

A Tigrinya letter from an Eritrean notable*

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

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

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

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

Translation

Cairo 14/5/54

Much honoured and loved Professor,

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

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

* Chairman’s note: The Editorial Board wishes to draw attention to the remarkable record of dedication to scholarship evidenced in this contribution. Professor Ullendorff, formerly for many years Chairman of our Board, is here shown to have been engaged half a century ago in the academic study of a language until recently long obliged by political circumstance to remain obscure. At the time that he received this letter, few can have been certain that it would be spoken in an independent nation of the twenty-first century. We commend his example to our readers.

