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Afewerq Yohannis and Debbebe Seyfu: Notes on Ethiopian Writers of the Late Twentieth Century

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Introduction

The twentieth century saw the beginning of fictional writing in Ethiopia. After a hesitant beginning, the market became, in a modest way considering the demand of Ethiopia's reading public, almost flooded by the second half of the century. Many of the authors who then appeared will remain important as long as Ethiopian literature continues to be read; others have made more ephemeral contributions. For my part, I have no notion who Ethiopia's greatest author is, although I believe Be'alu Girma is among the greatest, as are Haddis Alemayyehu, Seggayé Gebre-Medhin, and perhaps also Birhanu Zerihun. On the whole, the hunt for the greatest Ethiopian author is both futile and misleading. I shall not attempt to judge the two authors I write about below; still, they are worthy of notice, and both have their adherents and are loved by many readers. I knew Debbebe Seyfu fairly well when I wrote my book about Ethiopian writers, *Black Lions*,¹ and I knew Afewerq Yohannis's work very well from my earliest days in Ethiopia. I have collected some biographical notes on them after their deaths. I owe most of what I know about their lives to sources and interviews with others, as I did not interview them during their lifetimes.

When I was collecting materials for *Black Lions*, I had of course to make many choices on whom to include. Most choices were obvious, but in some cases I also consulted others, not least Ato Amare Mammo. He had first suggested I write such a book, a suggestion later supported by several other Ethiopians who knew the Ethiopian literary scene best of all. I decided not to include the authors I list below in *Black Lions*, but the two most noteworthy are featured in this article.

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The others have a rather scanty production, but nevertheless it is worthwhile noting their contributions en passant: 1) Laqech Hiruy, who anonymously wrote a tiny booklet of advice for young people, is the first woman in Ethiopia to publish any book at all and certainly a noteworthy figure. She was ill and bedridden when Dr. Amanuél Gebre-Sillasé offered to introduce me to her. I was afraid to be intrusive, and in any case the brilliant Alem-Segged Hiruy, with both *Blatténgéta* Hiruy Welde-Sillasé and Ras Imru Hayle-Sillasé as grandparents, both of whom are included in *Black Lions*,² could write the story of her aunt so much better than I ever could. 2) The poet Seyfu Mettafferiya I omitted not least because he was known as a recluse.³ 3) Solomon Deréssa had left for the United States when I was interviewing members of the Ethiopian literati and was therefore out of reach at the time. While his book of poetry, *Lijjinnnet* (Childhood), is highly regarded, he has not published much else.⁴ 4) Afewerq Yohannis is featured in this article because I now have sufficient materials for a biographical sketch; and 5) Debbebe Seyfu, the second author featured here, published most of his work after I had completed my research for *Black Lions*.

I wanted to include the most important woman writer in Ethiopia, Siniddu Gebru, in *Black Lions*, but she had her own ideas about how her biography should be written. I later wrote about her in an article in *Northeast African Studies*.⁵ I also debated whether to include Afewerq Gebre-ÿesus, but to my mind he posed a problem of where to place him in Ethiopian literature, as his only novel, *Tobbiya*, was written on commission and published abroad. It became well known in Ethiopia only a few years before the end of imperial days, when it was used as a textbook in Amharic classes in secondary schools. After the revolution of 1974, it was nearly forgotten in Ethiopia. The problem of his place in the tradition of Amharic literature in Ethiopia and his influence upon other authors remains unresolved. He is not much read today, and is probably overrated by non-Ethiopians.⁶

Captain Afewerq Yohannis: Poet, Playwright, Translator

I got used to seeing the name of Shambel Afewerq Yohannis included in poetry collections in the bookshops of Addis Ababa from the time I began to take an interest in Amharic literature in the late 1960s. He used his military title, Shambel (captain), although he was not in active military service after his



Captain Afewerq Yohannis

reputed involvement in the abortive coup attempt in Ethiopia in 1960. Many people appreciate his books, and some of the most discerning have told me that while on the whole he is not counted among Ethiopia's foremost poets or writers, he has written many fine poems. A prolific writer, he is perhaps best known for his poetry, though he wrote many other things both for the stage and the mass media. His translations of Western literature may have influenced other Ethiopian authors by bringing new ideas to the country.

I met few people of a literary bent who knew Afewerq Yohannis personally, but that may be accidental as he was a very kind and sociable man. Afewerq was described by his friends as a nationalistic, compassionate man. He wanted everyone to be happy and have a good time, and he is remembered for his generosity, "so much so that he was always short of money," as a close friend put it.

When Afewerq died in 1980, the Ethiopian newspaper *Addis Zemen* ran a lengthy obituary, and in 2002, an issue of the weekly paper *Ītiyop* published a profile of him.⁷ There are so many similarities between these two newspaper articles that they are either written by the same person or the information came from the same source, as the second article clearly builds upon the first. In 2000 Gezzahēñ Desta, a musician who had worked with Afewerq Yohannis setting tunes to some of his lyrics for famous pop singers, mentioned additional biographical points. These, together with some information supplied by the author Aberra Lemma, are my main sources for this biographical sketch.

Afewerq Yohannis was born to Ato Yohannis Gebre-Mariyam and Weyzero Boggalech Weldé near Filwiha, in Addis Abeba, on 13 Ginbot 1919 Ethiopian Calendar (EC, 21 May 1927). His father had recently returned from England, where he had studied for a master's degree. The article in *Ītiyop* gives his father the title *Lijj*, which indicates that he was of noble birth. Soon after his birth, his

mother left his father to bring up Afewerq alone. Yohannis Gebre-Mariyam died when Afewerq was seven years old, and he continued to live with Boggalech Weldé. After leaving school, Afewerq married his childhood sweetheart.

Afewerq Yohannis showed unusual talents from an early age, writing poetry in school at the age of 12. He began his schooling at the Lazarist Mission. He attended the Italian Consolata Mission school after Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935 and then continued his education in the elementary school run by French Catholic missionaries in Addis Abeba. For secondary education he went to the Teferi Mekonnen School, although one source writes that he also attended a secondary school run by the Protestant Swedish Mission.

When Afewerq Yohannis was 17 or 18 years old, he wanted to serve his country in the military, so he joined the Imperial Bodyguard in 1944. He passed the entrance test for the five-year technical course in the artillery; one source has it that he was assigned to the handicraft section (*tegbare-id*), but this is unlikely. After completing his course, he served wherever he was assigned from 1950 to 1959 and almost certainly served until the end of 1960, when a coup was attempted in December of that year. During this period, he advanced from the rank of lieutenant to captain. A tale told of him from those years illustrates his inventiveness: he is said to have developed a homemade bomb of unknown volume and power. He served in the Korean war (1950–53), at the end of which he was decorated by the United Nations and the Ethiopian government. When he was 33 years old, his military career came to an abrupt end when he was implicated in the 1960 coup attempt.

While in military service, Afewerq Yohannis began to write more seriously than he had done previously, and he became deeply involved in the Imperial Bodyguard's cultural activities. The Bodyguard had created a section for theatrical and musical performance in 1950, and since Afewerq had shown creative talents in this field, he was transferred from the artillery to this section and assigned the task of promoting cultural activities. Afewerq wholeheartedly involved himself: he contributed poems, music, and artwork and was much respected for his views in all fields of the fine arts.

The Imperial Bodyguard band had enormous success and made Shambel Afewerq Yohannis famous, as he was the star of the Bodyguard's musical and theatrical section. The band introduced modern dancing with foreign dance

tunes to Ethiopia. Afewerq also supplied lyrics to many of the popular melodies sung by well-known singers such as Bizunesh Beqqele,⁸ Tilahun Gessese,⁹ Teferra Kasa, Mahmud Ahmed,¹⁰ Melkamu Tebejje, and others. For many years a very popular weekly musical show on Ethiopian television called *Hibre-ti'irit* featured these singers performing with popular bands.

During this period of high profile and productivity, Afewerq was involved in the creation of popular media and made use of a local radio station called Teqill, after Hayle-Sillasé's nom-de-guerre, his Ethiopian horse-name. Afewerq often gave patriotic talks over the radio. He had his own column in the Imperial Bodyguard newspaper *Wettadder-inna gízéw* (The Soldier and His Times), in which he published lengthy, sometimes controversial, articles on various subjects. In one, he reported the views of scientists who maintained that there are similarities in the way man and animals, such as chickens, rats, and donkeys, are created. This created a hue and cry from officials close to the throne who, ever watchful for slights to the imperial status quo, interpreted the article as an insult.

Early on Afewerq became interested in the theatre, and in his post as the cultural arbiter for the Imperial Bodyguard he became the life and soul of the Bodyguard's theatrical activities. He wrote several plays of varying lengths, and in September 1960, his play *Iwnet Atmotim* (Truth Will Not Die) was shown at the National Theatre in Addis Abeba. In retrospect, some see this play as dramatically foreshadowing historical events, as a "beacon gleam," rendered in Amharic as *fana wegī*, or trailblazer, of the attempted coup led by the Imperial Bodyguard later that year.

Shambel Afewerq Yohannis was accused of having been involved in the coup attempt, and in the aftermath he was arrested and imprisoned. For several years Afewerq's movements were restricted. The biographical accuracy of this period of his life is difficult to determine, but some of those I interviewed say that during this period he lived at Robīt and Sebbeta in Shewa. Alternatively, a former colleague of mine says that he lived in detention in Welisso, or possibly, according to Gezzaheny Desta in an interview with an Amharic newspaper in 2000, Afewerq was detained at Debre-Birhan.

There is some doubt regarding the role Shambel Afewerq Yohannis played in connection with the attempted coup. Among his well-known poems that were written and disseminated prior to the coup are "Alchalkum" (I could not),

“Yeweddeqe Abeba” (Fallen flower), and “Igirwa Indayneka” (May it not touch her foot). Though nothing objectionable had been discovered in them prior to the failed coup, or in his other works of fiction after the coup attempt, hints and double meanings were discovered, especially in the poem “Alchakum.” Afewerq was suspected and accused of complicity in the plot, resulting in his incarceration. He was not the only member of the Ethiopian literati who suffered such punishment; Tilahun Gessese also was detained for having performed “Alchakum” and other poems such as “U-uta” (“Help!”).

After Afewerq regained his freedom, he started to write again. At first, after his arrival in Addis Abeba, the high-ranking politician Mekonnin Indalkacchew, who was also an admired author, made many difficulties for him. Even so, due to his excellent style, he found work as a journalist on the newspaper *Ye-Ītyopiya Dims, The Voice of Ethiopia*. He had a column called “Indét Lihon Chale” (How did it come about), in which he dealt mostly with scientific inventions but also with philosophical subjects. He also wrote several books, which were admired for their pleasing style, and he wrote essays on such subjects as patriotism, love, nostalgia, philosophy, honesty, and history. He started working for radio and hosted a series of programs called *Ke’alem Asdennaqī Tarikoch, Wonders of the World*. He also hosted a program where he answered questions from listeners called *Science and Life*.

In addition to writing stories of his own creation, Afewerq Yohannis translated foreign books into Amharic, as he was fluent in English, French, and Italian. Even later in life he continued to be a lyricist, writing lyrics for popular love songs. He spent most of his time reading and studying, and it was the books he thought would be most useful to his country that he translated into Amharic. With his translations he was an important progenitor of foreign literature and genres; some consider that it was Afewerq who introduced the short story to Ethiopia.¹¹ All in all, Afewerq Yohannis published 18 books, and he also left behind several unpublished manuscripts. He did not care too much about money and wealth, finding joy and satisfaction in collecting books. At the end of his life he left behind a private collection of about 5,000 books. In 1986, six years after he died, a book of stories translated into Amharic from Russian was dedicated to his memory.

Afewerq had many friends and admirers and, it seems, no enemies. The well-known author Birhanu Zerihun (1933/4–1987) once said of Afewerq that

he began to admire his poems when he went to school, before he had even met him or knew his name. His poems were disseminated anonymously because at that time many poems were recited or sung publicly without the author's name being mentioned. Birhanu Zerihun recounted that later, once he became acquainted with Afewerq, he admired and loved him even more, both for his writing and for his pleasing personality.

During his last years, Afewerq Yohannis experienced many frustrations. One of the most difficult to bear was that his eldest son, whom he had hoped would settle in a career before he died, became involved in politics. His son, Yohannis Afewerq, was a supporter of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party, which opposed the military government. He was arrested and imprisoned, though "without having done anything really bad," as one interviewee recalled. After the 1974 revolution, the legal situation in Ethiopia was rather confused, as arbitrary justice was in the hands of unscrupulous, incompetent people in local associations (*qebelés*). Consequently, Yohannis was left languishing in prison. During the years that followed, Afewerq did not know where to turn for help, and his helplessness saddened him greatly. When I first heard of the case, in 1986, his son was still in prison but was subsequently released.¹²

It added to Afewerq's problems that he was overly generous and as a result was constantly in financial difficulty. At the same time, he was overly ambitious, having begun, for example, to build a house before the Revolution that he could never have completed on his meager income. Many problems contributed to making his last years sad and burdensome, and he probably started to drink too much because of them. He was almost 53 years old when he died on 22 *Yekkatit* 1972 EC (1 March 1980). He was married and the father of nine children by his second wife.¹³

The Poetry and Politics of Debbebe Seyfu

Amare Mammo first introduced me to Debbebe Seyfu in Addis Abeba. They came from the same part of Ethiopia, and Amare had encouraged Debbebe throughout his writing career. Amare Mammo suggested Debbebe was worth including in my planned book about Ethiopian authors. During the time I was researching Ethiopian authors' biographies, I came to know Debbebe fairly well. He was a very kind and friendly man whom I liked very much, and he also



The late poet Debbebe Seyfu

made available to me some students' papers on authors in his department at Addis Ababa University. The observations below build partly on my own acquaintance with Debbebe, but largely on a number of articles written about him after his death, collected and given to me by Aberra Lemma, a fellow writer and a refugee in Norway since 2000, who knew Debbebe well.

Only a small number of Debbebe's works were published at the time I was in Ethiopia collecting materials for *Black Lions*. I asked a few people of a literary turn for their opinion about the quality

of Debbebe Seyfu's work, and these enquiries led to strange contradictions. Some consider him both a good writer and an inspiration to others, but others said that he had been promoted by ideologists for political reasons. These views were strongly maintained on both sides, and since I could not quite make up my own mind, I decided not to interview him for my book.

When Debbebe Seyfu died in 2000, many wrote in homage of him in Ethiopian papers. This alone could be an indication of his influence and the value of his writing, but in Ethiopia, one has to look for the switch of the olive tree kept hidden inside the toga (*wiste weyra*), ready to be used on an unsuspecting person. As so many have been imprisoned for their opposition to the government, it is safer to criticize indirectly, by praising a person who was treated unfairly by the current government. Even now, I cannot exclude the possibility that political opinion plays a role in people's evaluation of Debbebe Seyfu's contributions. When reflecting on the discussions I have had about him, I perceive a pattern to this contradiction: those who work with literature praised him, but those who thought less of his books mainly work in other fields. With all such reservations in mind, what weighs most heavily in judgment about Debbebe Seyfu's literary contribution and talent is the fact that several people who have taken up writing say that they were inspired by his

example, either when he was their teacher at the university or by his published work.

Debbebe Seyfu was a small man, *very* small, because he suffered from poliomyelitis in his childhood and this stunted his growth. I may have insulted him unintentionally once when he asked me if I was married and after replying, I tactlessly asked him if he was. I should of course have learned by that time that physically handicapped persons generally do not marry in Ethiopia. Once when I met Debbebe, I refused to take a taxi and insisted on walking from the Hilton Hotel to the university at Siddist Kīlo, a landmark known as the square with six corners, or exit roads, in Addis Abeba. Debbebe Seyfu walked alongside me, and we had come a long way before I noticed that sweat was pouring down his face due to the heat and my inconsiderate pace. He seemed so normal physically that I had not noticed the effort it posed for him. He never complained, though, even if he thought I was trying to walk him off his feet.

I have seldom met a more generous and courteous man. After his career as a teacher ended, and a period of deteriorating health, he died in Addis Abeba where he had been living with his mother, brothers, and sisters. He died only two months before his fiftieth birthday, on 24 or 25 April 2000.¹⁴ Perhaps it would have cheered him in his last years to know that his story would be told abroad and his work appreciated highly enough to be brought to international notice.

Debbebe Seyfu was born in Yirga-Alem, Sidamo, on the feast day of Saint Abbo on 5 Hamlé 1942 EC (12 July 1950), according to many written sources. Although the exact year is contradicted by other sources,¹⁵ one Amharic newspaper writes that he was born in 1945 EC. His father was Ato Seyfu Antenyisteny and his mother Weyzero Mariyam-Werq Asfaw.

Debbebe attended the Ras Desta School in Yirga-Alem for his primary education. He went on to secondary school at what was then called the Hayle-Sillasé I Secondary School but is now called Kokebe-Şibah, in Addis Abeba, until 1959 EC (1967), from which he graduated with distinction. From his earliest years he was a voracious reader, and he decided early that he wanted to pursue higher education. Already at this early age, he had a love of literature. He won first prize in a short story competition arranged by the Radio Voice of the Gospel in Addis Abeba when he was in his last years of secondary school.

Debbebe entered Addis Ababa University, then called the Hayle-Sillassé I University, and for a year he studied in the accounting department of the business college. This did not suit him, and, according to Dr. Feqadé Azzeze, his colleague of many years, it was during that time that it became clear to him what his field was and he transferred to the arts faculty. He studied Ethiopian languages and literature at a time when it was not very popular to study these subjects, which reflects his great love for his homeland and interest in Ethiopian culture. Debbebe also perfected his knowledge of Gi'iz by studying the language privately with the cleric *Merigéta Qeselam*.

He took his first degree in 1965 EC (1973), when he was 23 years old. For his master's degree he studied English literature, qualifying with top marks in 1972 or 1973 EC (1980/81). He took both his degrees at the university in Addis Ababa but evidently did not wish to go abroad for a doctorate. By this time he had already started his career as a writer of fiction (*sine-sihuf*). As a poet, he seems to have steadily improved over the course of his life, and thus achieved his best work towards the end of his life.

His birthplace, Yirga-Alem, was the capital of Sidamo province and had been founded by Ras Desta, Emperor Hayle-Sillasé's son-in-law. The town of Awasa later became the provincial capital of Sidamo. In 1964 EC (1971/2), Debbebe wrote a well-known poem about the town of his birth and childhood in which he made a pun out of the town's name by making use of the possibility of reading the word *Yirgalem*, the title of the poem, in two ways: Yirga-Alem, which is the proper name of the town, and Yirga-lem, both of which are pronounced in the same way. An Amharic newspaper article is dedicated to a discussion of Ethiopian topographical poetry,¹⁶ as is the poem about the town Ambo by Şeggayé Gebre-Medhin, an eminent poet whose biography is included in *Black Lions*.¹⁷

With his writings and poetry, Debbebe made many efforts to point out and correct the many social shortcomings (*seha*) of his country, and all was done in a spirit of patriotism and compassion for his people. As early as 1965 EC (1972/3), he wrote a polemic against the indifference of the government concerning the great famine that was beginning to plague the country. This poem, entitled "Ayé Yené Zimmita Gagirt," showed his humane spirit. The same year he also wrote a poem called "Ye'Abbatih Lijj" in the same spirit,

and he continued to compose poetry on this theme, with “Bétin Ye’Asharain Zer” in 1967 EC and “Tré Çew” in 1971 EC.

It seemed natural that he saw some hope of better times for Ethiopia when the revolution occurred in 1974. He supported the revolutionary cause for quite some time, perhaps until the very end of the Marxist regime, which fell in 1991. I do not know if he was disillusioned with the revolution towards the end of the Marxist regime, as many of his friends and colleagues were. His revolutionary aim and slogan (*yete haddiso lewt mezmur*) was Greater self-awareness and self-realization, *Yerasé Ginizzabé*. He involved himself in the national discussion about Marxism. He wrote about the linguistic problems of expressing Marxist ideas in Amharic. Apart from specifically political work, he worked more generally on expanding the expressiveness of Amharic, to develop the language so that it could express modern ideas. His contribution in this respect has been appreciated by intellectuals.

Debbebe Seyfu was a member of the Ethiopian Writers’ Union (EWU) for many years. He openhandedly helped many authors to publish their work. It is indicative of the high esteem in which he was held by Ethiopian authors that he was chosen to be chairman of the union in the late 1970s and early 1980s EC. During this time, he edited the union’s journal, *Bilén*, together with Aberra Lemma, who was then the general secretary of the EWU. Debbebe suggested authors for a collection of short fiction entitled *Inneho*, a book published by the Kurraz Publishing House.

It was during this time in the Ethiopian Writers’ Union in the early 1980s that the bitter controversy occurred over Be’alu Girma’s celebrated novel *Oromay*,¹⁸ which was critical of the government. The book was published but then withdrawn from the market after it was banned by the Marxist government of Be’alu’s former friend and collaborator, President Mengistu Hayle-Mariyam. Its publication led to Be’alu’s abduction and secret murder. The entire board of the Kurraz Publishing House, where Debbebe Seyfu also was a member, was sacked because, in their eagerness to get the book on the market as soon as possible, they had accepted *Oromay* for publication without following established procedures, though Debbebe had objected to its hasty publication.¹⁹

In one obituary, Debbebe Seyfu is called professor, but titles are used loosely to honor a loved and respected teacher, so I do not think this was his real title

at the end of his teaching career. Other sources call him assistant professor (*red-dat proféser*), and that is the most likely title. He taught in the Department of Ethiopian Languages, Literature, and Theater Arts at Addis Ababa University from 1965 to 1993. He made a strong impression on many of his students and on his colleague Dr. Feqadé Azzeze, who has testified to his ability as a fine teacher. At first Debbebe taught literature, but from 1973 EC until he retired, he taught in the theater department. He wrote for the stage, and in 1973 EC he published an instructive work on the theater, *Yetéatir Tibebe Kesehañi Teewnétu Anşar*, which consists of extracts about the theater from various sources. He translated numerous plays. In most of these plays, the characters are in search of their true identity. These plays were staged on the university campus by drama students. One play he translated into Amharic, *Kiftet* (Gap), was shown repeatedly on Ethiopian television.

Debbebe Seyfu was dismissed by the post-revolutionary government in the early 1990s. The official reason was that he had been a member of the Ethiopian Workers' Party, for which he had written a poem commemorating its foundation. He was never accused of having taken part in any unlawful or cruel acts or activities perpetrated by some of the members and supporters of the Marxist military regime. He was not among the first 60 academics to be purged from the university, but rumors circulated about him in his last years as head of the department.

Perhaps his ousting was with the complicity of his own colleagues, who were envious of his remarkable success in the department. One article about him after his death is dedicated exclusively to the topic of envy, quoting biblical passages. Many think that Debbebe's last tragic years were the result of the machinations of, among others, Asfaw Damté, who was suspected of concealing his tracks by speaking at the end of a memorial gathering for Debbebe. When Asfaw made his speech, the very people who had asked him to pay tribute to Debbebe walked out. The Ethiopian propensity for the disingenuous digging of pits for each other is one practical aspect of the classic Ethiopian "wax and gold" technique.

This end to his career caused Debbebe much grief and confusion, so that his last seven years of life were very sad. From being a friendly, outspoken, and outgoing university teacher, he turned into a silent and introverted person. He

withdrew within himself, severing contact with the outside world. Some of his later poems reflect his mood at this time, as, for example, does “Aydellem Zewetir Mot,” (It is not always death). One verse of “Lemin Mote Bīlu,” (If they ask why he died), in translation reads: “If they ask why he died / tell to all concerned / withholding nothing / that he died / sulky and at loggerheads with the world.”²⁰

Some of Debbebe Seyfu’s early poems were published in an anthology, *Siǵereda Bi’ir: Yegitimoch Medbel*, along with contributions from 16 other poets. Most of his poems, however, were published separately, in *Ye-Birhan Fiqir* (Love of [the] light) in 1980 or 1981 EC, and in *Le Ras Yetesafe Debdabbé* (Letter to myself), with the subtitle *Second Volume of Ye-Birhan Fiqir*, published in 1992 EC (1999). The latter volume, published a few months before his death, includes a foreword by the writer and literary critic Ato Mesfin Habte-Mariyam.²¹ The foreword contains an evaluation of Debbebe’s contribution, both as a writer and as a teacher, as well as some personal impressions about Debbebe. Dr. Abriham Felleqe and the poet Ato Yohannis Admasu are among the many great admirers of his poetry. The articles written after his death seem to know no end to the praise accorded him. Mesfin even expressed the opinion that he should be considered for the Nobel Prize. Time will show how his contribution will live on in Ethiopian cultural and intellectual life.

At present, he is a somewhat controversial figure, but certainly not ignored. Debbebe’s poems have been introduced as prescribed texts at the university in Addis Ababa. For some time before he died Debbebe Seyfu intended to write a full-length novel, but death overtook him before he could realize this dream. He also is said to have planned to publish a large anthology of poetry in collaboration with Dr. Feqadé Azzeze. Debbebe Seyfu wrote numerous unpublished plays and articles, and left many unpublished poems.

Notes

1. Reidulf K. Molvaer, *Black Lions: The Creative Lives of Modern Ethiopia’s Literary Giants and Pioneers* (Lawrenceville, New Jersey: Red Sea Press, 1997).
2. See Molvaer, *Black Lions*, for chapters devoted to the lives and works of *Blattēnqéta* Hiruy Welde-Sillasé and Ras Imru Hayle-Sillasé, 1–27, 95–131.
3. Seyfu Mettafferiya contributed to an anthology of Ethiopian poetry, translated into Russian (n.p., 1983). See Molvaer, *Black Lions*, 403.

4. Solomon Deréssa's biography up until 1974 is told in Lee Nichols, *African Writers at the Microphone* (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1984). He has been recognized by Aberra Lemma as an innovative poet for his use of free verse. Molvaer, *Black Lions*, 402.
5. See Reidulf K. Molvaer, "Siniddu Gebru: Pioneer Woman Writer, Feminist, Patriot, Educator, and Politician," *Northeast African Studies*, n.s., 4, no. 3 (1997): 61–75.
6. Alain Rouaud has written an excellent biography about Afewerq Gebre-ÿyesus. Alain Rouaud, *Afä-Wärq, un intellectuel éthiopien témoin de son temps, 1868–1947* (Paris: n.p., 1991). See also Molvaer, *Black Lions*, 368.
7. *Ïtiyop*, 11 Meggabit 1994 EC, 13.
8. Bizunesh Beqqele was at one time an intimate friend of the famous author Be'alu Girma.
9. T̄ilahun Gessese was born 27 September 1940. His artistic debut was in 1950.
10. Mahmud Ahmed is very successful internationally, and his international renown began in the United States.
11. In this field, the contribution of Taddese Liben (b. 1930), Ethiopia's greatest short story writer, has probably been more influential with his original work, although he learned much from foreign models.
12. Perhaps Afewerq gave his children his rebellious spirit. His second son, Abiy Afewerq, became a journalist and editor of an independent newspaper, and censorship issues led to him being persona non grata in Ethiopia. He went into exile in Kenya for four years before emigrating to Australia, where his sister lived as a refugee until late 2000 or early 2001.
13. See Molvaer, *Black Lions*, 399–400, for Aberra Lemma's biography. Newspaper articles referred to as source include: Birhanu Gebeyehu, *Addis Admas*, 21 M̄iyaz̄ya 1992 EC, 14ff; Gezzahēñ Gétacchew, *R̄ipporter*, 21 M̄iyaz̄iya 1992 EC, 14; Habtamu Aseffa, *Mebreq*, 26 M̄iyaz̄iya 1992 EC, 6ff; Kebede Gebrehanna, *Ruh*, 21 Hamlé 1992 EC, 14, 17; Kiflu Hussain, *The Reporter*, 12 July 2000, 15; Meseret Asmu, *Tikusat*, 25 M̄iyaz̄iya 1992 EC, 5; Meseret Attalay, *Fert*, Hamlé 1992, 16–19; Taddede Gedlé, *Addis Zemen*, 29 M̄iyaz̄iya 1992 EC, 4; Yoséf Gennene, *Ruh*, 5 Nehasé 1992 EC, 14ff; *Qalkidan*, 1 Hamlé 1992 EC.
14. Ethiopian sources record that Debbebe died on Tuesday, 17 M̄iyaz̄iya 1992 EC. Other sources give the date as the 16th, and that he was buried on the 17th at the church of St. Joseph.
15. Many Ethiopians do not know their exact date of birth. Even those who know on which saint's day they were born may be mistaken about the year.
16. *Addis Admas*, 21 M̄iyaz̄iya 1992 EC, 14.
17. For the biography of the eminent poet Şeggayé Gebre-Medhin, see Molvaer, *Black Lions*, 269–74.
18. Be'alu Girma, *Oromay* (Addis Abeba: Kurraz Publishing House, n.d.).
19. Be'alu Girma (1938/9–1984) became the victim of capricious justice in a *q̄ebelé* in Addis Abeba. Be'alu Girma just vanished, and none of his friends or family knew where he was, or what happened to him. I was first told of his fate in 1987 by Ato

Selahadin Mohammed, a member of an important Muslim family from Harer, then living in Addis Abeba, who said that one of his relatives who worked at a certain *qebclé* where Be'alu had been held for some time told him that they had killed Be'alu. See the chapter on Be'alu Girma in Molvaer, *Black Lions*, 341–52, esp. 346, 300.

20. Translation by Kiflu Hussain in *The Reporter*, 12 July 2000.
21. Debbebe Seyfu's published works are: *Yetiyatir Tibeat Keshafé Tewnétu Anşar* (n.p.); *Marksizminna Yeqwanqwa Chiggiroch* (n.p.), a translation of a book by Josef Stalin; *Yebirhan Fiqir*, vol. 1; *Lcras Yetesafe Debdabbé, Yebirhan Fiqir*, vol. 2 (n.p.). He admired Chekhov, and translated a number of Russian plays from English translations: *Sayqqwatter Sitteretter*, an expression that means in translation "Untying what has not been tied"; *Kebahir Yewetta Asa* (A fish out of water); *Innessu Innesswa* (They and they) masculine and feminine forms; *Iddimtennyocchu* (The wedding guests); and *Kiftet*, (Gap). It is possible that some works listed as his translations are actually his own short plays, but I have not been able to identify them or corroborate this.