

Book Review: 'Negadras Baikedagn Serawoch'

By Abebe Haile | May 23, 2011



Negadras Gebrehiwot Baikedagn

AAU University Press

Addis Ababa

2003 EC. – pp. 186.

*Negadras
Gebrehiwot
Baikedagn*

Few Ethiopians know that Negadras Gebre-Hiwot Baikedagn was a national figure of importance, but even fewer recognize that he was a rare intellectual, an accomplished economist and a patriot. One may even dare say he was a genius. Recently while discussing new books on Ethiopia, a friend showed me “Negadras Gebre-Hiwot Baikedagn

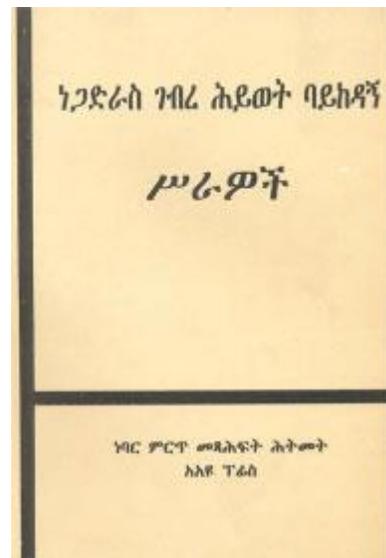
Sirawoch,” an Amharic book published by Addis Ababa University Press in 2003 EC (henceforth all dates in Ethiopian calendar). It is actually two books combined into one: - “Atse Menelik and Ethiopia” (1905); and “Government and Governance” (1916). After reading the superlative accolades on the preface of the book by Professors Bahiru Zewde and Alemayehu Geda, well-known AAU scholars, I thought this must be a great book, and having read the small book in its entirety I can say that I was not disappointed.

What is perhaps most amazing is the fact that such an intellectual of the highest order lived at that period in Ethiopian history and very few Ethiopians know him and here we are talking about him now. According to one of the AAU scholars mentioned above, the reason for the author’s anonymity is the fact that he lived in Africa and wrote his seminal theory of development economics and political theory in Amharic. One may also add that Gebre-Hiwot was not connected to any great academic institution and that he died when he was only 33 years old, long before he could expound and test his theories or firmly establish his credentials.

Gebre-Hiwot was born in Adowa in 1878, a period in Ethiopian history fraught with great upheaval and turmoil: in March 1881 the great patriot Emperor Yohannes gave his life defending his nation’s borders at Metema (by the way is Metema still in Ethiopia?); in 1882 Italy overran and took over the Ethiopian coastal province of Bahr Negash and named it Eritrea; in 1888 Ethiopia fought the mother of all evil, European colonialism, and decisively defeated it at Adowa, a town where Gebre-Hiwot lived as a small boy. Here one can’t help but take note of the small town of Adowa, the symbol and proving ground of Ethiopian patriotism, sovereignty and national unity, as the home of two important personalities – a patriot who championed the unity, prosperity and national sovereignty of his country; and a ruthless dictator who turned the country into a living hell and would sell its sovereignty at a drop of a hat.

Judging from his keen sense of adventure, Gebre-Hiwot must have been a very smart kid. As a small boy he was enrolled in a Swedish mission school in Massawa but no sooner his curiosity led him to embark on a journey to an unknown destination when he travelled to Austria by hiding in a cargo ship at the port of Massawa. Anyway, without getting into the details, he returned to Ethiopia during the last years of Emperor Menelik and became one of the physicians who were trying to help the Emperor recover from his debilitating stroke.

The first book Ato Gebre-Hiwot wrote was “Atse Menelik and Ethiopia (1905).” This was a very small book but with far reaching modern ideas about social and political transformation of the country, mostly meant as an advisory to serve the then new crown prince, Lij Eyasu. An admirer of Emperors Tewodros and Menelik, Gebre-Hiwot nevertheless wrote about the need for an accountable government grounded in rules and regulations and analyzed why Ethiopia remained



poor and backward while the nations of Europe advanced and were colonizing the world to keep their prosperity going. He explained that it would be foolhardy to maintain Ethiopia's independence and sovereignty given the backwardness of the country, and warned that the victory achieved at Adowa was at a great risk. Unfortunately, his prediction was realized when Italy came back in 1928 and devastated the country, including wiping out the handful Ethiopians who were educated.

Although Ato Gebre-Hiwot had returned during the last years of Emperor Menelik, his chance to put his ideas to work didn't come until the ascendance of Ras Tefferi to power. Ras Tefferi first appointed Gebre-Hiwot as inspector on the new Addis-Djibouti Railway and very quickly promoted him to the position of Negadras, at the time quite a high and favored position for a young man of his age and family background.

It was about this time that Negadras Gebre-Hiwot wrote his most fascinating second book, "Government and Governance," which the then progressive Ras Tefferi published after his death. This book deals with the theory and practice of economic development, including sophisticated analysis of investment, fiscal and monetary policy, wealth creation, import substitution, trade, banking, urban-rural economic dichotomy, etc... The book which analyzes the problems of the country in 1910's might as well could have been written for contemporary Ethiopia in 2011. Not only does it address the ignorance, backwardness and the pitfalls of tribalism and cronyism, but how they can be overcome with enlightened, accountable leadership, an educated population and skilled work force. Reviewing world history Negadras identifies two main reasons for the country's poverty and backwardness, (1) ethnic/regional conflicts and foreign wars, and (2) lack of enlightened leadership to guide social and economic development. Negadras Gebre-Hiwot was an early promoter of the Japanese model of development in which both economic development and cultural identity would go hand in hand without trying to imitate half-baked little-understood foreign ideas and confusing cultural mores. He emphasized that this was an absolute imperative if Ethiopia wanted to ensure her independence and sovereignty and catch up with the civilized world.

It was at this time of his most productive life that Negadras Gebre-Hiwot fell ill from an epidemic that swept across Europe and Asia and then came to Ethiopia laying the country waste to death and destruction. Sadly for Ethiopia, Negadras died at the tender age of only 33 in Harar where he was posted to reform import-export administration and lay out the nation's trade policy.

It is interesting to observe that this 'stranger' who was a little boy when he left his country returned a learned adult speaking only Tigrigna, German and some French. However, it took his brilliant mind only seven months to master spoken and written Amharic, the language he used to write his fascinating books. One can only imagine what this outstanding statesman could have accomplished had he lived a longer life.

Writing in his memoir, Ras Imiru Haile Selassie, who was a close advisor of the Ras Teferi at the time, says that Negadras Gebre-Hiwot was "...a wise, bold, energetic young man, perhaps one of only 10 well-educated Ethiopians of the time..." History professor Bahiru Zewde places the Negadras at the helm of Ethiopian intellectual discourse, and Professor of economics Alemayehu Geda credits him with having worked out the modern theory of "development economics" forty to fifty years ahead of European and American economists.

"Negadras Gebre-Hiwot Baikedagn Sirawoch" is an historical but also a fascinating and modern educational book that every Ethiopian concerned about the fate of his/her homeland should read.

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