrañña) is, next to Amharic, the most widely spoken Semitic language in Ethiopia, mainly in the Tigre province and in Eritrea. In most respects it is closer to the orthodox Semitic typology than Amharic. In terms of the number of Semitic language speakers in general it follows Arabic and Amharic and surpasses Hebrew by those who speak that language indigenously.

Relatively little has been published in Tigrinya and even less in a representative handwriting (cf. my Tigrinya Chrestomathy, Stuttgart, 1985) by someone who has often been termed ‘the father of Tigrinya’, i.e. Waldeab Waldemariam whom we employed, during the British caretaker government of Eritrea, 1942–52, as executive editor of the first regular newspaper in Tigrinya nay Ertra sämnawi gazetta ‘Eritrean Weekly News’.

After the conclusion of the British administration in 1952 Waldeab had to escape from Eritrea, as he had been the victim of several attempts, miraculously unsuccessful, on his life for advocating complete independence for Eritrea. Those who favoured union with Ethiopia (though quite a few changed their minds later on) were intolerant of someone who held such strong views on Eritrea’s independence. Waldeab did not return to his own country for forty years; by that time he was in his mid-eighties. Meles Zenawi, the President, later Prime Minister, of Ethiopia had agreed to grant Eritrea independence in 1991. Waldeab was now too old and infirm to become President, but he held a position of great honour in his country. He was assigned a fine house and was granted all that was needed for a comfortable life. He died four years later, conscious of the fact that the language and the country, for which he had fought so long and valiantly, were now safe. A detailed obituary will be found in The Independent of 1 June, 1995.

The Tigrinya letter printed below is a photograph of a typical missive, in style and substance, of Waldeab’s mode of expression in his mother tongue and seemed to me worthy of being more widely known. My translation slavishly follows the original, but, although ungainly, it may be of assistance to those not wholly familiar with Tigrinya.

Translation

Much honoured and loved Professor,

Although I believe that you have not quite forgotten me, I know and understand well that you are angry and very distressed about me, because I have given much offence. But because much love removes much offence, I dare to write today remembering the brotherly love which I have for you and which, perhaps, you once had for me.

Honoured Professor, as it is too long and too difficult here to write my life-story since we parted until today, I leave this to some future time and beg you today to allow me to tell you very briefly how and where I am.

* Chairman’s note: The Editorial Board wishes to draw attention to the remarkable record of dedication to scholarship evidenced in this contribution. Professor Ullendorff, formerly for many years Chairman of our Board, is here shown to have been engaged half a century ago in the academic study of a language until recently long obliged by political circumstance to remain obscure. At the time that he received this letter, few can have been certain that it would be spoken in an independent nation of the twenty-first century. We commend his example to our readers.
On account of my political opinions which are known to you, about seven attempts were made to kill me, but I survived miraculously. Although it is written 'DO NOT TEMPT THY LORD' (Deut. 6:16; Matt. 4:7), I did not consider it too much tempting for 'the Lord. But mainly because my brothers and sisters and all my friends had begged me bitterly [sic] to leave the country, I departed from Asmara on 25/8/53 and reached Khartoum. There I remained for about five months.

But because the heavy heat and air of Khartoum did not agree with me, I went away from there on 21/1/54 and came to Cairo and here I am staying until today.

Now, sitting in Cairo, what is one to do? How is one to live? Please tell me. Hitherto I have no work and I don’t know what I shall do or what I shall be able to do. I am still resting because I need a long rest and a peaceful life on account of my health and fatigue. I receive a little money for my livelihood from my brothers and from one or two of my friends. But truly an existence
like this is very hard. But although it is very restricted, I live in contentment
and reasonable comfort because it is not as oppressed as the hole of the grave
which they had reckoned for me.

Honoured Professor, the present or future political condition of our
country is very serious. Our people had longed, and much struggled, to find
that state of bliss which is called freedom and democracy and which is now
constantly receding like a mirage. The conductor has been changed and the
music goes from bad to worse. That wonderful constitution given by the
United Nations has remained a dead letter. And there is no-one who pays any
attention to exiles. A man is arrested in the street without law or ordinance
and is imprisoned without justice and leaves prison without justice. As proof
it is possible to cite the injustice against Dejatch Abraha Tessemma and his
family, of which you will have heard.

Be that as it may, although all these trials may afflict us, hope will never be
severed from us. We shall fight until there exist freedom and democracy in our
country. It is our complete faith that God will liberate us from these hyenas
and from these Philistines, and that, having begun, he will carry through his
work of liberation.

Honoured Professor: Please give my best regards to your honoured wife.
May God grant me to see you again.

Your pupil Waldeab Waldemariam who loves you and longs for you.