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## **Abebe Retta, the Reformist in the Imperial Haile Silassie I's Government: A Political Biography**

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### **Abstract**

This paper gives for the first time a brief examination of the political and cultural career of Abebe Retta, 1908–1974. Abebe was one of the court officials and diplomats who joined the absolutist monarchial state in the post-1941 period and one of the figures that have not recently been the subject of individual biographies. Thus far, Abebe has been a little-noticed figure in Ethiopian historical narrative and documentation. Born in Hareqo, Tigray, from a rural-farming family, Abebe eventually succeeded in occupying middle positions in the restored Imperial Government, thereby highlighting some of the integrative approach of the absolute monarchy. In this respect, Abebe did not only manage to occupy the center stage of Ethiopian politics, particularly in the late 1950s and 1960s, but he also succeeded in winning Emperor Haile Silassie's favor and respect. Abebe was successively chosen for ambassadorial and ministerial posts. He was assigned to attend and participate in various supranational and Pan-African conferences, such as the Accra Conference and the conferences of the UN Economic Commission for Africa, and was designated to chair the Ethiopian delegation at the UN at different times and capacities. It appears to have been his lot to be assigned to morbid ministerial positions, which he tried to transform into vibrant institutions through his vision and industry. By using oral and archival sources, largely collected from government offices and private collections, this study presents archetypal accounts of Abebe's political and cultural views vis-à-vis the nature of the twentieth-century Ethiopian government.

**Keywords:** biography, foreign diplomacy, bilateral contacts, minister, ambassador.

### **Introduction**

Investigating Abebe Retta's life-story based on varying places and experiences is rewarding.<sup>2</sup> Born in a small parish from a humble family, he ultimately

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<sup>2</sup> Personal files and memoirs are significant to better understand how power was exercised in the Emperor Haile Silassie's court. For details, see the work of Abraha Weldu, 'A Note on Abebe Reta's Role in the Ethio-Swedish Contacts' in *Journal of African History and Culture*, 9(5), 2017, p. 41.

retained various positions in Haile Silassie I's Government, thereby underscoring some of the heterogeneous nature of the monarchy. In this respect, Abebe did not only manage to dominate the center stage of Ethiopian politics, particularly in the late 1950s and early 1960s, but he also succeeded in winning Haile Silassie's favor and respect. Abebe was routinely chosen for ambassadorial and ministerial positions.<sup>3</sup> In the meantime, he was assigned to attend various international and Pan-African conferences, such as the Accra Conference and the Conference of the UN Economic Commission for Africa (hereafter ECA). Abebe was also chosen to chair the Ethiopian delegation at the United Nations in different capacities. Indeed, it appears to have been his destiny to be assigned to moribund government departments, which he often transformed them into vibrant institutions through his vision and industry.

In a similar vein, Abebe designated his life to protect and enhance the study of Ge'ez at many levels. The interest in the Ethiopian classical language, Ge'ez is rooted in Abebe's early educational background. Abebe was a graduate of the traditional Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) School. As a result, in addition to being the Government's point man on anything related to EOTC, as a scholar of Ge'ez especially in the field of *Qené* poetry, he worked tirelessly to protect and advance Ethiopian Literature. He was instrumental in the establishment of the Ethiopian National Library (*Bete Metsahaft*) and bequeathed hundreds of manuscripts, in addition to being actively involved in preparing annotations for each personal book he donated to the Library. Some scholars argue that Abebe was the first to translate *Hateta* (the philosophical writings of Zera Yaqob) from Ge'ez to English in February 1944.<sup>4</sup> The topic of whether there was an Ethiopian rationalist (philosopher) who preceded or at the same time as Descartes, the French philosopher, is a principal claim of Claude Sumner, who wrote five volumes on Ethiopian philosophy.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Heli von Rosen, *Carl Gustaf von Rosen: An Airborne Knight-errant* (Sweden: Book of Demand, 2017), p.92.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Dawit Reta on 21 March 2017 in Addis Ababa. In this regard, Pankhurst described Abebe Reta 'a scholar no less than a Minister and diplomat he roamed the London bookshops in quest of used books about his country, and built up an important personal library.' Pankhurst, *Ethiopian Reminiscence..*, p.65.

<sup>5</sup> Claude Sumner produces a translation of five nominally philosophical texts. For details, consult Claude Sumner, *Ethiopian Philosophy*, vol. I: The Book of the Wise Philosophers, Commercial Printing Press, 1974; Claude Sumner, *Ethiopian Philosophy*, vol. II: The Treatise of Zara Yaacob and Walda Hewat: Text and Authorship, Commercial Printing Press, 1976; Claude Sumner, *Ethiopian Philosophy*, vol. III: The Treatise of Zara Yaacob and Walda Hewat: An Analysis, Commercial Printing Press, 1978.

In this regard, Abebe left us five works, i.e., one monograph, two scholarly proposals, which suggested revising the Ethiopic scripts, published in 1933 and 1948<sup>6</sup>, and two pieces of writing published in 1942 and 1944, respectively.<sup>7</sup> Some writers like Ataklti have portrayed Abebe as a European-educated “intellectual”, who was more familiar with European civilizations and knowledge, but he did not simply advocate for “westernization”.<sup>8</sup> In addition, Sylvia Pankhurst has excellently characterized and referred to Abebe as “a scholar of Ge’ez and an authority on all pertaining to the literature of his country”.<sup>9</sup> Both Sylvia and Pankhurst quoted Abebe as a “scholar”, who attempted to preserve Ethiopia’s original culture and literary tradition.<sup>10</sup> He made a continued and determined effort to transform his country without compromising her identity. Abebe maintained his desire to see Ethiopia turn modern, while preserving its respective cultural identity and political liberty.

### **Education: From Haräqo, Tigray to Scotland, Europe**

Abebe was born on September 27, 1908<sup>11</sup> in Hareqo, a small village town of some five hundred inhabitants in the former Enderta *awraja* of Tigray (today: Enderta *wereda*, Ethiopia).<sup>12</sup> Under the patronage of his father, Retta Kahsay, Abebe initially attended the traditional church education at Mariam Church in Haräqo, Tigray.<sup>13</sup> In spite of their farming economy, the parents nevertheless took great care over the education of their son, educating him to help him earn a better income. In 1915, aged seven, therefore, Abebe was brought to the local traditional school for Christians that was run by the Church, where he completed the first level. At this stage, the Church helped Abebe learn their letters and identify each of the two hundred and ten symbols that constitute the Ethiopic alphabet. This also introduced Abebe to the basic elements of the Christian faith. At this level, the learner was trained to repeat in an ordinary manner each of the thirty letters of the alphabet and their seven variations, where Abebe earned remarkable success. Sources also attest to the sharpness

<sup>6</sup> *Kä-Temehret Wäodajoch*, ፊደልን ግሻሻል: ለግጥም ሰድል [Script Reform: An Opportunity for Youth] Addis Ababa: 1940 E.C., p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> *New Times and Ethiopia News*, 7 February 1942 and 5 February 1944.

<sup>8</sup> Ataklti, *Ner’a*..., p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> Sylvia, *Ethiopia: A Cultural History*..., p. xxviii.

<sup>10</sup> Pankhurst, *Ethiopian Reminiscences*..., p. 65.

<sup>11</sup> *The Ethiopia Herald*, 10 April 1950.

<sup>12</sup> “Abäbä Räta”, *Ner’a* 2<sup>nd</sup> Year, No. 3, 1998 E.C. p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> *Siyon* Mariam (St. Mary) Church established during the reign of Emperor Gäbrä Mäskä I, and offered part of training for many Tigrayans. *Ner’a*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Year, No. 3, 1998 E.C., p. 19.

of Abebe's mind at this stage, when he successfully mastered the reading of the Acts of the Apostles in a short time and promoted to the next stage, i.e., the reading of the Psalms. This prepared him for the next level of Church education, which includes the reading of *dawit* (that is: reading the Psalms of David from cover to cover).<sup>14</sup>

In 1930, Abebe's education at the church school finished when he travelled to Addis Ababa, accompanying *wagshum* Kebedde. During his fifteen-year stay in the church, the school would have helped Abebe become fluent in Ge'ez, the medium of instruction, and to develop his knowledge of theology beyond his specialties in *qene*, *zema*, and *duga*. And, perhaps it was this circumstance that acquainted him with the deeper meanings of Ge'ez and other antique Ethiopian literature.<sup>15</sup> Anyway, Abebe left Seqota and enrolled at a mission school; from there he was able to acquire formal education in the mid-1930s. Oral and published sources attributed Abebe's strong attachment to the Swedish missionaries, and his employment as a teacher of Ge'ez at the same institution.<sup>16</sup>

In Abebe's life, the death of his father (1921?) was an appalling incident, but he continued his education. His uncle,<sup>17</sup> from his paternal side, considering Abebe's extra gifts and due to the absence of advanced institutions to accommodate his academic thrust, brought him to the impressive monastery of Endaba Hadära in Tämben, southwest of Tigray.<sup>18</sup> Abebe probably stayed at the monastery until his first experience and teaching of advanced learning was ended. In September 1927, aged nineteen, Abebe went to another center of education to study an elaborated *qene*. Going to Seqota (Wello) in 1927 at the relatively young age of nineteen, but having apparently acquired appropriate competence in Ge'ez, Abebe entered the church school there. After going through the advanced stage of traditional church education, Abebe enrolled at the Swedish Evangelical Mission School (hereafter SEM) in Entäto, in the

<sup>14</sup> The same sources reveal that Abäbä speaks, Ge'ez, Tigrigna, Amharic and English. FO, Folder No. 371/ 351 File No. 73711; also see Report of Mr. McNamara's visit to Ethiopia, Folder ID: 1772566, Reference Code: WB IBRD/IDA 03 EXC-10-4540S, WBG Archives

<sup>15</sup> Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print, 1954, FO/371/371, File No: 113560, p. 46.

<sup>16</sup> *Neri'a*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Year, No. 3, 1998 E.C., p. 19, *Informants: Hailu, Dawit*.

<sup>17</sup> *Informants: Hailu Habtu and Dawit Abäbä*.

<sup>18</sup> *Neri'a*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Year, No. 3, 1998 E.C.

outskirts of Addis Ababa.<sup>19</sup> In 1932, Per Stjärne and other staff of the school, convinced of Abebe's academic capacity,<sup>20</sup> helped him obtain a teaching position at the SEM school.

After completing his education in the mission school, there being no chance for higher education in the country, Abebe was one of the privileged few who found opportunities to go for study in Great Britain. He was awarded this scholarship with the support of his intimate acquaintance, Emmanuel Gäbrä-Silasse, who was ordained in 1920 and became a member of the Swedish Evangelical Mission.<sup>21</sup> Abebe went to Glasgow Bible College in Scotland, beginning in 1935 and studied for the diploma of Theology and Semitic Languages for two years. His expertise and knowledge of Ge'ez could have inspired him to join the field.<sup>22</sup> Upon completing his diploma in Theology and Semitic Languages in the late 1936, Abäbä earned him a reputation, and probably it was this occasion that actuated him to canvass and write about the philosophical tradition of Ethiopia. Yet he decided to study economics and philosophy, possibly in agreement with his friends. Then, Abäbä had started his bachelor's degree in economics and philosophy at Bristol University, England. He soon left Glasgow Bible College for Bristol University.<sup>23</sup> Anyway, in 1937, Abebe's education at Bristol University did interrupt. Notwithstanding his acuteness and vigour to study, Abäbä did not manage to stick to education on account of his serious health problem.<sup>24</sup>

### Early Life and the Rise to Power

Abebe's close acquaintance with Haile Silassie's Government started during the first years of the Italian occupation of Ethiopia (1935-1941). When the Italians made a rapid military advancement to the capital, Addis Ababa,

<sup>19</sup> Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print, 1954, FO/371/371, File No: 113560, p. 46.

<sup>20</sup> The British FO states Abäbä Räta was a school-teacher in 1932, and had a profound knowledge of culture and history of Ethiopia. Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print, 1954, FO/371/371, File No: 113560, p. 46; Heli von Rosen (2017), *Carl Gustaf von Rosen: An Airborne Knight-Errant*, Book on Demand, p. 92.

<sup>21</sup> Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print, 1954, FO/371/371, File No: 113560, p. 46.

<sup>22</sup> Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print, 1954, FO/371/371, File No: 113560, p. 46.

<sup>23</sup> Informants: Dawit Abäbä and Hailu Habtu..

<sup>24</sup> Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print, 1954, FO/371/371, File No: 113560, p. 46; Rosen, *Carl Gustaf Von Rosen...*, p. 92.

Emperor Haile Silassie I was extremely shocked by the extent of Ethiopia's political and military unpreparedness vis-à-vis the Italians. Once the Emperor opted to present Ethiopia's case to the League of Nations in Geneva, he left the war front and went to Europe. The Emperor, his family, and some officials left Addis Ababa for Djibouti by train and then took a ship to Jerusalem and finally to London. Regardless of its success, Haile Silassie personally presented Ethiopia's case before the then League of Nations in consultation with his close aides-de-camp.<sup>25</sup> His detractor accused the Emperor of leaving the country. It was perhaps the first time in the history of Ethiopia that an Emperor did so. The imperial retinue arrived in London on June 3, 1936, and appeared to be acquainted with few Ethiopians in the city.<sup>26</sup>

While all this took place in the country, Abebe suffered from a mental illness, which seems to have been related to the situation in Ethiopia. The sources on Abäbä's early contacts with the royal family in London are not yet clear, and also deliver some contradictory information. It is not clear why and when Abebe joined the imperial entourage. In any case, his introduction to the imperial family in London was a turning point, as it brought Abebe into the politics of Ethiopia, where he served for almost 33 years. Abebe's contribution to the Ethiopian entourage was perhaps an important point in his career, but had also introduced him to the reality of power in the post-1941 era. It was Per Stjärne, a Swedish principal and school teacher at the SEM, who now introduced Abebe to the Ethiopian entourage in London. Having some acquaintance with Abebe, Per Stjärne sometimes visited him and other Ethiopian students in London.<sup>27</sup> This was particularly happened during Abebe's college education. In any case, when Per Stjärne visited Abebe, he was reportedly in the hospital because of his mental illness, which was probably caused by the war in Ethiopia or other personal matters.

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<sup>25</sup> For further information on the journey of and life of Emperor Haile Silassie I in Bath, England, consult Lutz Haber, *The Emperor Haile Selassie I in Bath, 1936-1940*, pp.161-162; Rosen, *Carl Gustaf von Rosen: An Airborne...*, p.92.

<sup>26</sup> *The Ethiopian Herald*, 3 May, 1959; John H. Spencer (1987), *Ethiopia at Bay: A Personal Account of the Haile Sellassie Years*, Michigan: Reference Publications, Inc., p. 60. , The position taken by the League of Nations members on the subject of the sanctions against Mussolini and recognition of his arrogates of sovereignty has been rigorously documented and analyzed by various scholars and will, therefore, not be discussed here. As the years went by, however, all countries except the Soviet Union, the United States, New Zealand and China appeared to recognize Mussolini's occupation of Ethiopia.

<sup>27</sup> Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print, 1954, FO/371/371, File No: 113560, p. 46.

Then Abebe joined the entourage in Bath, London. This introduced Abebe to the royal family. And this was a source of political power in the Ethiopian context. He ventured into the country's political spectrum. Abebe, the Emperor, and other state machinery of the government-in-exile came to decide on various issues. Keith Bowers, who produced a mesmerizing work on the life of the imperial entourage in London, concisely summed up Abebe's allegiance and commitment as a valuable aide to Emperor Haile Silassie.<sup>28</sup> On site at Fairfield House, the Emperor had his family and other trusted advisors, comprising *blatengeta* Hiruy, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and *blatengeta* Lorenzo Te'eza, his skillful aide. Welde-Giyorgis Welde-Yohannes, Director General of the Ministry of Pen, later *Sehafä Te'ezaz*, was a capable politician, and commonly exchanged to Bath from the Legation in London. No less than this, Abebe rendered invaluable service to the Emperor.<sup>29</sup> While Abebe studied Economics and Philosophy at the nearby Bristol University, he had dealings with the British press on behalf of the government-in-exile. For a short period of time, Abebe reportedly worked as a "spokesperson".<sup>30</sup> He had communication with some of the British Media about Ethiopia and the imperial retinue at Bath.

It seems crucial to recapitulate the responsibilities and deeds of Abebe in Bath in the late 1937. Emperor Haile Silassie, who made arrangements for the education of the younger members of the imperial household, and few other Ethiopians, Abebe happened to instruct them in English. Besides, he had served as a driver for the Emperor, his family, and members of the entourage. Most of all, as administrative secretary, Abebe carried out important official responsibilities of the imperial entourage at Bath. It was also Abebe who mostly accompanied the Emperor and brought the members of the royal family to amusement parks and other public entertainments. It was perhaps this occasion that enabled Abebe to have a special relationship with Princess Tenagne-Werq, the Emperor's eldest daughter.<sup>31</sup> The Princess, who, in February 1937, became a widow, following the execution of her husband, *Ras*

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<sup>28</sup> Though it seems difficult to know Haile Silassie in any depth, he was not short of supporters, well-wishers and acquaintances, who provided him moral and financial support. For details on the life of the emperor at Bath, see Keith Bowers (2016), *Imperial Exile: Emperor Haile Silassie in Britain 1936-40*, London: Brown Dog Books, p.73.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print, 1954, FO/371/371, File No: 113560, p. 46.

<sup>31</sup> Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print, 1954, FO/371/371, File No: 113560, p. 46; Bowers, *Imperial Exile...*, p.73.

Desta Damtew by the Fascist Italians,<sup>32</sup> had united her family in Bath, England. Almost in the first period of her union with the imperial routine, she had “sought solace with Abebe, an intelligent and very attractive man”.<sup>33</sup> This relationship led to a brief engagement between the two and the birth of a daughter, Tsege-Mariyam, in 1939. Available sources, however, claim that Emperor Haile Silassie did not welcome the union between the two since the Emperor did not deem Abebe’s social standing fit for the status of the royal family, albeit the Emperor had “great sympathy for the talented young man”.<sup>34</sup>

Regardless of the break-up of the relationship, it is probable that since Abebe was related to the imperial family by marriage bonds, it partly yielded him the relevant post-liberation political trustworthiness and success in so many endeavours.<sup>35</sup> Yet this did not necessarily mean that other factors, outside of marriage issues, were irrelevant to Abebe's spectacular rise and his being one of Emperor Haile Silassie’s most respected officials in the post-Italian occupation of Ethiopia. Conversely, the principal factors for his rise, it seems, were Abebe’s profound political ability, his progressive outlooks, and, above all, the performance portrayed at Bath, England. Be that as it may, Abebe’s union with Tenagne-Worq was ephemeral. He then led a solitary disposition. It was virtually after twenty years, on May 5, 1958, that Abebe married to Eleni Hailu, with whom he had one child.

It seems crucial to recapitulate the responsibilities and deeds of Abebe in Bath in the late 1937. In his apartment, Abebe carried out important diplomatic activities of the imperial entourage. Correspondences were performed through a shift system based on language. The English correspondence was carried out by Abebe with his colleague and intimate acquaintance, Emmanuel Abraham, another preeminent patriotic intellectual, in the morning. The French correspondence, particularly until 1938, was carried out by Lorenzo Tazaz,

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<sup>32</sup> In Sidama, *Ras Desta Damtew*, made a resistance against Italians throughout the 1936, and confronted them at many battles in the area, where he lost many of his fighters and he himself narrowly escaped until 24 February 1937. At this time, he was captured by the Italians. A quick convening military court was carried out in Butajira who sentenced *Ras Dästa* to death. *New Times and Ethiopian News*, 13 and 20 March 1937.

<sup>33</sup> Rosen, *Carl Gustaf Von Rosen...*, p. 92.

<sup>34</sup> Rosen, *Carl Gustaf Von Rosen...*, p. 92; see also, Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print, 1954, FO/371/371, File No: 113560, p. 46.

<sup>35</sup> In any case, the union did not last long for this and other related reasons. Informant: Dawit Abebe.



an Ethiopian of Eritrean origin, French-educated, the first medical doctor in the country, and Petrides in the afternoon.<sup>36</sup>

Moreover, Emperor Haile Silassie, who made arrangements for the education of the younger members of the imperial household, and few other Ethiopians, Abebe happened to instruct them in English. Also, he had served as a driver to the Emperor, his family, and members of the imperial entourage. Above all, as administrative secretary, he carried out important official responsibilities of the imperial entourage at Bath.<sup>37</sup> While Abebe studied Economics and Philosophy at the nearby Bristol University, he had dealings with the British press on behalf of the Ethiopian retinue. For a short period of time, Abebe worked as a “spokesperson”.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, Abebe was invariably preoccupied with the diplomatic correspondence for the imperial entourage. In spite of Abebe’s indispensable aid in the years of exile, his activities had received mixed assessments and interpretations by writers. While few writers considered him a patriot, others were critical of him.

According to noted historian Pankhurst, Abebe had excellent character and a resolute patriotic stance. He was also known for his intellectual qualities. He wrote anonymously in the weekly newspapers, *the New Times and Ethiopian News* (Edited by Sylvia Pankhurst, a feminist and anti-Fascist campaigner), as an Ethiopian correspondent during and following Ethiopia’s liberation from the Italian occupation in 1941. His writings harshly excoriated those who attempted to undermine and disparage Ethiopia’s independence.<sup>39</sup> Following his designation as Councillor to the Ethiopian Legation in London, Abebe tried to uncover some of the mischievous schemes of Britain against Ethiopia. He thought that this could be usefully achieved by exposing the rascally British policies towards Ethiopia to the international community through publications. Thus, after he took up his position in the Legation office, Abebe took immediate steps to publish short articles in the weekly newspaper. In the pre-war period, Abebe’s writings focused on the literary tradition of Ethiopia. When he was appointed Ethiopian ambassador to the UK, Abäbä also strove

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<sup>36</sup> Makonen Tegegn, ‘Walda-Giorgis Walda-Yohannes and the Haile Sellassie Government’ in *Northeast African Studies*, New Series, 4:2, (1997), p. 103.

<sup>37</sup> Seyoum, *The Bureaucratic...*, p. 208.

<sup>38</sup> Keith Bowers, *Imperial Exile: Emperor Haile Silassie in Britain 1936-40*, London: Brown Dog Books, 2016, p.73.

<sup>39</sup> Richard and Rita Pankhurst, *Ethiopian Reminiscences: Early Days*, New York: Tsehail Publishers, 2015, p. 210.

to restitute looted works of art, monuments, palace properties, and archives from European countries.<sup>40</sup>

### **Abebe in the Domestic Scene and Others**

In general, Abebe did not immediately return to Ethiopia after the liberation of the country from the clutches of fascist occupation. In any case, Emperor Haile Silassie did enter Addis Ababa on May 5, 1941. In the meantime, the imperial regime was restructured and staffed by officials representing diverse perspectives and visions for the post-Italian Ethiopia. The exiled and forces of resistance formed influential political groupings within the imperial regime. State functionaries were loosely grouped into three opposing groups, namely radicals, moderates, and hardliners.<sup>41</sup> Given Abebe's intellectual quality and progressive attitudes, Alem Habtu (including this author) categorized him with the moderates who sought reform in the government in the form of constitutional monarchy.<sup>42</sup> Contrary to this, few scholars associated Abebe with the hardliners, who wanted to perpetuate the absolute monarchy.

Despite the contrasting versions of Abebe's reformist stance, all agree that he assumed important political posts in post-Italian occupation Ethiopia, including serving as a Legation Secretary in London, where he played a role in reinstating the pre-war Ethio-Swedish contacts.<sup>43</sup> Abebe was also appointed Ethiopian Ambassador to Great Britain, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden in 1948. This was a critical position capable of determining Ethiopia's relations with Italy, Great Britain, and the United Nations. In effect, Abebe found himself indispensable to the Imperial Government and the people. The Emperor entrusted Abebe to represent Ethiopia in Great Britain at a time when Ethiopia had complicated stakes with neighbouring colonial and non-colonial powers, attesting to his influential position with regard to Ethiopia's international affairs.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Sylvia Pankhurst, for example, quoted from Abäbä's rendition on Zär'a Yaqob in her book entitled: *Ethiopia: A Cultural History*, London: Woodford, Lalibala House, 1955; Pankhurst, *Reminiscences of Ethiopian...*, p. 65.

<sup>41</sup> Makonen, *Walda-Giyorgis Walda-Yohannes and the Haile Sellassie...*, p. 15; Rosen, *Carl Gustaf von Rosen: An Airborne...*, p. 92.

<sup>42</sup> Alem Habtu, *The Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM): My Experience in ESUNA, 1964-1971*, p.6.

<sup>43</sup> Bahru Zewde, *Pioneers of Change in Ethiopia: the Reformist Intellectuals of the Early Twentieth Century* (Oxford: James Currey, 2002), p.88.

<sup>44</sup> Norberg, *Swedes in the Haile Selassie's Ethiopia...*, pp.175-176.

Besides, Abebe did not only play a key role in rebuilding the administrative bureaucracy, but also strove to resuscitate the Ethiopian economy by recruiting Swedish experts during the post-Italian period. In 1942, Emperor Haile Silassie appointed Abebe as his personal emissary to re-establish contacts with Sweden and recruit Swedish experts. Shortly after, he consulted with Björn Prytz, the Swedish Minister in London, on the possibility of reactivating the amicable relations between the two countries. He also sought and obtained Swedish experts to work in Ethiopia.<sup>45</sup> It may well be imagined that it required hard work to re-establish pre-war relations with Sweden upon the presence of the Great Powers in Ethiopia. The first Swedish reactions to Abebe's requests were thus half-hearted but became increasingly effective. Abebe made contacts with the institutions that had been active in Ethiopia in the pre-war period. Therefore, the Swedish experts were supplied after 1945 based on Abebe's communication with the Swedish authorities.<sup>46</sup> The Emperor's active involvement was also conclusive in the process. In spite of these highlights, the details of the post-1941 Ethio-Swedish relationships and their entailments need further study.

In this connection, mention should be made of Abebe's part in the Ethio-Italian diplomacy during the post-1941. Despite its failure, Abebe was instrumental in the effort to bring the alleged Italian war criminals to trial. In this respect, Abebe publicly reproached the Italian authorities. On September 7, 1949, for example, Abebe requested the Italian Ambassador in Great Britain, Duke Gallarti-Scotti, with an aide-mémoire in which Ethiopia demanded the surrender of Marshal Pietro Badoglio and Marshal Rodolfo Graziani as war criminals. This Italian diplomat, however, blatantly rejected the demand.<sup>47</sup> Consequently, this diplomatic incident caught international attentions. On September 8, 1949, *The Times* wrote about Abebe Retta's endeavour to approach the Italians in the capital of another country. *The Times* commented: "Where no diplomatic relations exist between two countries, it is sometimes usual for one Government to approach another through the representatives of the two countries in the capital of a third. The Government

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<sup>45</sup> SIDA and Global Reporting, *Ethiopia-Sweden: 50 Years of Partnership Against Poverty*. Edita, 2004, pp. 2-3.

<sup>46</sup> For an excellent analysis on the role of Abebe Reta in reactivating the amicable pre-war Ethio-Swedish contacts, see Norberg, *Swedes in the Haile Selassie's Ethiopia...*, pp.171-173.

<sup>47</sup> For details on the process to bring to trial the two Italian Marshals, Badoglio and Graziani, see the work of Pankhurst, 'Italian Fascist War Crimes in Ethiopia: A History of Their Discussion, from the League of Nations to the United Nations (1936-1949)' in *Northeast African Studies*, 6 :1/2, (1999), p. 133

approached is, however, within its rights in refusing to accept any such demarche”<sup>48</sup>.

The failure of Ethiopia’s diplomacy to bring war criminals to trial may have forced the country to shift its attention towards the status and fate of former Italian colonies, Eritrea and ex-Italian Somaliland. The Italian’s plan regarding Eritrea was rather teleological, with the option of either providing independence or administrating it as a mandate territory. It can be said that the Italian Government placed its own interests at the expense of the Eritrean right to self-determination. On the other hand, Emperor Haile Silassie sought to reintegrate Eritrea with Ethiopia. Abebe, who was accredited to negotiate with Italy, made efforts to narrow down their differences and respect the unfeigned aspirations of the Eritreans.<sup>49</sup> Despite the inclination of the Highland Eritreans to unite with Ethiopia, Abebe claimed to excogitate the subject at the grassroots level. This is not, of course, to deny Abebe’s tenacity for the Eritrean aspiration to unite with their motherland, Ethiopia. But, he apprised his government to reconsider the case properly and disinterestedly.

According to Novati, Ethiopia and Italy made their first direct contact on December 8, 1950, after the UN decided on the fate of Eritrea on December 2 of the same year. In the meantime, Emperor Haile Silasie I resisted any contact with Italy. An attempt at discussion level was initiated through Abebe, Ethiopia’s Ambassador in London, as well as through Spencer, the American legal advisor to Ethiopia. Later, Abebe was also actively involved in Ethiopia’s legal arguments against Italy’s appointment by the UN to administer the mandate territory.<sup>50</sup> He was a principal delegate in the discussions to return Ogaden, the south-eastern part of Ethiopia, to Ethiopia. In the boundary delimitation between Ethiopia and ex-Italian Somaliland, Abebe decisively argued against the use of the British provisional administrative boundary as a line, which was made based on the 1948 border

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<sup>48</sup> *The Times*, 8 September 1949, quoted in Pankhurst, *Italian Fascist War Crimes in Ethiopia...*, p.133; also consult the work of Ghelawdewos Araia, *Ye Etyopya Likso: Revisiting Fascist Italy’s Crime in Ethiopia*. IDEA, Inc, 2008, p, 7.

<sup>49</sup> For details and thorough history and analysis of the re-establishing Ehio-Italian relations after war, please see Giampaolo Calchi Novati, ‘Re-establishing Italo-Ethiopian Relations after the War: Old Prejudices and New Policies’ in *Northeast African Studies*, 3:1, (1996), p. 28.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, p. 28.

agreement with the British, as a basis for final border delimitation.<sup>51</sup> At the end of the day, most of the suggestions submitted by Abebe were accepted and made by the Council to be the line of withdrawal of Great Britain from Somaliland and the boundary line of Ethio-Somalia. As was to be expected, Abebe largely safeguarded Ethiopia's interest in the UN boundary agreement.<sup>52</sup>

The Italian diplomat, Renato Piacentini, made inquiries of Abebe Retta with regard to the reaction to the Italian colonial interest in Eritrea. In their direct talks, Abebe, who, according to Piacentini, could be considered as one of the "young Abyssinians" presumably "hostile to Italy", expressed the hope that Eritrea would be united with "the Ethiopian motherland". He sought, however, that a special arrangement might be made for towns inhabited by Italians and that Eritrean aspirations for autonomy would be considered, but that "today (they were) practically impossible".<sup>53</sup> The nascent and emerging issue of self-determination may have been an expression of resistance to the absolute nature of the Monarchy. The call for self-determination by intellectuals such as Abebe illustrates the internal strife as well as the machinations within the Imperial Haile Silassie's Government.<sup>54</sup>

In this connection, Both Bulcha and Seyoum shed much light on Abebe's attitude towards the policy of the Imperial Government over Tigray and Eritrea as well as his tenaciousness for "minority rights". These authors made reference to Abebe as an outspoken minister and critic of the regime, but whose side of the account has not yet been properly investigated.<sup>55</sup> Bulcha, for example, observes Abebe's disenchantment with some unfair policies and their implementation in the provinces of Tigray (present "regions" were called "provinces" during the imperial regime) by the Council of Ministers. Though discarded by the monarch, Abebe expressed his critical voice or opinion at various cabinet meetings.<sup>56</sup>

The Italian diplomat, Renato Piacentini had also substantiated Abebe's opposition of counts of government myopic policies towards Tigray and

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<sup>51</sup> For further information on the Ethio-Italian diplomacy, consult the work of Haile Muluken, 'A Diplomatic History of Ethio-Italian Relations, Ca.1941-1991', (PhD in History, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 2014), p. 234.

<sup>52</sup> Spencer, *Ethiopia at Bay...*, p. 225.

<sup>53</sup> Novati, *Re-establishing Italo-Ethiopian Relations...*, p. 32.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Seyoum, *The Bureaucratic Empire...*, passim.

<sup>56</sup> Bulcha, *My Life: My Vision...*, pp. 64-66.

Eritrea. In his report, Piacentini has asseverated that Abäbä had once dreamt of “setting up an independent Tigre [Tigray]”, to take out the province from the “Amhara domination and to lay the foundation for a future independent state” composed of parts of the present Tigray and Eritrea.<sup>57</sup> No matter of Abebe’s growing acrimoniousness with some of the parochial and odious government policies and practice in the province, informants staunchly contended Piacentini’s report of 1949 on the allegation that Abäbä aspired to establish an independent state. Contrarily, as largely asserted by oral and written sources, Abebe did not only a passionate and earnest Ethiopian, but also stood steadfastly towards the integrity of all provinces even by granting the right to “self-administration”.<sup>58</sup> Apart from the varying emphasis, the same sources demonstrate that Abebe was critical of the Imperial Haile Silassie’s Government in particular in relation to the invidious policies and practices in Tigray and Eritrea.

Starting from the early 1950s, Abebe was concerned with the state of Ethiopian education in general and its expansion in Tigray in particular. He expressed his concern for the lack of comprehensive educational activities in the region. In Tigray, some primary schools were traditionally administered by the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church (EOTC). The disinclination of the Imperial Government to systematically disengage the ecclesiastic office from the responsibility of running the public schools is attributed to the slow expansion of the sector. Abebe then claimed that “when education is solely administered by the ecclesiastical office, it will have a negative effect on the students’ achievement and on the need to produce a trained workforce”.<sup>59</sup> In Tigray, education was delivered by the clergy. The central subjects of church education were moral and religious subjects and the practice of the EOTC. Aligned with the spiritual teachings, the instructions had some secular components about Ethiopia’s history and socio-political issues.<sup>60</sup>

Abebe argued that the community in the province had been deprived of their right to acquire modern education. Abebe’s point of view was unambiguously put forward by Bulcha Demaksa, a member of the Imperial Cabinet. In his book, Bulcha corroborates Abebe’s criticism of some myopic policies and biased activities of the imperial regime. Bulcha captured the nature of the debate at that time when he was a member of the cabinet. “On another

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Novati, *Re-establishing Italo-Ethiopian...*, p. 31.

<sup>58</sup> Informants: Dawit Abäbä, Hailu Habtu, and Bulcha Dämeksa.

<sup>59</sup> Bulcha, *My Life: My Vision for...*, p. 66.

<sup>60</sup> Sylvia, *Ethiopia: A Cultural ...*, p. 232.

occasion in the Council of Ministers, in the mid-60s”, that is, when Abebe was in the Ministry of Health, he challenged the Council of Ministers. Abebe said: “You [meaning the Government, but more precisely, Aklilu Habtä-Wäld, the Prime Minister of the Imperial Government] do not want ‘them’ [people of Tigray] to go through the school system and become educated. [You] want them to be gardeners, drivers, cooks, and guards.”<sup>61</sup> Aklilu and his cabinet were allegedly liable for the deliberate discrimination of the region.

Notwithstanding Abebe’s growing resentment with some of the Imperial Government’s policies and practices in the north, informants staunchly disagreed with Piacentini’s unsubstantiated and exaggerated report of 1949. The report was probably an attempt to create division among the aides and functionaries of the Emperor. Abebe’s loyalty and patriotic commitment was not prone to questioning and doubt by the Emperor. In fact, Abebe contributed to the political and economic integration of the north into the country. He strove to adopt a policy of "self-administration" in Tigray, which was, of course, not in harmony with imperial policy.<sup>62</sup> Apart from differing interpretations, nonetheless, the same sources show that Abebe was engaged in overt criticism of the Imperial Government, in particular in relation to the policies and practices in Tigray and Eritrea.

Abebe’s diplomatic career in Ethiopia terminated when he was appointed to work as a minister in the domestic affairs office in 1956. Oral accounts provide contrasting explanations about the factors behind the transfer of Abebe to domestic affairs at this particular time. One group claims that his personal desire and affiliation as Emperor Haile Sellassie’s trusted functionary, qualified him to the new position. Others strongly argue that it was part of the larger political reshuffling by Emperor Haile Silassie who wanted to keep his power intact.<sup>63</sup> Despite disparate views, it is quite clear that the reshuffle of the cabinet removed Abebe from pioneering and distinguished activities in foreign affairs.

The domestic offices that Abebe was assigned had a great and pervasive influence on the general development and modernization of the country. The

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<sup>61</sup> Bulcha, *My Life: My Vision for...*, p. 66.

<sup>62</sup> Interview: Dawit, Hailu and Bulcha Demeksa (23 September 2018, Addis Ababa).

<sup>63</sup> During this period of time, Emperor Haile Selassie I announced that Ethiopian ministers had been shirking their duties and re-possibilities and turning too much to him for decisions. For details, see Anonymous, ‘Chronology March 16, 1961-June 15, 1961’ in *Middle East Journal*, 15: 3, (1961), pp.306-307.

Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Public Health, and Agriculture were key government machineries. His appointment to domestic affairs, therefore, offered significant challenges to him. Of course, the problems of transferring the domestic scene differ from sector to sector, but lack of finance, trained experts, and myopic state policy were daunting issues. It could be that it was almost difficult to establish a modern system of public health, commerce, industry, and agriculture given the traditional feudal-oriented foundations of the monarchy. Put another way, a shortage of financial resources, and pathetic government policy daunted the initiative to reform the sectors. In any case, Abäbä's reform initiatives were basically stymied by the shortage of financial resources and by the "unpreparedness" of the imperial regime to improve access to land or to reform the existing exploitative landlord-tenant relationships. In all, the regime did not have the necessary inputs, such as a clear policy, good leadership, and, above all, finance, to realize the process of economic transformation in the country.

Be that as it may, after serving for two years as the Minister of Commerce and Industry, Abebe became the Minister of Public Health and, for a while, also worked as the Minister of National Development. His first major assignment in the Ministry of Public Health was to improve health practices in Ethiopia. Among other improvements, Abebe helped establish the Ethiopian Medical Association in 1948 and set up a medical team to combat an epidemic of yellow fever in Ethiopia. The task was full of significant challenges and opportunities. To begin with, the great majority of the people lived in small, scattered villages of extended families, which undermined efforts to reach out to the entire community. In addition, there were shortages of professional nurses. But, as an opportunity, the major ailments were preventable. By taking the problem into account, Emperor Haile Silassie in consultation with the Ministry of Public Health founded health institutions.<sup>64</sup> In spite of certain changes, when the first Aklilu Habte Wold's Cabinet was formed in March 1966, Abebe was transferred to the Minister of Commerce and Industry, from where he was transferred to his final post, the Minister of Agriculture, in February 1969.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Eileen Stommes and Seleshi Sisaye, 'The Development and Distribution of Health Care Services in Ethiopia: A Preliminary Review' in *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 13: 3 (1980), pp.487-489.

<sup>65</sup> Abraha, *A Note on Abebe ...*, p.43.



With regard to African affairs, Abebe's accomplishments include, among other things, the spearheading of Ethiopia's entry into African politics<sup>66</sup> and regional as well as continental economic co-operation institutions. He was a principal Ethiopian delegate in the First Conference of Independent African States and assumed chairmanship of the first conference of the Economic Commission for Africa held on 15 to 22 April 1958 and from 29 December 1958 to 6 January 1959, respectively. Some writers argue that the participation of Abebe in the Accra Conference changed Ethiopia's involvement in the African affairs. Abebe was instrumental in forging a policy of active involvement in African affairs, including issues of decolonization. Abebe was a key to altering the *status quo*, even if it has taken an extended period of time. In other words, it commenced political changes that eventually contributed to Africa's independent states' choice of Addis Ababa as its permanent headquarters for the then Organization of African Unity (now called the African Union), which was established in 1963. It was also more responsive in the anti-colonial and anti-apartheid struggles.<sup>67</sup>

The Ethiopian Government's focus on Africa and its activities so far have been little known, even to the most experienced scholars of Ethiopian studies. In many cases, extensive primary sources have to be investigated in order to establish scholarship with regard to the roles of educated elites in Government affairs and the modernization of the state.<sup>68</sup> From the above explanation, nevertheless, we inclined to support the argument of some writers that Ethiopia made its first venture into the wider stream of African politics after the Accra Conference, in which Abebe participated.<sup>69</sup> This is not, of course, to say that Ethiopia never participated in continental politics before the Accra Conference. On the contrary, the Imperial Government sent delegates to the

<sup>66</sup> Regarding the challenge of African Unity, please see Ayele Bekerie's "Beyond the Cold War: Pan-Europeanism and the Challenge of African Unity," in *Africa After the Cold War: The Changing Perspectives on Security* (Edited by Adebayo Oyebade and Abiodun Alao). Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1998, pp. 183-191. Also see, Ayele Bekerie's "An Essay on Pan-African Perspective on the Transition from the OAU to AU," *JEDIRAF*, 4:1&2 (December 2001), pp. 49-78.

<sup>67</sup> Colin Legum, 'Ghana: The Morning After (III) The Accra Conference' in *Africa South*, 2(4), 1958, p. 84.

<sup>68</sup> C.L., 'The Accra Conference of African States' in *Royal Institute of International Affairs*, 14:6, 1958, p. 263.

<sup>69</sup> See, for example the works of Colin Legum, *Pan-Africanism: A Short Political Guide*. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1965, pp.44-42; Legum, *Ghana: The Morning..*, pp.83-85.; C.L., 'The Accra Conference of African States' in *The World Today*, Vol. 14, No. 6 (Jun., 1958), p.263.

Bandung Conference in 1955. It could be argued that Abebe's presence in Accra influenced the course of the discussion. Decisions and resolutions were made that went along with what Ethiopia aspired to achieve.

Moreover, Abebe's attendance at the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and Economic Community for Eastern Africa (ECEA) conferences<sup>70</sup> in 1958 and in 1965, respectively, would have a far-reaching impact on Ethiopia's entry into regional economic groupings. Despite the short life of the ECEA, it gave a new lease of life to negotiations for mutual co-operations at the sub-regional level. Thus far, there has been no study of Ethiopia's role in the ECA and ECEA<sup>71</sup>, which are wider plans to integrate Africa economically. On the one hand, there has been a shortage of accessible published and unpublished materials that point out both the Accra Conference and the ECA and ECEA from an Ethiopian viewpoint<sup>72</sup>. On the other hand, in the case of the Accra Conference, a good number of writers failed to comprehend Abebe Reta's critical role in the deliberations, while in the cases of ECA and ECEA, there has been a shortage of research based on archival materials.

Generally, the nature of Ethiopia's politics in the 20th century is a subject that still awaits comprehensive investigation. Biographical research is thus important to closely examine the imperial regime and how dissenting voices are expressed from within, often adopting subtle approaches. This approach tries to rigorously explore how voices of opposition from within were expressed, reform attempts, political appointments, class background, and the apogee of absolutism in Ethiopia. The debut and determined stand of Ethiopia in African politics, the Economic Commission for Africa, the Economic Community for East Africa, and other accomplishments in the global and domestic scenes such as health, commerce and industry, and agriculture are poorly understood and even less studied in this particular period of time. The lack of sound investigation and the poor handling of individual primary sources and recollections limited our ability to come up with interpretations useful in formulating and advancing sound policies in foreign affairs. It also resulted in a poor understanding of the political landscape under imperial rule.

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<sup>70</sup> The abbreviations of ECA and ECEA are to mean Economic Commission for Africa and Economic Community for East Africa, respectively.

<sup>71</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Commission, *Report of the first Meeting*. Addis Ababa, 2-4 May 1966, p. 6.

<sup>72</sup> M. L. Marasinghe, 'Regional Economic Co-operation in Developing Countries' in *Law and Politics in Africa, Asia and Latin America*, 20(1), (1987), p. 32.

In this article, however, we try to elucidate the nature of the political history of Ethiopia in the 20th century through Abebe's political biography. It comprises Ethiopia's diplomacy with Sweden, Italy, Britain, and Denmark in different time periods. It also scrutinizes the Ethiopian position in the boundary demarcation with Somalia. In 1949, the Ethiopian representative was confronted by a challenge relating to the Ethio-Somali border delimitation. The French, American, and British embassies in Ethiopia came up with a joint proposal requesting Ethiopia cede Ogaden to Somalia. In this prolonged diplomatic standoff with regard to Ethiopia's insistence that Ogaden has been part of Ethiopia's territory, the individual accomplishments of Abebe, though significant, appeared to be poorly understood. The present study is aimed at filling this gap by critically examining the principal roles of the Ethiopian delegates to the UN during the debate to keep Ogaden as an integral part of Ethiopia. The debate also included the reintegration of Eritrea into Ethiopia.

### **Conclusion**

The complex realities of Ethiopia's 20th-century politics that are fuelled by private and government deeds to prevail and transform the country still await a thorough study. The present research intends to critically explore the socio-political landscape of Ethiopia during the Haile Silassie imperial government by looking into the political biography of Abebe Retta, a public intellectual, minister, and diplomat in the imperial regime. It is true that the vast majority of 20th-century Ethiopian history has been discussed at different levels by different writers. However, these studies failed to utilize personal files and recollections in a substantive manner. As a result, their accounts lack depth and contextual analysis to see the particulars of the historical dynamics. Through the investigation of the role of Abebe in the critical period of twentieth-century Ethiopia, this research attempted to provide an in-depth and contextual insight into Haile Silassie's Imperial Government. In this respect, nuances, such as how Abebe assumed high positions, how he dealt with the political machinations, and what he did at the ambassadorial, ministerial, and other national and supranational conferences, were documented and narrated. Thus, Abebe's political biography concisely demonstrates the modernizing agenda of nationalist intellectuals within a monarchical system of rule in the country.

Up until now, Abebe has been an obscure and little-noticed figure in contemporary Ethiopian historiography. Born in Hareqo (the former Enderta Wereda) of Tigray, he rose to become one of the most powerful politicians and

a closer advisor to the Imperial Haile Silassie's Government. He occupied important posts in local and foreign affairs for more than three decades until the takeover of political power by military officers. Interestingly enough, Abebe contributed to the process of establishing Ethiopia as the hub of Pan-African politics and continental economic integration, aligned with his remarkable role in the domestic scene. Despite his substantial influence in local and international politics and his progressive approach to issues, he was detained and summarily executed together with other ministers and royal family members by the Military Government on November 24, 1974.

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