

Obituary

Berhanu Gebeyehu

24 December 1964 – 19 July 2010¹

With sadness and feelings of loss we recall the sudden and premature death of Berhanu Gebeyehu in Addis Ababa on Monday 19 July 2010. Berhanu was an Ethiopian scholar of literature, an Assistant Professor at Addis Ababa University and a PhD student at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. He was also based at the African Studies Centre in Leiden and was in the process of finalizing his PhD thesis at the time of his death.

Berhanu had received a WOTRO PhD grant in 2006 on the basis of an excellent and original anthropological-literary research proposal on interfaith relationships and social consensus mechanisms among Christians and Muslims in Wollo, an important region in north-central Ethiopia. His project was entitled ‘Trajectories of Tolerance: A Comparative Study of Religious Discourse and Social Consensus in Wallo (Ethiopia)’ and had a wider relevance for the understanding of religious-communal relations in Ethiopia and in Africa. I was his PhD supervisor and we were looking forward to a final round of editing in August 2010 before his defence in Amsterdam in early 2011. This was not to be.

On 19 July 2010 Berhanu had lunch with friends and was in good spirits. At home afterwards, he felt unwell and sought medical treatment, but passed away suddenly later that afternoon. The cause of his death seems to have been a cardiac arrest. He was buried at St Joseph’s Church in Addis Ababa on 20 July 2010 in the presence of hundreds of mourners. An unforgettable friend to so many people, he also leaves behind his beloved wife Menen and his young son Tewodros (Tedy), to whom he was very devoted. We extend our condolences and deepest sympathy to them both.

Berhanu was an exceptionally bright and hardworking scholar. He had two Master’s degrees: one in Ethiopian Languages and Literature, and the other in Applied ICT, which he had completed just before starting his PhD. Berhanu was a well-respected literature scholar at Addis Ababa University and a popular and gifted teacher. His

¹ This obituary is based on the text written on 21 July 2010 and posted that day on the ASC website: www.ascleiden.nl/Pdf/ObituaryBerhanuGebeyehuDef.pdf.

knowledge of Christianity and Islam in Ethiopia and the country's Muslim communities was remarkable, and he had established good contacts with various important Muslim scholars and literary figures. Berhanu wrote many papers and articles in local magazines in Amharic, and in 2007 published *YäAmarenya Sinegit'im*, a beautiful book on Amharic poetry that he finalized during the first year of his PhD contract. It is a well-written, sensitive work on a complex subject and proved so popular that it was reprinted soon afterwards. With a colleague, he also translated *Candace*, a book on women in Ethiopia by an Ethiopian-Dutch writer, from English to Amharic and did so in record time. In another burst of energy in early 2009, he drafted the text of a book on the religious media in Ethiopia that we were planning to work on and elaborate together. And all this was done without falling behind schedule with his PhD thesis. His academic profile was growing steadily and he was on the road to becoming a more and more prominent scholar at Addis Ababa University.

Berhanu was a very sociable and likeable man. He had a wide variety of acquaintances and friends in Ethiopia, from traders, farmers and craftsmen in Addis Ababa and elsewhere to politicians, administrators, a multitude of university staff and members of the cultural elite.

And everyone liked him because he was genuine and tolerant and had a good sense of humour. His ability to extract information about anything from anybody was uncanny and he was one of the most dynamic, intense and well-informed people I have ever known. All this went with a great and deep love of Ethiopia and its people, and a concern for its problems and predicaments. People loved to be with him and he could talk knowledgeably on so many subjects. I will always remember our conversations, be they about his research and his discoveries of manuscripts and his much-valued informants in Wollo, about the future of Ethiopia or about world and Ethiopian literature. Berhanu could talk just as easily about Thomas Mann's great novel *Buddenbrooks* as about Goethe and his relationship with Islam or about the themes of Dostojewski's novels: he had read them all. The next day he would come up with an interesting book he had found on American foreign policy or on religious history. We continue to miss his intellectual dynamism, his way of playing with ideas, his generosity, and his great humanity and breadth of vision.

Berhanu's work on Wollo, a society characterized by social and religious diversity but also mutual tolerance and accommodation, has to be completed and his book will be a major new study of this Ethiopian region and its cultural history. He originally came from there and had developed an inordinate depth of knowledge on the area, having done fieldwork there on oral traditions, history, poetry, and the folklore and narratives of Wollo since 1996. His study is pioneering and may set a new standard for multidisciplinary work on Ethiopian society and culture. An effort is underway to finalize the book manuscript and have it published. It will be in memory of Berhanu's creative powers of observation and analysis and serve as a fitting legacy to this admirable person, great colleague and personal friend.

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