

**AMHARIC POLITICAL PLAYS  
(1974-81)  
A CONTEXTUAL STUDY**

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By  
ZELALEM GETAHUN

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## **Abstract**

This research is done on the Amharic political plays that were written and performed from 1974 upto 1981. It studies them contextually.

The 1974 Ethiopian revolution is the first of its kind in the history of the country. It has completely changed the socio-political system.

Though the revolutionaries had cooperated in overthrowing the feudo-bourgeois regime, they started power struggle immediately after they succeeded to.

At the time theatre was one of the instruments of propaganda used by the political groups which controlled the central power. Because of this plays, which treated contemporary political issues following the central government's agenda, dominated the stages for the next seven years.

There are many researches conducted on the plays during the Derg regime. But none of them has studied the plays contextually. That is why this research is designed to study them so.

The first chapter assesses the background. It revises the political situation of the time and the relation between theatre and politics before and after the revolution.

The second chapter is devoted to the study of the scripts. Of the 31 plays which this research is based on 9 are selected for analysis. They are categorised into four groups based on the issues they have treated as: protest plays, plays of political intrigues, war plays and plays on the economy. They are discussed in relation to the political situation.

The third chapter focuses on the style of productions and the audiences' reactions. Dominant and new production styles used during the time are indicated.

Besides an effort is made to assess the audiences' reactions, the plays' effect upon them and whether the plays succeeded the targeted aim.

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# Chapter One

## Introduction: General Background

This research is designed to study the Amharic political plays that were written and performed from 1974 up to 1981. It studies them Contextually.

The 1974 revolution brought a radical change in the country's political, economical and social life. During the first years of the revolution a large number of the people, especially the elite, involved themselves in politics as never before.

Since most of the people's attention was diverted to politics, the playwrights also concentrated on politics as their major subject matter. At no time in the history of the Ethiopian theatre was politics continuously treated as the major subject as during the post revolution years.

Most Ethiopian authors are didactic in their works. Concerning this characteristic feature, Molvaer in his book, Tradition and Change in Ethiopian Social and Cultural life as treated in Amharic Literature. wrote: "No figure is portrayed for the sake of his experiences or his interesting situation, but for the sake of the instruction which the author hopes to achieve through his story" (1).

This is one of the reasons why this research is designed to study the plays contextually. It tries to answer why politics became the dominant subject during the time, on what issues the plays focused, and whether they achieved their target or not.

Most of the Amharic plays written and performed during the time had the intention of propagating political outlooks. They are what is known agit-prop plays.

Since the preoccupation of agit-prop plays is to agitate certain ideas, in this case political, it would not be enough to study them textually only. A play becomes alive when put on the stage. Brocket advises that, “whenever possible a play should be studied both on the printed page and in performance” (71). This is also another reason why this research studies the plays contextually.

There are a number of senior essays done by students of Theatre Arts and Ethiopian Language and Literature departments. Of them: *Theatre Bedihre Abiyot Ethiopia* (Theatre in the post-revolution Ethiopia) by Aboneh Ashagre, *Yequesiqesana Propaganda Tewnetoch Bedihre Abiyot Ethiopia* (Agit-prop Plays in the Post-revolution Ethiopia) by Daniel Legesse, *Socialistawi Ewnetanetna Yedihire Abiyot Tewnetoch* (Socialist Realism and the post-revolution plays) by Getachew Tareqegn, *Tesfaye Gessesse ena Sirawochu* (Tese faye Gessese and His works) by Asfaw W.Gebriel, *Ayalneh Mulat ena Sirawochu* (Ayalneh Mulat and His Works) by Yeshiwas Ayalew, Tsegaye Gebremedihin by Teferi Alemu and *Yemelaku Ashagre Yehiwot Tarikna Abeit Kinwanewoch* (Melaku Ashagre and his Major Works) could be mentioned.

Aboneh’s first and the third, last, chapter are devoted to assessing the historical development of Ethiopian theatre and forwarding ideas which help in developing Ethiopian theatre respectively. In his second chapter he has analysed the plays textually which he selected. Daniel has focused on the technical aspects of the plays and their contributions to the development of Ethiopian theatre. Getachew, as his title indicates, has tried successfully to analyse and evaluate the plays based on the Socialist Realism principles. The others give highlights of the authors’ biographies,

their role in the Ethiopian theatre and analysis of some of their works, still textually. There are also other senior essays done on the use of language, characterisation and other technical aspects of the plays.

Moreover, the senior essays present politically sided analysis. However, all of them have explained the plays to be technically weak and agit-props. But concerning the content of them, all, except Getachew, only praised them. To quote from the two: “Ethiopian theatre ... has fulfilled its progressive role in portraying the victories gained by the broad masses in the social, political and economic sectors as well as in the armed struggle and in agitating the people for more struggle and victory” (Aboneh: 80); “The agit-prop plays have contributed a lot in expressing the truth and indicated the right way for the broad masses” (Daniel: 12). The others also share these views.

Even so, all the researches have their own significance since they give detailed analysis on technical aspects, which I do not focus on much, and first hand information about Ethiopian theatre and the authors’ life.

It is after I had observed the research as a theatre student and had done an annotated bibliography of the plays performed during the Derg regime that I decided to study the plays contextually: with respect to the political struggle. My intention is to study how the plays portrayed the political struggle and, ofcourse their effect, if there is any.

The first chapter is an assessment of backgrounds: the political situation of the time, the relation between politics and theatre before the revolution and the impact of politics on theatre after the revolution.

The second chapter is devoted to the analysis of the scripts. Around 46 plays were performed on the stages of the four professional theatre houses in the capital. Of these the research covers the 31 full length plays since the rest are short plays, translations, musical dramas and are concerned with other social issues. I left the short plays only because of the problem of getting the scripts.

Of the 31, 9 are selected for analysis. These are selected either for their particularity or for their representativeness. There is similarity of both content and form in most of the plays written and performed during the period. Because of this, the 9 are selected as models of the rest. An effort is made in the selection to include most of the playwrights, both old and new. Of the eleven playwrights who wrote the 31 plays, seven are selected.

The third chapter focus on the style of the productions and the audiences' reactions. As regards the latter I have based my study on information gathered from newspapers, other research work done on the theatre of the period and interviews with the artists who participated in the productions of the plays.

Only five of the plays are published. The practice of publishing plays was greatly reduced after the revolution. Besides, there is no tradition of keeping copies of playscripts in the libraries or other appropriate places where they could be available for researchers or others who need of them. This condition has costed me a lot of time and energy to get the scripts from the artists who participated in the productions.

Since there is a difference between the Ethiopian calendar and the Gregorian calendar, I tried to use as much as possible the Gregorian calendar. But sometimes,

especially in the bibliography, there are dates indicated by the Ethiopian calendar and they are followed by the abbreviations, E.C..

## **1.1 The Revolution**

### **1.1.1. The Political Struggle at the Center**

The 1974 revolution is the first of its kind in the history of Ethiopia that has completely changed the socio-political system.

Before the revolution erupted, Ethiopia was undergoing the earliest phase of transition from feudalism to capitalism. The industrial sector and large scale state farms were in their infant stages. Almost 90% of the population was also living in the rural areas under the feudal mode of production.

The main causes of the Ethiopian revolution are many, but in general they center upon the country's poverty, the feudalistic character of the relationship between the higher officials and the king, the pressure of continued territorial threats from Somalia and the strains arising from the events in Eritrea.

In the late 60's and early 70's, because of long lasting agrarian crisis, the country was devastatingly poor. The living conditions of the people, especially those of tenants, was sub-standard. Because of this there was pressure to improve the landholding system from the elite groups, especially from university students.

In the meantime the 1973 famine, which affected almost 7 million people in the northern part of the country occurred. Oil prices increased in the world market while prices of agricultural products were in depreciation. The price of goods and commodities rose and economic problems affected every corner of the society, except the ruling classes. The government failed to take effective, practical measures to improve the economic condition as well as the political system. Hence, the students continued to advocate the need for land reform under the slogan *Meret Larashu!*

(Land to the Tiller!) and for change in the system. Repeated clashes occurred between the students and the security forces.

The final collapse of the feudal regime was signalled by a succession of popular demonstrations, industrial unrest and military mutinies. In 1974 Addis Abeba became paralyzed by unceasing demonstrations and strikes. Till June 1974 there were no officially organized bodies to lead the movement as the formation of political parties was not legally approved. Because of this restriction, demonstrations and strikes were applied individually by professional associations and trade unions.

On July 28 the Armed Forces Coordinating Committee (mostly known as the *Derg*) was formed with the membership of 126 junior officers under the rank of Lt. Colonel. Each unit of the armed and police forces sent three representatives to form the *Derg*, through Democratic elections. On the first meeting of the *Derg* at the Fourth Division headquarters, Major Mengistu Haile Mariam (later Lt. Colonel) was nominated as the first vice-chairman with Major General Aman Andom as headfigure.

At the start the *Derg* emphasized only social reforms and promised to cooperate with the emperor and his government. The emperor announced that the partnership had his blessing. Soon after, however, the *Derg* started to arrest high officials with charges of corruption. Eventhough in August the Constitutional Commission, formed by the Imperial government, produced a draft which proposed a constitutional monarchy with a bicameral parliament, the *Derg* did not take practical measures beyond allowing it to be published. Instead everyday fresh exposures were made of corruption in the ruling circles. Finally, on September 12 the *Derg* arrested the emperor and announced that 'the oppressive rule of Haile Selassie I was over', with promises of enthroning the heir, Asfaw Wossen and upholding the draft constitution. Many commentators called the process from June 28 to September 12 'the creeping coup'.

In October the Derg announced its decision to stay in power for an undetermined period of time and the formation of the Provisional Military Administration Council (PMAC), without a clear-cut policy.

Derg's slogan - it was far from policy - of *Itopia Tikdem* was nationalism of the vaguest kind and the initial programme issued in early 1974 was equally undone, combining commitment to the monarchy and to national unity with an attack on corruption and a call for lasting changes (Clapham:42).

In December, a few days after the execution of General Aman Andom and the imprisoned 60 high officials including the two consecutive prime ministers of the Imperial government, the Derg explained its motto *Ethiopia Tikdem* (Ethiopia First). The motto meant that a new society will be built upon the principles of Ethiopian Socialism which are :- equality, self-reliance, the supremacy of good, the indivisibility of Ethiopian unity and the dignity of labour.

It was on March 16, 1975, two weeks after the proclamation of the land reform that the Derg announced also the abolishing of the monarchy. The proclamations of the rural land reform of March 3, of urban land and rented houses of July 16 and the nationalizing process of the big companies in the meantime were the radical measures which destroyed the bases of the deep-rooted feudal system and the embryonic capitalism. The proclamations nationalized all the land. Tenancy was prohibited. The peasantry was given the right to till plots of ten hectares maximum. In urban areas all rented houses were nationalized and 500 m. square area was allowed for an individual to build a house on. The proclamations also included the idea of forming urban dwellers associations (*Kebeles*) and peasant associations, based on neighbourhood boundary for the purpose of administering the nationalized houses and distributing the land to the farmers. But later on, both became the basic units of administration with their own armed members under the title *Abiyot Tebaki*

(Revolutionary Guard) for the Kebele's and *Tataki* (Militia) for the farmers' associations. "By September 1975, 21,000 farmers' associations were said to have been formed throughout the country" (Hamilton:80), which replaced completely the basic administrative units of the feudal system.

Even though most civilians were satisfied by the land reform, the students and the Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Union (CELU), in September 1975, by opposing the denial of democratic rights called for the formation of political parties and a civilian government. But the Derg declared a state of emergency and later banned CELU. In addition, it announced that, as any strike or demonstration against the Derg would be considered as contrary to the motto of *Ethiopia Tikdem*, they were banned and special courts were set up to enforce this and other military decrees.

In April 1976 "because of the pressure from the civilian political groups and members of the Derg who returned from the USSR after brief political trainings" (Chege:100), the National Democratic Revolutionary Programme (NDR), which made the political direction more clear was announced. Its main points were the establishment of a people's democratic republic, under the leadership of the proletariat in collaboration with farmers and with the support of anti-feudal, anti-imperialist forces. But the programme did not include a definite time-table.

By this time there were two significant political groups which claimed to be based on Marxist-Leninist principles. They were: the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and the All Ethiopian Socialist Movement (mostly known as *Meison*). "The Meison grouped together many sons and daughters of former aristocratic families who had spent years in exile thoroughly alienated by the decadence of the feudal regime" (371), while EPRP's base was in the country.

The exact date when these two political groups started to function according to prescribed programme is controversial. Even though different people state different time-tables most agree that both groups started operation in Ethiopia after 1974. However, their nuclei were formed in the student movements within the country

and abroad before the revolution. The former movement is inspired by the 1960 attempted coup d'état. "The university students' movement had held their first rally, with political intention by supporting the coup d'état" (Tesfaye Mekonnen: 73).

Apart from these, there were other political groupings which were formed after 1974. They were: The Oppressed Peoples' Party of Ethiopia; The *Waz* (Labour) League; Marxist-Leninist Organization of Ethiopia and *Abyotawi Seded* (Revolutionary Flame). With the exception of *Abyotawi Seded*, these political groups were not that much influential. But, *Abyotawi Seded*, as it was regarded as the creation of some members of the Derg, including Mengistu Haile Mariam, was powerful in the upper echelons of the political platform.

The other political group formed by progressive members of the feudal regime was the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU). It organized an army and started an armed struggle in the northwestern part of the country. Before its defeat by the central government's forces in 1977, it had been successful in controlling substantial areas in Wollo and Gondar provinces.

For the practicality of the NDR programme, the Provisional Office for Mass Organizations Affairs (POMOA), a largely civilian body, was set up a week after the programme was announced. Its aim was to politicize the masses and to prepare for a general assembly uniting the revolutionary forces. Meison and the other four political groups accepted the programme, and especially Meison took the advantage of controlling the leading role in the POMOA as well as the state bureaucracy. But EPRP demanding the immediate establishment of a peoples' government, declined to accept the programme and to cooperate with the Derg. By this time the EPRP had extended its network to students, teachers, civil servants and trade unionists. Because of this the revolutionary groups split in to two antagonistic camps; ie - EPRP on one side and the rest, including the Derg, on the other.

Christopher Clapham discerns the reason for the split very convincingly as follows:

This [The NDR programme] expressed the aim of all the various revolutionary factions, including EPRP, but since each group saw itself as the core of such a party, which is viewed as the means of establishing its own control over the new government, this unity of goal led to no corresponding unity of political action(66).

From this time onward anti-EPRP campaign started to be launched. It was accused of anarchism and of sabotage. By the second half of 1976, the conflict between the two camps grew into a more violent phase. In June, the death penalty was introduced for certain political crimes. The state of emergency introduced in September 1975 was prolonged. The attempted assassination of Mengistu Haile Mariam in September 1976 was blamed on the EPRP. After this the EPRP adopted an assassination policy of the Derg members and its supporters. In response, the Derg and its allies reiterated by launching the Red Terror campaign to withstand what they termed the White Terror of their opponents. In this conflict thousands of Ethiopians lost their lives without trial. But generally it was unknown who killed whom.

It was hard to tell who was killed by who, assassinations routinely ascribed to the EPRP may well have been the work of rival factions of Meison, or even the Derg seeking to rid itself of untrustworthy officials while blaming its opponents (61).

Even if it was not clear who killed whom, the Red Terror effectively decapitated the opposing factions of the Derg and its allies, especially the EPRP, by the mid of 1978. In the meantime, in February 1977, the Union of Marxist-Leninist Organization (mostly known as *Emaledh*) was formed by the political groups which accepted the NDR programme. Immediately after its formation, *Emaledh* controlled the leadership of POMOA and Mengistu Haile Mariam replaced Haile Fida who had been the chairman of POMOA and leader of Meison.

Meison considered this measure as a challenge to its leadership and by August 1977 it defected from the political platform. Most of its leaders, including Haile Fida, were captured while fleeing from the capital and were killed later.

EPRP also ceased to operate in the towns by mid 1978 as the Red Terror had destroyed almost all of its network.

By the end of 1978, the four years of general upheaval had calmed down and most of the towns had fallen under the full control of the military government through the Kebeles. The struggle for power at the center also concluded under the supremacy of the Derg and its supporters who formed the Commission to Organize the Party of the Working Peoples' of Ethiopia (COPWE) in December 1980.

### **1.1.2. The Civil Wars**

As the upheaval and the struggle in the capital and other major towns created a vacuum in the countryside, regional feelings, which were 'below the surface', began to develop. Some groups which advocated regional and ethnic autonomy started armed struggles in different parts of the country. Though these groups were not in a position to cause serious problems at the time, they played a great role in stretching the central government's resources. The Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) were the two most powerful contenders in the northern parts of the country.

The Derg seemed ready to give the priority to settle the 14 years old war in Eritrea by the selection of Major General Aman Andom as the first head figure of the Derg. It was a political strategy to attract the attention of the guerrilla. But soon everything collapsed when he was assassinated by the Derg and Brigadier General Teferi Banti replaced him. All the Derg members and Teferi claimed to maintain the unity of Ethiopia, if necessary by force.

The political struggle at the centre, the wars in different parts of the country and the shortage of arm supplies to the government's army enabled the ELF and EPLF to strengthen their power and control most parts of Eritrea with the help of some Arab countries. By mid 1978 they had controlled most of the land except the capital, Asmara, and the port of Massawa.

The 1976-78 Ethio-Somali war concluded with the victory of Ethiopia. In June 1978 the victorious army launched a full scale attack on the ELF and EPLF and in five months time the army regained the occupied lands except for the northern part, the Sahil Mountains.

### **1.1.3 The 1976 -7 8 Ethio-Somali War**

Somalia had and still has a territorial claim on the Ogaden region for ethnic and geographic reasons. Based on this claim it has had so far two wars with Ethiopia. When the revolution erupted it was preparing to launch the second war.

Until 1975 the USA was the major arms supplier to Ethiopia, either in terms of donation or commercial sales. During the first year of the revolution the Derg and the US had good relations. But later, as "Carter's administration was offended by the repressive nature of the Derg" (Chege:45), it suspended its backing.

When Somalia launched the second war in 1976, the Ethiopian army was not in a position to defend itself. Because of this, the Somali army occupied most of the Ogaden region without significant resistance from the Ethiopian army. Meanwhile the socialist ideology which the Derg started to follow, strengthened its alliance with the Eastern Block countries. As a result the USSR, Cuba, the D.R. of Yemen and the GDR sent soldiers and military experts to assist Ethiopia. The government also mobilized the people under the slogans: Everything to the War Front! and Revolutionary Motherland or Death! Three hundred thousand militia from all over the country were gathered at the Tatek Military Camp for a three month military

training programme. The Ethiopian people made contributions in terms of labour, money and materials in defence of the territorial integrity of the motherland. Generally the government, the people and all its resources stood together to back up the army. The Somali troops were defeated and withdrew completely from the Ogaden by March 1978.

#### **1.1.4 The Economy**

The economy was badly affected throughout this period of upheaval. Neither the government nor the productive forces were in a position to concentrate on growth and productivity.

Clashes were common in the countryside between the up-rooted landlords and the peasantry. The process of land distribution and the formation of farmers' associations caused innumerable problems which affected production. Conflicts between the central government and the ethnic or regional autonomy advocator groups and other dissatisfied groups disrupted the production process in different parts of the country. The nationalized state farms and big industries could not become as efficient as they had been before because of political interference and lack of experience of the newly appointed managers. Lack of control and government interference paved the way to corruption. Economic sabotage was also another factor. Market stability was thus disrupted and crippled the economy.

The Derg reiterated by arresting and even executing those it considered responsible for the sabotages and corruptions. It was on September 12, 1978, on the occasion of the 4th anniversary of the revolution that Mengistu Haile Mariam announced the shift in government priorities from pre-war to post-revolutionary reconstructions. A month later the National Development Campaign (mostly known as *Arengwadew Zemecha* (the Green Campaign)), was officially announced. 'Production Cadres', from the lumpen proletariat, were given a month long training

and were sent off to supervise workers in state farms and factories. Agricultural machinery and spare parts as well as raw materials for the industrial sector were imported mostly from the socialist countries on loans. But, “as it was campaigning rather than planning, it could not improve the production process for more than two years” (Clapham:120).

Corruption was also becoming a routine practice in the nationalized industries, urban dwellers (Kebeles) and farmers’ associations. In order to arrest this the Derg established the Workers Control Committee in November 1981, “largely concerned with the investigation of economic malpractices and complaints of administration” (122).

## 1.2. Theatre and Politics Before the Revolution

Ethiopia's first play, *Fabula - Yawrewoch Comedia* (Fables- A Comedy of Animals), written and performed at the beginning of this century, is a dramatized allegory. It was written with political intention.

*Lij* Iyasu, the heir, was a teen-ager when Menelik II died. As *Lij* Iyasu was incapable of performing his duty and controlling the government, internal conflict started in the palace on an underground level. The fable was written in order to make *Lij* Iyasu conscious of what was happening around him. The author, *Fitawrari* Tekle Hawariat Tekle Mariam, discloses this motive in the introductory part of his published work:

At the time, probably he (*Lij* Iyasu) was a young man of 15. The number of nasty and flattering people around him had increased. ... and I felt more grief when I saw how Ethiopians were being led to civilization. I felt at the moment that the leadership should be

adjusted. Immediately I sat down to produce a play to serve as an example (Tekle Hawariat: 1).

Though the author's intention, in dramatizing the fable, was to show what drama is, the play was banned after the first performance and the published books were collected because it had offended Empress Zewditu and her feudal officials.

Despite this unfortunate beginning, plays with political themes continued to be produced afterwards. Plays with political themes follow the pattern of political situations. They flood the stages whenever there is a power shift or political unrest.

The nucleus of the oldest theatre house, Yehager Fikir Theatre, was formed for the purpose of political agitation on the eve of the Italian occupation. Members of Yehager Fikir Association used to instigate the masses to defend the motherland by presenting verses, songs, war chants and other written materials. The association was reformed after the war, in 1941, to become the first professional stage in Ethiopia.

In the 1940's political plays were widely performed. During this time there were political conflicts between different groups who were running after political power. Because of this, immediately after the victory, theatre became one of the instruments in the political game.

After Italy was defeated, the conflict between the patriots, *bandas* [deserters] and those exiled, which had started during the war, became source material for the Ethiopian theatre.

As these groups were intent to win power, everybody rushed to the theatre to use it as an instrument to prove their superiority (Aboneh:9).

They did not use theatre only to prove their superiority. But also to glorify their contributions for the victory gained over Italians.

The Emperor was in the group of the exiled, because he had fled the country and stayed in Europe after the Italians defeated the Ethiopian army. When he regained

the throne with the help of British troops, many people, especially those patriots who had been participating in the five years armed struggle protested his return to power. Most of the plays performed during that time were plays which favored the King and his allies. Censorship was also officially instituted for the first time in 1940 to prevent the other kinds of plays from being shown (Shimels: 6).

*Afajeshign* (You Cause Me to Fight), one of the famous plays of the 1940's could be the best example here. The play shows Afajeshign, the heroine, being kidnapped from her sick bed and returned by Haile Lioul's effort, her keeper. The characters are symbolic representations. Afajeshign represents Ethiopia while Haile Lioul, is Haile Selassie I. The play clarifies his role in the victory.

From this time onward, plays on political subjects did not appear widely on the stages until the 1974 revolution. However, there are a few plays like *Yalacha Gabcha* (Unequal Marriage) which satirizes the feudalistic attitudes of the time. Additionally, "works with historical themes served a political purpose in as much as they served to promote patriotism and a feeling of unity" (Kane: 178).

Generally, the number of plays which treat political themes were very few in contrast with other subjects. Concerning this Thomas Leiper Kane wrote: "The last theme is political writing, at present comprising comparatively few works but a subject which would probably inspire a far larger number of writers were it not for the dead had of censorship" (27).

It is true, there were plays that were banned after a single performance because of minor reasons. For example, Julius Ceasar was banned only because it shows Ceasar being stabbed. Mengistu Lemma also confessed that he started to write *Balekabana Baledaba* (The Rich and the Poor) in 1973 only "hoping that it would get the opportunity to be performed in the future when things changed" (1975 E.C.: 8).

Fortunately things changed for a little while. In February 1974, Haile Selassie's last cabinet suspended censorship and allowed ideas to be expressed freely. But it did

not last long. Despite its advocacy of freedom of expression in public, the Derg re-established censorship in October 1974 (Shimels:4), immediately after the formation of the PMAC.

### **1.3 Theatre and the Revolution**

Immediately after the revolution broke out in 1974 politics became the major topic of Amharic plays. Why? There may be many reasons.

As we have seen earlier, politics had been almost an untouchable subject before the revolution because political activity was highly reserved for a handful of top officials. And the revolution broke this tradition, at least for a few years. Because of this many people, for good or for bad, began to participate in the political sector either on an individual basis or as members of political parties which were formed for the first time in the history of the country. The revolution played a great role in diverting the peoples' attention towards politics. Because of this, the intellectual elite was highly involved in politics. Playwrights also followed the same path and this was reflected in their works.

Some of the playwrights like Ayalneh Mulat and Getachew Abdi, who had studied in the USSR, strongly utilized the theatre for the revolutionary struggle. In an interview Getachew Said, "... theatre is a good weapon for tackling the anti-revolutionaries" (Mestawot Vol.II, No.III: 25). This idea had had wide acceptance among the playwrights as well as the politicians. Another play director who had been the General Manager of Yehager Fikir Theatre also said in an interview, "The role which art is playing nowadays has also perfectly proved the vanity of the idea of 'art for art's sake', which is the bourgeoisies's outlook" (Yehager Fikir Theatre: 34).

Apart from the advocacy of professionals to use theatre as a weapon in the revolutionary struggle, the government was also highly insisted to use the art form for propaganda.

The Ministry of Culture and Sports Affairs was established in 1975. The Arts Department was one of the major division in the Ministry which was administering the theatre houses. In a seminar which was held at the then Haileselassie I (now the National Theatre), representatives of POMOA informed the employees that the Ministry has the responsibility of agitating the people to participate in the political struggle and emphasized that the creative artists should have to focus on producing 'revolutionary art works' (Arts Dept. Vol. I, No.II: 33). A committee was also formed under the Ministry to select and distribute playscripts to the theatres, with the intention of centralizing the system. The chairman of the committee in the first meeting held with the playwrights expressed the aim as follows: "... with the fact that we have understood the great role literature played, after the revolution broke out in 1974 it [the aim of the meeting] is to help us grasp what we can contribute" (Vol II, No III: 24). Simply put, it means producing plays which support the revolution.

The newspapers, magazines and bulletins of the theatre houses were also advocating the use of art in the revolutionary struggle. The titles of the bulletins and the art columns of most of the magazines and newspapers include the word 'Revolution'. *Abiyotawi Tibe* (Revolutionary Art), *Kinet Leabiyot* (Art for the Revolution), *Kinetina Abiyot* (Art and Revolution) and *Kinet Sifalem* (When Art Duels) are some of the titles. They have played a major role in promoting the idea of using art in the political struggle.

The complaint of the playwrights, during the time, was about the censorship. Before the revolution the censor prohibited political themes. After it, the issue became "'dealing with the burning issues of the time' and many were banned because they did not fit the times" (Shimelis: 21).

Actually the playwrights were not against the idea of producing revolutionary plays. What they sought was the freedom to treat issues as they felt. But they could not convince the officials who were smart enough to stress the relation between the

message of a play and the personal political stand of the playwright. It is worth mentioning here an answer given by a POMOA representative to this question.

The topic should not have to be the existence of censor, but the one to be censored. For example, to me, to say 'no' for someone who wrote a good play in opposing the proclamation of 'Land to the Tillers!' is an action which shows the importance of the censor (Arts Dept. Vol. I, No II: 33).

Generally during the time the idea of using theatre as an instrument in the struggle with strict censorship was highly advocated by the playwrights, the mass media as well as the politicians.

## Chapter Two

### The Scripts

The 1974 Ethiopian revolution changed the political system of the country with unexpected speed. It eradicated the feudo-bourgeois economic base in less than three years by sweeping measures taken by the Derg. Though the political system changed, the people's mentality could not be changed as fast as that. It needed aggressive propaganda on the part of the politicians. One of the major instruments of propaganda was the theatre.

Most of the plays performed in the first seven years were agit-prop plays designed to instigate the audience to participate actively in the needed reform.

Agit-prop plays started in the USSR of the 1920's, immediately after the October Revolution. These plays usually denounce the past regime, and paint a bright future under the socialist system.

Similarly in Ethiopia, after the breakout of the revolution the contemporary political situation became the major topic of Amharic plays. As we have seen in the previous chapter, politics was almost a taboo before the revolution. Right after, however, most playwrights rushed to exploit this untouched subject, following the central government's agenda.

The Amharic plays of the first seven years followed closely the political pattern charted by the central government. These can be categorized into four groups.

The first category consists of plays performed on the eve and aftermath of the revolution. The plays which focus on the intensified struggle that followed between the Derg and the other political factions fall in the second group. The third category deals with plays devoted to the wars. Those plays which treat about the economic condition fall under the fourth category. This does not mean that this categorizing is absolute. With the exception of the first category, the others inter-lap many of the issues. Because of this the division into categories is based on the main focus of the plays.

## 2.1 Protest Plays

The plays performed during the first years of the revolution were protest plays. They denounced the feudo-bourgeois regime, praised the 1974 popular insurrection and agitated for more struggle.

Under this category could be included: *Ha Hu Be Sidist Wor* (ABC in Six Months), *Enat Alem Tenu* (Mother Tenu), *Yelewt Arbegnoche* (Patriots of Change), *Sintayehu* (How Much I Have Seen), *Esat Sinned* (When Fire Burns), *Basha Damte* (Pasha Damte), *Marign* (Forgive Me), *Poletikana Poletikegnoch* (Politics and Politicians) *Min Aynet Meret Nat?* (What a Country Is It?) and *Bale Kabana Bale Daba* (The Rich and the Poor).

Until the NDR (National Democratic Revolutionary) Program was announced in April 1976, the political direction was not clear. Because of this most of the people were uncertain about the future. This uncertainty was reflected in most of the plays.

With the exception of *Esat Sined* and *Poletikana Poletikegnotch* (which we will discuss later) all the plays did not go past the eruption of the revolution.

These plays were written immediately after the eruption and did not indicate what would have to be done after abolishing the old system which they strongly attack and agitate for its eradication. They drop their curtains immediately after announcing the collapse of the old regime. The playwrights restricted themselves to depicting the evils of the past regime and generalized the need for bitter struggle to establish a more egalitarian system without a clear-cut ideological line.

The plays' time span stretches from the period after the Italians' withdrew from Ethiopia in 1940 to 1974.

Haile Selassie's return to the throne, after five years of exile in Europe, created political conflict between the supporters of the King and part of the patriots who had been fighting the Italians in the country. The King banished the protesters, imprisoned, and even put to death such people like the famous patriot Belay Zeleke. He was also accused of favoring those bandas who were fighting against the patriots and his high officials who had fled with him to Europe.

The plays presented the conflict between the protesters and the King as the root cause of the 1974 uprising. They portrayed the protester patriots and the educated younger generation as having a similar outlook regarding the King's oppressive rule.

The five years of Italian rule in Ethiopia had introduced modern concepts and ways of life as never before. Though modern schooling was introduced at the beginning of this century, it was after the occupation that a large number of schools

were opened in many parts of the country and many young Ethiopians got the opportunity to receive modern education. This situation created a new generation which advocated modernity in every aspect of life including politics. The new generation started to criticize the ruling class and the feudalistic nature of the government. But the rulers were not willing to improve the system, especially the land owning aristocracy.

The plays' main focus was to depict the above situation from different angles. These playwrights, being part of the new generation, presented the unhappy state of the protester patriots and of the educated groups. In addition, they exposed the corruption of the regime as well as the misery of the people.

They link political change with modern education. Though the elite is credited for initiating the uprising, it is also accused of being material-minded and opportunistic.

Let us take two plays, by senior authors to illustrate the above mentioned development of protest.

Mengistu Lemma in *Balekabana Baledaba* draws the elite group in two opposing faces. The action of the play takes place in a bar around 1971-2. It presents the story of two boyhood friends in nine scenes of which four are flashbacks. The two friends are Gezmu, the 'intellectual', and Techane, the 'official'. Both had attended higher education in England after the restoration. Upon their return Techane succeeds to be appointed to a higher position and gets wealth as he is an opportunist and a collaborator of the ruling class despite his opposition while he was a student. But

Gezmu, as “he does not know how to climb this world’s political ladder” (A2:S7), he stays ‘poor’ and ‘part of the common people’.

The play covers happenings that took place during the post-war years. In the preface the playwright indicates that “the intention is to make the reader visualize the society’s condition in those thirty-three years, from the fascist era up to the revolution”. In addition to this, it is stated that “the play is based on actual happenings which the playwright observed”.

The two characters are the eldest of the new generation which is accused for its passive stand. In this play also Gezmu is not active and practical. He is against the system but he never takes practical measures to oppose the regime.

It is the younger generation, especially the students, who are portrayed, to be active in the opposition. Adefris, the hero in Berhanu Zerihun’s *Yelewt Arbegnoch*, is one of such characters.

*Yelewt Arbegnoch* also presents what took place after the withdrawal of the Italians up to the revolution. The first act shows Tadege, a protester patriot, bravely resisting torture in prison. In the second act the Governor, an appointee of the King, is seen enjoying life with ladies and upper class members rather than attending to the welfare of the poor and disadvantaged. The third act presents the argument that takes place between Adefris and his family. Adefris succeeds to convince his illiterate stepfather, Sergeant Teshager, and his relatives about the evil nature of the Governor whom they used to consider as ‘absolute with divine power’. It is after Adefris clarified to them the idea of class oppression, exploitation and struggle that they, especially Sergeant Teshager (who represents the army), change their minds and

decide to fight against the Governor and his allies by cooperating with Adefrs and Tadege. The two became very close friends in the later days because of the similarity of their political outlooks. The play ends after Adefrs and his allies capture their enemies.

Tadege and Adefrs are the agents of change. Especially Adefrs, who plays the greatest role in enlightening Sergeant Teshager and the illiterate people to become conscious of the oppressive nature of the regime.

It is in this way that most of the plays presented the passing of the old regime and the development of the new.

### **2.1.1 Enat Alem Tenu**

Tsegaye Gebremedn's *Enat Alem Tenu* was written and performed in 1975. Though the author indicates in his preface that it is an adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage*, it does not seem to be so.

Except for the name of Enat Alem Tenu (literally means mother courage) and her two children, the play is a far cry from the famous revolutionary play by Brecht. His *Mother Courage* is material-minded and shrewd who twists at every turning point to win advantages. She exploits every opportunity and succeeds to make more money than the other characters around her. But Tsegaye's *Enat Alem Tenu* is drawn as a motherly character. She is not shrewd and self-centered as such. Her main concern is the well-being of her family. She tries hard to foster her grandchildren as she is poor, she encourages them to beg and win their living. She never keeps silent as *Mother*

Courage does. Instead she does all that is possible to protect, at least, her family from getting into trouble. But the plays have similarity in that both depict the miseries of life. Even if so, they are two different plays.

It is difficult to detect a definite story line in *Enat Alem Temu*. Usually Tsegaye writes episodic plays with many loosely linked scenes. He does not care to construct strong plots for his plays. But his quaint characters and beautiful language make his plays memorable.

The play begins with the torture of Belay Zeleke, the historical figure, sentenced to death soon after the Italians withdrew and the King was restored on his throne. It ends when he is desposed and imprisoned on September 12, 1975. The play portrays the miseries of the Ethiopian people under the feudo-bourgeois regime in those thirty-four years.

The torture and death penalty of Belay Zeleke, the King's speeches on the radio immediately after the war and on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of his coronation in 1955 as well as the Derg's official announcement of the King's removal on September 12, 1975 are chronologically inserted in the play.

Of the 12 scenes of the play, seven are in the first act. The actions of these scenes are supposed to happen within the first 15 years up to the coronation anniversary. But it is not exactly indicated when they take place. The second act also follows a similar pattern. The stage direction which appears at the beginning of the second act also does not indicate the exact time. "The setting is the same as that of act one. But all the characters and their abodes are aged from ten to fifteen years", the author claims.

Tsegaye deliberately tried to apply some of Brecht's epic theatre techniques. There are narrations at the beginning of each act which disclose the proceeding events. The film which shows the ceremony of the 80th birth day anniversary of the King, the Derg's announcement on radio as well as the tanks shown on screen to depict the measures taken by the Derg are elements of epic theatre.

Enat Alem Tenu represents Ethiopia in its poverty and wretchedness. It is said that Belay Zeleke had cursed Ethiopia not to have any more courageous offspring at the moment of his death, later referred to in the play thus:

Hassen - Enat Alem Tenu, your secret is disclosed.

Chorus - *Ajeba!*

Hassen - The sorcerer speaks. He says your inheritance is a curse.

⋮

Hassen - The inheritance that Belay left for you.

Chorus - *Ajeba!*

Hassen - The sorcerer says you shall not have courageous offsprings

(A1:S6).

Her grandchildren also refer to her as the motherland in their begging songs. At the end the Derg is referred to as her courageous son.

It is through the misery of Enat Alem Tenu and her family and their relation with the officials, including the King, that the play presents the injustice and mishandling of the people. In addition, the violence against the opposing patriots and the appointment of *bandas* (deserters) to high offices reinforces the injustice of the feudo -bourgeois regime.

Primarily *Enat Alem Tenu* depicts how the King crushed the protest of the patriots by torture and death penalty. While Belay Zeleke is being tortured before being put to death a speech of the King, which acknowledges the patriots' struggle is heard on the radio. Debark's oath of office, a character who had been a *banda*, upon being appointed as the head of the prison, is also held after the King's speech. By intertwining these controversial actions the play depicts how the King used false propaganda to cheat the people and how he favored the opportunists.

The appointment of Debark also indicates how the King reestablished his government by using those who had betrayed the country and opposed the patriots. Later Debark becomes a General while Dambal, an accused patriot and son of Enat Alem Tenu, stays in prison for thirty-three years.

Dambal tries to convince the judges that he was not a patriot. But they do not accept him. Even if he is eventually released by amnesty on the 50th anniversary of the King, his son, Dibu the Elder, is hanged there and then for political crime.

All the characters, with the exception of the King and his officials, lead miserable lives. Their situation deteriorates from day to day while those opportunists constantly climb up the ladder of wealth and power.

Despite this glaring maladministration the play also indicates the lack of courage and unity on the part of the oppressed people to fight against the rulers. This lack of courage is depicted through Dambal. He is portrayed to represent the educated group. He never protests. He is a coward: "Do not call me a hero! I am a man! A coward! ... I am coward body and soul!" ( A1:S4 ), he says to Moro, the

imbecile character, when he addresses him as a patriot. He also has a long monologue in which he exposes his guilty conscience. To quote a part:

... we became verbalist. We, the metropolitan philosophers, announcers, merchants of the modern civilization ... instead of being the promoters of welfare we became the residue of the era, boulders and iron walls on the fate of the masses. ... our selfishness dispatched us from humanity ... (A2:S4).

The play accuses the intellectuals of being selfish, material-minded and mere verbalists who do not have the courage to fight the oppressive rule in practical terms.

The characters of the play are shown as non - coordinated to fight against the oppressive rule. No one cooperates with Belay Zeleke and Dibu the Elder and they are sacrificed. No one dares to oppose the death penalty of both heroes. They are passive observers. It is at the end of the play, after the Derg announces the King's overthrow that they blabber for the arrest of the government officials, including the King and hail the Derg as the courageous son of Enat Alem Tenu - Ethiopia.

The play also exposes how the ruling class encouraged conflicts among the people for its own advantages. It is through the relationship between Gebreyes, the flogger, and Enat Alem Tenu's family that this situation is depicted.

Gebreyes is from the lower class of the society who is employed as the flogger and the hangman. Even if he leads a miserable life like Enat Alem Tenu and her family and is conscious of the oppression and the injustice, he never hesitates to fulfill his duties. He lashes Dambal and hangs his son, though they are from the same class and know each other well. He complies with the judges' sentences. It is not only for the

sake of income that he fulfills his duty properly and abuses them, but mainly to reaffirm his superiority over them as they discriminate him because he is from a despised ethnic group. "All of you! You consider me as a human being only when I whip or hang your relatives" (A2:S2), he says to Enat Alem Tenu when she begs him to have mercy for Dibu the Elder.

*Enat Alem Tenu* is a play which depicts the misery of the masses in the feudo - bourgeois regime and it credits the Derg for its decisive role in the struggle to overthrow its oppressive rule.

### 2.1.2 Esat Sined

*Esat Sined*, Ayalneh Mulat's play was performed at the end of 1975. It is based on the story of Embibel Adera, one of the leaders of the university students' movement. It shows when Embibel succeeds to abort the plot of his father, a member of the resigned cabinet in February 1974 and his friends, high officials, to leave the country. Based on this story, *Esat Sined* presents the political situation of the country in 1974. It shows the oppression perpetrated by the feudo - bourgeois regime upon the masses, the students' movement and the government's cruel measure against it. In addition through many characters which appear and disappear arbitrarily in the scenes, it conducts debates on the nature of the uprising and its future.

Ayalneh had been a student of journalism in the former USSR before he returned home immediately after the revolution. Latterly, he also had been working in the office of the Workers' Party of Ethiopia, as the head of Culture and Sports

Department, till its fall in 1991. Obviously he was one of the adherents of Marxist ideology. In *Esat Sined* he presented the 1974 uprising from the Marxist's point of view.

This play advocates structural change of the system of government. It argues for the overthrow of the feudo - bourgeois system and the establishment of socialism, "which brings freedom to the oppressed broad masses" (A2:S3).

The main causes of the February 1974 uprising were socio-economic. Ayalneh's characters, however, highly stress political changes. His main characters emphasize the need to institute socialism to pave the way for communism, "the noblest and most progressive system in the world" (A2:S3).

Many people were not certain about the nature and future development of the uprising at the time. But Ayalneh defines it as the 'eve of a revolution'. To quote from a scene:

3rd Boy - ... I think there is a sense of revolution.

4th Boy - What about next? Socialism ---? or Communism  
...?

2nd Boy - Just as the sequence ought to be.

5th Boy - ... We can establish socialism by coordinating the  
workers and progressive intelligentsia with the  
oppressed broad masses (A3:S3).

Based on this, Ayalneh dictates the measures to be taken in order to achieve the above mentioned goal. He dwells on the tasks to be accomplished to bring about a socialist revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Primarily the need for bitter struggle is stressed. "Freedom is not alms given out of generosity. It should be gained by the proletariat using force and complete ideological devotion" (A2:S3), says one of the leaders of the students' movement. Ayalneh has his heroes thus agitating and encouraging the lower classes to continue the struggle.

Organization and development of political consciousness of the masses are considered to be the key factors in the process of developing the uprising into a socialist movement.

The 1974 uprising was a result of demands raised by different groups individually. The priority to be organized is given to the proletariat, which is supposed to be the leaders of the communist system as well as in the struggle to establish it. The students agitate Abba Berhe, the character which represents the working class in the play, to be organized.

It is impossible without your participation even to win minor reforms.  
... now the organization of the workers and other groups is the major process in the development of the struggle. It is the bell ring which announces the eve of the victory we are waiting for (A2:S3).

They also give him ideas for discussion at the meeting of the workers, which stress the need for organization. The heroes' main concern is preparing the working class to be efficient.

Politicizing the masses is also the major task which should be done simultaneously with the organizing process. The play depicts the level of the masses' political consciousness during the time to be at the lowest level. It thus stresses that politicizing the people should continue till they become capable of self-administration.

The student's movement is credited for its effort in this connection:

My children, I had been exploited for the last 25 years by the shoe factory owners. I earn a wage which is not even sufficient to feed me and my family. ... until your voice woke me up, I had been considering my fate to be the cause of my suffering (A2: S1).

Says Abba Berhe. The factory workers are not the only groups which become conscious of the exploitation and the oppression but also the domestic servants. As they become conscious of the situation, they disobey their masters' orders and are eager to participate in demonstrations and mass meetings. It is the maidservants who arrest the ladies, the wives of the bourgeois, who are plotting to flee, at the eleventh hour of their departure. Ababa, Embibel's fiancée and a maidservant is the one who agitates them to be conscious of the situation and take this measure. They do not hesitate to take the measure as they have understood that the ladies are their class enemies who had been exploiting them. Ayalneh's choice of this action, in order to show the significance of politicizing and organizing the masses in the class struggle is not an effective one. It would have been better to find other measures taken by other groups for plausibility. It is one of the play's major technical defects.

The major conflict of the play is between Adera and his only son Embibel. They are manipulated to represent the two antagonistic groups. Embibel represents the younger generation who is struggling to overthrow the feudo-bourgeois regime while his father is his opposite. There is no father and son relationship between the two. They are manipulated to depict the relationship between the two conflicting forces of the time.

They feel and act only according to their political motives. That is why Adera says, "It is a miracle that you returned home alive. ... I will not utter a single word even if they execute you in front of me" (A1:S1), when Embibel comes home after escaping from the police who had dispersed the students' rally at the university. It is also Adera who finally shoots Embibel after the collapse of their plan to get out of the country.

They are portrayed in opposite features. Adera is portrayed negatively. He is cowardly, corrupted, opportunistic, self-centered and cruel. Ayalneh deliberately portrays him so just to picturize the negative aspects of the regime through him. On the other hand Embibel is courageous, kind and strong-minded enough to sacrifice his life for the sake of the masses. The other characters are also portrayed in similar patterns. All the other characters, with the exception of Embibel and Abeba, are portrayed from a single dimension: their political outlook. Especially those characters indicated as 1st Boy, 2nd Boy ..., 1st Girl, 2nd Girl .... 1st Lady, 2nd Lady ..., 1st servant, 2nd servant ... merely stand for central ideas. They just appear and disappear suddenly. Some of them do not have more than one line of dialogue. The scenes in which these characters appear do not have any relevance to the main plot outline. They are inserted only for the sake of the political ideas they reflect. As a result they weaken the strong plot started at the beginning of the play.

Though *Esat Sined* is technically weak and at times boring, it is a play which analyzed the February 1974 uprising and pinpointed the future development from a definite ideological line with simple, day to day language.

### 2.1.3 - Poletikana Poletikegnoch

Abbe Gubegna's play *Poletikana Poletikegnoch* was performed in 1976. It is based on the story of Tezera who is from a rich family and unemployed. One evening he utters words of insult against the King and is sentenced to two years of imprisonment. In prison he becomes an informer because the head of the prison promises him to be released soon. In the meantime, however, all the political prisoners get released when the revolution erupts. Then the mass media give Tezera a wide coverage as a political prisoner. He pretends as if he had been jailed and tortured for twenty years because of charges in the previous 1960 coup d'état and becomes one of the top political figures in the country.

Based on the above story, Abbe ridicules both the feudo-bougeois regime and the opportunist politicians that emerged after the revolution. In the preface Abbe indicates his aim as follows: "The main purpose [of the play] is to uncover and show the scandal as well as the imposture seen in some people after the change [of government] and to leave the judgment for those concerned."

He also states that the play is based on factual happenings "... not expressing what I observed, I consider as the greatest betrayal of the country. I have, therefore, presented the truth which I witnessed." Indeed, he has dramatized what took place at the time, especially on the upper political platform.

*Poletikana Poletikegnoch* is the only play performed at the time which criticizes not only the feudo-bourgeoisie but also the politicians who emerged after the revolution.

The mishandling of justice is the main subject of criticism of the feudo-bourgeois regime. The public prosecutor, the police and the court of justice are portrayed as agents of the ruling class. The individuals who work for these institutions are also depicted as its lackeys.

Tezera's charge is seen by a special court in-camera. It is considered to be one of the major crimes, even 'worse than murder'. "Should my dearest King of Kings be insulted by you?" (A1:S2), is the opening line of the judge in the court scene.

The prosecutor and the judge abuse their powers. Both of them are virulently against the defendants. Especially the judge who uses nasty words worships the king. He comments that citizens should not participate in the politics of their country. To quote the dialogue between the judge and Ferede (a defendant):

Ferede - Is it a crime to oppose this kind of administration?

Judge - Whatever happens, how dare you interfere in the country's affairs?

Ferede - Does that mean Ethiopia is only your country?

Judge - Is it not enough for you just to live? (A1:S2)

Ferede is sentenced to life imprisonment because of participating in the attempted coup d' etat in 1960. He is a patriot and a man of sincerity who strongly criticizes the government of Haile Selassie as well as the opportunist politicians.

The last and longest scene is devoted to show the aftermath of the revolution. It takes place in the journalist, Gorfu's office. There 'the politicians', Ferede, Tezera and Dr. Mitiku are gathered for debating political issues.

Dr. Mitiku is also one of the political figures who arrived from Europe immediately after the revolution. He is the son of a feudal lord who went abroad with

the King during the Italian occupation. But Dr. Mitiku pretends that his father was a fighter patriot.

Although they are gathered together to discuss political issues, they, instead, argue only on who should be the leader? Especially Tezera and Dr. Mitiku strongly contest the position. Both of them exaggerate their role in the struggle to overthrow the past regime. But neither of them, especially Dr. Mitku who had never set foot in Ethiopia since he left for Europe at the age of 10, had moved a finger for the sake of the country. But they argue as if they had suffered a lot during the struggle and claim positions of power. Both of them have plans to form a party to help them win office. It is only the office that they have in mind, not the well-being of the people. It does not even occur to them to leave the choice to the people they claim to lead. "Politics should be reserved for us, the experts." (A1:S4), says Tezera. They all shout one against the other:

Tezera- ... I will show you! I will not allow you to utter a word after my party is established.

Mitiku - (Angrily) You do not qualify to form a party!

Goshu - Oh! Calm down please!

Mitiku - (Pointing at Tezera and Ferede despisingly) How am I going to participate in politics with these sort of people?

Ferede - Oh Cheat! Son of a Cheat! . . . We are sick of your flattery and agitation. From now on the Ethiopian people will not be fooled by schemers like you (A1:S4).

They continue on to quarrel, to undermine and degrade each other without reaching any resolution or agreement.

In the middle of their argument a peasant enters the room with a letter in his hand. But no one gives him attention, till the last moment when Ferede notices him and comments thus:

(Clutching the country-fellow's hand, he turns to the journalist) Please Ato Gorfu! Let us use our conscience! .. Have we given any consideration to this poor farmer? We talk about and on behalf of him. But really, we do not like him from the bottom of our heart. Do we? (A1: S4)

That is the gist of the play. All the 'politicians' are concerned about their own interests. They do not give a damn about the masses. And that is indeed what really happened in Ethiopian politics after the revolution. The political groups never intended to leave the decision for the people they claimed to struggle for. They denied the public its right to nominate and choose its leaders. Instead they chose to fight against each other for power.

Abbe in *Poletikana Poletikegnoch* limited himself to depicting the political situation of the period. He did not intend to forward a solution. Even Ferede, who is portrayed as a democratic figure never advocates practical measures.

The play ends symbolically with the 'poor farmer' leaving the office after tearing his letter of application as no one paid any attention to him.

## 2.2 - Plays of Political Intrigues

The plays which fall in the second group were performed after the political direction became more clear and the politicians split into antagonistic factions. It is the declaration of the NDR program that made the difference. Marxism -Leninism became the undisputed ideology of the government. It was also after this announcement that the enmity of the political factions became clear-cut and they started to attack each other officially.

The political groupings and individuals who opposed the Derg and its allies were dubbed as anti-revolutionary and reactionary in general.

The central issue of the plays is this conflict between the Derg and its antagonists.

*Shatir Beyefera* (Sabotage Everywhere), *Yezeterua Fanna* (Torch of the Country Side), *Dubanna Oil* (Pumpkin and Gourd), *Abugida Qeiso* (The Second Initiation), *Meqdim* (Prelude), *Beqey Kaba Siwur Deba* (The Hidden Plot Under Red Mantel), *Qeyou Machid* (The Red Sickle), *Tehadiso* (Renaissance), *Wonjelegnaw Manew?* (Who Is the Criminal), *Mestawot* (Mirror), *Fitmia* (Duel) and *Yegoselech Siga* (Wounded Flesh) fall in this category.

These plays portray the conflict in favor of the revolutionaries - the Derg and its allies. The revolutionaries are the protagonists and the anti-revolutionaries, the antagonists. The plays all end with the victory of the protagonists. Their principal aim is to agitate the audience to side with the revolutionaries. There is no one single play that views the conflict from a neutral point of view. All the characters are grouped as black and white or as good and evil. All the revolutionaries, with the exception of a

few, are from the lower classes. Their outlook is revolutionary and down right faithful to the Derg's regime.

The anti-revolutionaries, on the other hand are portrayed as either those who had lost their property and position because of the revolution, or as intellectuals with great craze for material benefits and positions. Most of the central characters have high educational standards, lots of money and great experience, but are without discipline, spiritual strength, courage or moral scruples.

All these plays are agit-prop. Since the aim of the agit-prop play is to propagate certain ideas, in this case political, and to convert the audience to one kind of ideology, their concern is more with content rather than form.

Most of them are technically defective. They do not draw human-like characters. Both the revolutionaries and the anti-revolutionaries have no individuality. They either stand for a central idea or represent a type. The revolutionary characters, especially the minor ones, do not even have proper names. They are indicated by their classes or professions like: *Wozader* (Worker), *Arsoader* (Farmer), *Gered* (Servant), *Abiyot Tebaki*, (Revolutionary Guard), Militia and so on. Even when the anti-revolutionaries are indicated by their proper names, the revolutionaries do not usually use them. They refer to them as 'that reactionary', 'that bureaucrat', 'that saboteur', ... and so on.

In most of the plays the anti-revolutionaries are portrayed to have better education and material resources. But they never overcome their opponents. They are not seen taking the proper actions to tackle their enemies, but are only heard abusing and cursing the revolution, discussing their ambitions and evil intentions, outlining

destructive plans and spreading rumors. On the other side the revolutionaries, though usually less qualified than their opposers, always win. They know who is who. And who is doing what. They are never mistaken. They are perfection itself. They take timely measures and subvert the plots of their opposers. They are not depicted as mere verbalists like the anti-revolutionaries, but as practical people. As the two conflicting forces are thus manipulated to assure the victory of the revolution, the plays lack in strength.

They also lack in actions. Most of the happenings are presented in narrations and reports or in interviews. Discussion forums and debates on political issues are common.

Usually the two antagonistic groups hold their meetings separately. The antagonists discuss their future and destructive motives while the protagonists discuss political issues. The cadres, usually the heroes, brief the 'immature' revolutionaries and other illiterate members of the lower classes about exploitation, oppression, class struggle and the evil intentions of the anti-revolutionaries stressing the need for eliminating them without mercy to safeguard 'the Ethiopian revolution of the broad masses'.

In rare debates held between the two groups, the ideas of the antagonists are presented clumsily and unconvincingly. They are not given the opportunity to express their ideas in detail and to reason out properly as the revolutionaries do. They are manipulated to be passive participants. This condition renders the glorification of the revolutionaries' cause without significant challenge from the opposing forces.

### 2.2.1 - Shatir Beyefeju

*Shatir Beyefeju*, Ayalneh Mulat's play, was performed in 1977. It is a play without a definite story line with 17 scenes and more than 25 characters. It shows the reactionaries preparing for a general meeting and the revolutionaries destroying them with a bomb blast as they refuse to surrender.

Apart from the above mentioned action which takes place in the last scene, the play is a concatenation of scenes of debates and discussions on different political issues and reportages of reactionary sabotage. The discussions and debates are on the hot political issues of the time which split the political groups into opposing sides. The question of the formation of an immediate peoples' government, the establishment of democracy and the actions taken by the Derg are the major issues treated.

The question of forming a peoples' government right away was one of the basic differences between the opposing groups at the time. EPRP was strongly insisting on the establishment of a provisional peoples' government while Meison and the Derg were arguing for its delay. EPRP was highly suspicious about the Derg's promise of handing over the power to a peoples' government and strongly insisted that a definite time-table to be included in the NDR Program. But as Meison was in a position of control of the state bureaucracy as well as of POMOA (Provisional Office for Mass Organizations Affairs), and the Derg held the central power, they preferred the delay. Since both the civilian political factions were claiming to follow Marxist

ideology, they were not against the idea of a peoples' government. Their difference lay in timing.

*Shatir Beyeferju's* treatment of the issue is from the Derg's and Meison's point of view. It disapproves the idea of establishing the peoples' government immediately. It tries to justify the delay by arguing that its immediate formation is a wrong strategy.

Abriha - Can not we primarily establish a provisional peoples' government and then eradicate the triad enemies? [Feudalism, Imperialism and Bureaucratic Capitalism?]

Abera - No, we can not. It would be similar to putting the horse behind the cart. The revolutionaries say, 'There should be either a revolutionary organization or a party for the existence of a revolution. The working class and the broad masses are incapable of eradicating imperialism and its allies in the absence of a Marxist-Leninist revolutionary party'. If you held an election before the triad enemies are eradicated by an armed popular revolt, it is obvious that they would not watch you standing at the corner with crossed hands till the election is carried out. There would be nothing to stop them from participating in and winning the election (A2:S1).

It emphasizes the primary duty to be the formation of a political organization or a party to coordinate and lead the struggle. An organization or a party is indicated

as the basic and indispensable factor in the struggle, the only means of preparing the masses to control the power.

Another point of contention is the raising of the political consciousness of the masses. The play supports Meision's stand that their level of consciousness is insufficient to hold political power. It depicts the level of political consciousness of the masses, at the time, to be at the level which enable them to recognize their enemies: the landlords and the capitalists, but not "those opportunist right wing petit bourgeois who may confuse it" (A2:S1). Here again is advocated the need for an organization to develop political consciousness of the broad masses. "It is absolutely impossible to hold power without an organization. ... Political consciousness is not a manna which drops from the sky. It could only be achieved through organization" (A2:S1).

The question of democracy was also one of the burning issues of the time that divided the political groups. The Derg and its allies were advocating partial democracy while the opposers were insisting on unbridled democracy.

*Shatir Beyeferju* supports the former. It points out that absolute democracy has never been exercised in history. It also points out the fact that democracy should be visualized in respect to class interests. When it comes to the particular case of Ethiopia at the time, it advocates the idea of partial democracy. "To apply full democracy means to allow the reactionaries and enemies of the masses to organize and fight against the interests of the oppressed" (A1:S1). Moreover it presents democracy and state power to be inseparable entities and points out that it is only in

communism when class struggle ceases and state power is diffused that absolute democracy could be exercised.

Related to democracy, there takes place a debate between the political groups about the Derg's measures. The opposers accuse the Derg to be a reactionary force which violates the democratic rights of citizens. On the other side, those political groups coordinated with it argue for it as progressiveness. *Shatir Beyeferju* calls the Derg "left wing and progressive"(A2:S3). It lists the progressive measures taken by it: the abolishing of the monarchy, the land reform and its willingness to cooperate with the intelligentsia as proof. Concerning its violation of citizens' rights, it argues that "as far as the measures are taken against the reactionaries for the well-being of the masses it is not supposed to be considered as a violation of rights" (A2:S3).

Apart from the above, it is worth mentioning one other issue: the personality of the late leader of Meison, Haile Fida. The play launches a counter propaganda against the detractors of this political figure. It depicts him as a strong-minded progressive comrade "who has great affection for the Ethiopian oppressed broad masses" and "whom the feudals hate because they consider him to be at the root of the nationalization of land. The anarchists also wished his death because they consider him as the one who aborted their plan of establishing a provisional peoples' government" (A2:S1). This part of the play was not performed and was cut out because of Meison's defection.

As the title suggests, sabotage is one of the methods used by the reactionaries against the revolutionary government. The reactionaries are portrayed to have only one motive: planning sabotages to cripple the government. Breaking down machines,

wasting products, delaying tactics in the bureaucratic process, stealing government's money and spreading confusion among the people, etc. are presented as the reactionaries' tactics, to create conflict between the government and the people. It exposes the sabotages designed by reactionaries in the political as well as the economic sectors and calls for the revolutionaries and the broad masses to be alert and stop them.

### **2.1.2 - Filmia**

*Filmia*, Tekle Desta's play, was performed in 1978. It is a one act play with 19 scenes, more than 27 characters and with double stories.

The first is the story of Alemu and Senait who are lovers. Alemu lives in Senait's family house, which he rented before the nationalization of urban land and rented houses. *Fitawrari* Dubale, Senait's father, agrees to their marriage, despite his earlier disapproval before the proclamation on condition that Alemu agrees to pretend to be the owner of the house and pay them a lower fee than the government's. But Alemu declines to accept the proposal since he is a revolutionary and a member of POMOA. Besides he arrests *Fitawrari* Dubale and his friends while holding a secret meeting with anti-revolution intent. At last, Senait, who had joined the EPRP, shoots him in turn with the approval of Bereded, member of the central committee of EPRP. Right after, she is also shot down by revolutionary guards who were waiting in ambush.

The second one is the story of Bekele. He is an eighth grade student, whose father deserted him and his mother 20 years ago. He is now a member of the EPRP. Because of his dedication, he is chosen for an important mission and is allowed to contact the central committee members. Here he finds his father, Bereded, and observes him murdering another member of the party. He changes his mind and informs the kebele leaders about Bereded. At last Bekele and Lemma, his half brother, shoot each other.

Although the play is made up of the above two main stories, it does not stick to them. Different incidents and happenings which do not have relevance to the stories are included. For example a whole scene is devoted to two characters pretending to be foreigners and unsuccessfully trying to cheat a bar woman. Another scene is about a quarrel between a drunkard and his wife and his neighbors. These scenes bear no significance to the main plot of the play. Unless perhaps they serve as comic relief.

*Filmia's* main intention is to depict the anti-revolutionaries as evil and the revolutionaries as good.

It begins with the announcement of the nationalization of urban land and rented houses on the radio. The lower class members express their happiness while the landlords are disappointed.

*Fitawrari* Dubale and his wife reconsider Alemu's marriage proposal with the intention of salvaging at least half of the rent. The author's intention is to depict the feudalists as material-minded and immoral people who present their daughter as a bribe to get a little money. Even if so, the author is not capable of expressing it

convincingly. Alemu's and Senait's characterization especially is very artificial. They are manipulated as he wishes.

At first both were in love with each other and eager to get married. But only because Alemu declines to accept *Fitawrari* Dubale's deal, Senait's love changes to extreme hatred and they part as enemies. Alemu also philosophizes about love and marriage in respect to class. "Marriage should be regarded in respect to the class struggle" (S5), he says at the moment of their separation. He wipes out his love for her by telling himself that she does not belong to his class. Here the play tries to make political outlook and class partisanship to be the central driving forces of love rather than natural instinct.

The second story's main focus is on depicting EPRP as a reactionary political organization. It is through Bereded, who succeeds in infiltrating the revolutionary camp and win a high post in the Provisional Military Government, that the play depicts EPRP as an evil intentioned faction.

Bereded, as the leader of the anti-revolutionaries, is portrayed negatively. He had deserted his first wife, Bogalech, soon after he was appointed as an official by the feudo-bourgeois government. When sent abroad he marries a foreigner. It is because of this that Bogalech is obliged to become a prostitute. Although he knows what sort of life his first wife and son are leading, he is unwilling to help them. "My mother turns into a prostitute to educate and bring me up. ... Who is responsible for this? ... My father? Or the system? Who is responsible?" (S4), Bekele asks himself.

Bereded is one of the leaders of EPRP, who "claims to be struggling for the well-being of the poor" (S19), but is in fact dictatorial and cruel. Their orders are

supposed to be carried out without any ayes and noes. 'Discipline!', they cry out loud. Bereded decides everything by himself without consulting other members. He murders suspected members by poison and buries their corpses in his compound.

The EPRP's attitude towards the lower classes is also depicted negatively. Improving their standards of life is not presented as part of the party's agenda. It is only used as an instrument in the power struggle. "If you organize the lumpen properly and give them material benefits, they will participate in any struggle against any system, becoming its vanguard without hesitation. ... That is why we should hasten to strength our relation with them" (S15), says Bereded.

Most of the EPRP members were among the youth, who were completely devoted. But *Filmia* accuses the party for confusing them and using them to fulfill the handful leaders' ambition for getting power. It is through Bekele, their hero, that the play depicts this situation.

Bekele is from the lower classes. He is completely devoted to the party and fulfills whatever is demanded of him because he has been brain-washed by the party that it is struggling for the well-being of the oppressed broad masses. When he finds 'his wicked father' to be one of the leaders of the party, he regrets what he has done before and brands Bereded as "... a cruel man who betrayed his poor wife and son, who got enriched by the blood of the oppressed, ... a sly reactionary" (S19), and he decides to avenge himself and the party.

His vengeance is not only based on his personal hatred of his father, but also on the party members who had confused and made him fight against the revolution.

[While bleeding much and very weakened] Since I have discovered myself, since I have attacked my class enemy,

since I have repaid the revolution which I had attacked unconsciously... . Even if I die now I feel a relief at this moment because I have linked my struggle with that of the oppressed broad masses (S19).

Apart from portraying EPRP as a non-democratic and power-targeted organization, *Filmia* asserts that the social problems, especially prostitution, to be the result of the feudo-bourgeois regime.

Large portions of the play are devoted to the depiction of the problem of the prostitutes: Bogalech and Bekelech. Aboneh, the fiancée of Bekelech, a true revolutionary youth, relates the problem with the political and economic condition of the country and advocates structural change to be the only solution. But Bogalech undermines the revolution, because it has done nothing to improve her life. Bekelech tries to convince her to wait in patience. She explains that priority should be given to the elimination of the triad enemies and assures her that “the struggle against poverty, illiteracy and disease will be started immediately after the revolutionaries’ victory” (S3).

### **2.2.3 - Mestawot**

*Mestawot*, by Getachew Abdi, was performed in 1981. Zelelew, though his land and rented houses are nationalized, strongly adheres to the revolution. His two sons, who had been participating in the political struggle on opposite sides, are shot by the kebele’s Cadre. It is because both of them were aware of his wrong political

stand that he shoots them. Besides, the kebele's Chairman is also a reactionary who tried to accuse Zelelew as a reactionary. In the meantime the revolutionary kebele leaders call the residents for a general meeting. On their agenda is the problem of infiltration. The Cadre, the Chairman and their friends are exposed as reactionaries who have infiltrated the revolutionary camp.

Infiltration is the major topic of *Mestawot*. The play was written and performed after the establishment of COPWE (Commission for Organizing the Workers' Party of Ethiopia). The establishment of COPWE had brought the political leadership under a single and clearly defined body. By that time, those political groups which had been struggling against the Derg and its allies at the center had been eliminated in one way or another. In addition, even those groups who had collaborated with the Derg were liquidated to form COPWE. But this did not mean that all members of the political parties which had been struggling against the central power were completely eliminated or had ceased to partake in political struggle. *Mestawot's* main aim is to advocate the need of eliminating infiltrators in order to clear the revolutionary camp from the remnants of reactionaries and opportunists. As the Chairman of the revolutionary guards expresses it:

Even today there are two camps, the revolutionary and the anti-revolutionary. It is wrong to consider everybody in the revolutionary camp as revolutionary. Since the mischiefs and tricks of the anti-revolutionaries are many colored and hard to identify, they may have succeeded to infiltrate the revolutionary camp by uttering revolutionary phrases. As our Communist Leader said, 'Words of Marxism-Leninism

should not be taken as the yardstick to evaluate revolutionaries. It should be their deeds that have to be considered.' Today is the day of judgment. Today is the day of purification. ... Today's truth calls for purified and genuine communists (A2).

The kebele's Cadre was a member of one of the antagonistic political groups, who had succeeded in infiltrating the revolutionary camp during the period of intensified struggle. He was also a friend of Zelelew's anti-revolutionary son. They had fulfilled different missions together. But, in order to avoid the risk of being exposed he had arrested and then killed him by accusing him as a reactionary. He also killed the other brother for similar reasons. Despite all these deeds, he is successful in posing to be a true revolutionary till the general meeting exposes him.

It is stated that his success is not only the result of his smartness, but also the absence of centralized control. As there had been many political groups on the upper platform which formed *Emaledh* (The Union of Marxist-Leninist Organizations), "there was a difficulty to differentiate who was who?" (A2). So, he had been covered by his friends from the upper hierarchy. But, when COPWE was established and the leadership was centralized he lost the cover.

Besides, Shumye, the intimate old friend and neighbor of Zelelew, presents himself as an eye-witness against him since he had seen him three years ago with the reactionary son while fulfilling a mission. Shumye had never uttered a word against the Cadre before. His main reason was the difficulty of finding the right person to whom to give the information as he could not be sure who was who? He admits that

it may have cost him his life. Because of this he had kept silent for three years till 'the day of truth arrived'. It is the establishment of COPWE that enabled Shumye and the residents to speak out the truth.

*Mestawot* agitates the audience to participate in the filtration process with confidence in order to safeguard the revolution from the remnants of the anti-revolution. There are speeches directly addressed to the audience by revolutionary characters. These speeches, apart from agitating, also comment on the people's negligence of accusing the anti-revolutionary for their destructive deeds.

Who has the firm stand and avoids moderation? Who?  
 (pointing to members of the audience) What about you?  
 What about you? You also? Have you not kept silent even  
 when you witnessed mischiefs being committed in your area  
 of residence, at your work place ... Or in the kebele?... Is  
 there any body who would not be accused of this negligence?  
 (A2)

These speeches also warn everybody to reexamine their political stand and rectify it according to the victorious revolutionary line. "There is no place for ignoramuses, opportunists, and non-activists" (A2).

*Mestawot* is full of discussions on political issues, narrations of the victories of the revolution, reports of the reactionaries destructive deeds and long formal speeches of the revolutionary kebele leaders. It does not show the actions being done, but it narrates or reports them. Especially the second act, which is entirely devoted to the general meeting.

The conflict is also unbalanced. The anti-revolutionaries are completely powerless and unable to defend themselves. They simply listen to their guilt and await the verdict to be passed on them.

The portrayal of the characters is also defective in that they are drawn from a single perspective. All of them visualize everything from the author's political angle. He manipulated them as he wished. That is why Zelelew, for example, approves the death of his anti-revolutionary son by saying, "I do not say he has died, but he has learned, he has been purified. That is what I say!" (A2). No reason is mentioned why he supports the revolution so much. The revolution which had nationalized his property and made him lose two sons. He acts thus simply because Getachew wants him to.

### **2.3 - War Plays**

The plays which fall in this category treat the wars in different parts of the country. The majority focus on the Ethio - Somali war.

*Tagay Sifalem* (When the Hero Duels), *Yementa Enat* (A mother of Twins), *Melekte Wozader* (Apostle of the Proletariat), *Gamo* and *Moresh* fall in this category.

Of these the first three focus on the Ethio-Somali war. All of them present the war as a coordinated work of reactionaries both at home and abroad, including the Arabs and the Western powers, especially USA and NATO.

As we have seen previously, subverting the revolution is depicted as the major aim of the anti-revolutionaries. Collaboration with the external anti-socialist powers is presented as one of the major tactics.

All the anti-revolutionaries are portrayed without a single positive attitude towards Ethiopia and its people. They are depicted spreading confusion, approving the cruel measures of the Somali troops, and encouraging defeat of the Ethiopian army.

The plays put the blame on the anti-revolutionaries especially the army's reactionary commanders, for the defeat of the Ethiopian army at the beginning of the war. This is mere propaganda for the main reason of the defeat was shortage of arms.

In all the plays Ethiopians are portrayed as ready to pay the maximum sacrifice for the sake of the motherland and the revolution. However, *Yementa Enat* shows a mother's reaction towards her two sons who participated in the war on opposite sides. In any case, the love for the motherland and the revolution is the governing motive of their actions.

*Gamo* focuses on the Eritrean war while *Moresh* deals with the battle against the EDU in Northwestern Ethiopia.

### **2.3.1 - Tagay Sifalem**

*Tagay Sifalem*, written by Tesfaye Abebe and staged in 1979, is an episodic play which presents the Ethio-Somali war of the time in two acts and seven scenes chronologically arranged with choral songs, soliloquies and war chants in between.

The first scene shows a reactionary commander of the Ethiopian army ordering his soldiers to retreat, instead of organizing a systematic manner of defense and supplying them with the necessary armaments. The second depicts the destructive and cruel measures taken by the Somali troops on Kebri Dehar town and its residents. The third scene deals with the heroic death of an Ethiopian soldier who is captured. He bravely resists torture and dies without leaking any information. The fourth is a dialogue between men and women workers about the reasons for the Ethiopian army's failure. The fifth covers the story of Yetatek Abat, a militia, who had killed a land lord in his early childhood to avenge his father's death. The sixth takes place on the Karamara mountain (the strategic mountain near Jijiga town). A reactionary commander gives the order to retreat but the soldiers disobey him and intensify the resistance. In the last scene the reactionary commander is arrested and replaced by a progressive one. The Ethiopian army becomes happy and starts to launch a counter attack under the command of the new leader.

The main theme of *Tagay Sifalem* is patriotism. Ethiopians are presented as patriotic people who never surrendered to foreign forces invading their country. But in the Ethio- Somali war of 1976-78 the Somali troops were successful in occupying almost the whole of the Ogaden region without significant resistance. Why?

*Tagay Sifalem* reasons out that the defeat occurs not as a result of the lack of will on the part of the people to defend the motherland, but because of the systematic sabotage of the reactionaries both in the country and abroad whose only aim was subverting the Ethiopian revolution. It also highly condemns 'the reactionary commanders' of the Ethiopian army for their betrayal.

During the time there were certain individuals and political groups who advocated the idea of self-determination. But the Derg and its allies were against the idea stressing the indivisibility of Ethiopian territory.

The reactionary commanders that the play condemns for the defeat, are those who advocate this idea of self-determination. They strongly try to persuade the soldiers to visualize the situation from their point of view and stop the war. "Comrades, how dare you fight against an ethnic group which struggles to maintain its freedom and its rights?" (A2:S3), says one of the commanders. The army accuse him as a reactionary who had infiltrated the revolutionary camp and to be 'the mouthpiece of Seid Barre'.

All of the revolutionary characters in the play are super-patriotic. They are ready to kill and die to keep the territorial integrity of Ethiopia intact and safeguard the revolution. Those who die are proud of their deaths. They also encourage the others to continue the struggle at the moment of their death. Like this woman militia:

Though my hand is numb, it has fulfilled its obligation.  
 Comrades of mine! Continue the struggle!  
 Unite! Children of Ethiopia! Forward with the battle!  
 The oppressed is the winner!  
 (she dies holding the flag ... ) (A2:S3)

This kind of message is common whenever a revolutionary character dies in the play. "The noblest death of all"(A1:S3).

The play, as previously mentioned, is written in an episodic form. The choral songs and the soliloquies link the scenes. They comment on the scenes and praise the heroism of the Ethiopians. They report and highlight the radical measures taken by the revolution and reiterate that victory would be for the Ethiopian oppressed broad masses. They agitate for the need of bitter armed struggle to defend the revolution from the systematic and coordinated attack of reactionaries, particularly from American Imperialism and its lackeys.

They are full of repetitions. Repeatedly we listen to the same ideas in different words by the chorus and the revolutionary characters. Like in the other plays, the characters are stock characters lacking individuality. That is why Yetatek Abat and Yetatek Enat never approach each other as husband and wife, but only as allies in the struggle. That is also, why the characters of the play do not have proper names. They are identified by their status, profession, or trade. For example: *Yetor Azmach* (Commander), Militia, *Abat Tor* (Old Aged Warrior), *Geberew* (The Farmer) and *Wozader* (Worker). Some of the identifications describe the characters' political partisanship, like *Teramaj Shaleqa* (Progressive Major), *Adhariuw Shaleqa* (The Reactionary Major) and *Chiqunua Set* (The Oppressed Woman).

But most of them do not fit their names. They do not reflect the behavior of the group they are intended to represent. For example, *Chiqunua Set* is just a resident of Kebri Dehar town, whose husband and only son were killed by the Somalis. She also kills a soldier who tries to capture her. She dies also in the exchange of fire. That is all. She is a simple woman who suffered because of the war as any woman would

have in similar circumstances. There is no reason for identifying her as the *Chiqunwa Set* (The Oppressed Woman).

The dialogue is stilted. Especially that written in verse, which one character starts and another finishes seem that the characters are sharing one mind, that of the author.

*Tagay Sifalem* is purely a propaganda play, written without the proper artistic manipulation of events and characters meant to appeal to the emotions rather than to the intellect.

### 2.3.2 *Moresh*

Berhanu Zerihun's play, *Moresh*, was performed in 1981. It is in three acts. The action of the play takes place in an Ethiopian army's fortification and its surroundings, in the northwestern front. The play shows the role of the militia in making up for the army's failure. The army loses battle after battle. The militia suspect the presence of infiltrators in the armed forces. At last they discover the infiltrators, including the co-commander of the regiment, Kumlachew Dejene, and succeed in destroying the enemy's information net work.

*Moresh* is not a play like most of the others which propagate bitter armed struggle as the only means of defending the revolution and the motherland. It tries to dig into the underlying causes of the conflict and tries to resolve them logically.

The second theme of the play is concerned with the ethnic problem. The principal characters of the play are militias who come from different ethnic groups.

Sergeant Tekle, the commander, is from Eritrea, Lidimo Jarso from Wolaita, Deacon Melaku and Lemma Muhe from Amhara, Berhane Bedaso, the only female, from Gurage, and Anjelo from one of the southern minorities. This ethnic diversity of the characters is done intentionally to portray the multiplicity of the country's ethnic groups. They are gathered together to fight 'their common enemy', the EDU.

*Moresh* asserts the feudo-bourgeois system of government to be the cause of the ethnic problem in the country. It argues that the regime had not given the opportunity to the different ethnic groups to know each other closely and to learn to live in peace. Rather, the system is accused of creating conflicts among them in order to divide and rule them.

The play uses the story of the two lovers, Berhane and Lidimo, who were engaged at the Tatek Militia Training Center. Their respective fathers had died while fighting on opposite sides in the Derasa battle. Berhane's father, who had lost his plot of land because of a landlord, was forced to join the regime's army in order to generate income for his family. Being a member of the feudo-bourgeois regime's army, he went to crush the rebellious peasants of Derasa, Lidimo's birth place. Both fathers die in the battle as Lidimo's father was one of the rebellious peasants. Both fathers were from the lower classes of the peasantry. The fathers killed each other on account of the regime. Their offspring do not accuse their fathers for what had happened. They fall in love with each other and understand that the ruling class is their common enemy. So, instead of hating each other they are unified together to fight their common class enemy which the revolution made them aware of. Lidimo expresses it in verse as follows:

You attacked me. I had no sympathy for you.  
 Our spears clashed with each other  
 As we were not enlightened but based on ethnic differences  
 Backed our class enemies.  
 Now you and me are together living in one camp  
 Calling each other Comrade! Comrade!  
 Dropping our enmity  
 United against our class enemy.  
 Did you ever expect that this would happen?  
 Even in your dreams?  
 Just only four or five years ago? (A1:S1)

The revolution is highly credited for uniting the broad masses of the different ethnic groups to fight against their common enemy, the ruling classes.

*Moresh* by viewing the problem in relation to the class struggle tries to provide a solution which is organizing the oppressed broad masses and enlightening them to visualize the problem from the class point of view. But it also stresses the fact that the problem can not be easily eliminated as it is a deeply rooted one. As Sergeant Tekle puts it:

Human relation is not as simple as it appears in a book. It is highly complicated. In one way or another, whether we like it or not, most of us carry the scar of the previous ages. Sometimes this scar itches us. It pains us. The similarity of our oppression does not remove the scar. So it is better to treat it step by step. But if we scratch it too hard and bleed it, we may create more injury than cure (A2).

Though the characters understand the problem and believe in their equality and are fighting their common class enemy together, sometimes they have difficulties in their personal relationships. Though Lidimo loves Berhane, he feels that she looks down upon him. As he confesses to Deacon Melaku: "... as you observe I love her very much. But shall I tell you the truth? I suffer inside because it seems to me that I observe in her a despising attitude towards me" (A1). But she does not really despise him. It is only his own feeling of inferiority complex which makes him to think so.

The other point worthy of mention in *Moresh* is its treatment of the reactionaries. It looks at them fairly. It does not portray them in only evil and destructive behaviors. It reasons out that they are fighting for their interest as any body else would do. Here is what Lidimo says about them:

If we look at it from their point of view, they also remember so many things they have lost and can not forget... They also say, 'Why do not they leave us in peace? Why not are they like before?' Peace has so many faces. They can not understand that times have changed and that we are different now (A1).

In *Moresh* both fighting groups are peace seekers. War is not their intent. It is but their class interest that leads them to war.

*Moresh* does not underestimate the power of the reactionaries either as most of the other plays do. It warns the revolutionaries to be more efficient and vigilant than their opponents. "Do not think so! Comrade Lemma, the reactionaries are not that foolish. They know what they do" (A1), says Tekle while discussing about them.

The revolutionary characters' outlook is also rational. They are not all firebrands obsessed by the revolution. They try to analyse problems and situations logically. They do not rush to take undue measures. They try to follow legal procedures. Tekle is the best example. He calms down some of the militias who insist on immediate measures against Kumalachew, the infiltrator. He waits in patience until he gets concrete evidence before he decides. He justifies his stand to his soldiers as follows:

Of course, I do not deny you. I am suspicious of him. But I do not have yet concrete evidence against him. Actually to kill a suspected person is the simplest and fastest method to get rid of the enemy and safeguard the revolution. But it might be a mistake. ... If you kill somebody by mistake, there is no way of restitution (A2).

They do not mete out the usual 'revolutionary justice' (executing without trial) even when they catch Kumlachew red-handed. They hand him over to the proper authorities.

The reactionaries are also smart enough to exploit every opportunity to weaken the army's strength. Apart from trying to convince the revolutionaries that the war is wrong, they utilize personal relations to undermine and weaken their unity.

Kumlachew lies to Lidimo, as if he has observed Berhane and Tekle leaving a hotel room in a near by town. Lidimo, even if he suspects Kumlachew to be a reactionary, believes him. He becomes jealous and insists to be transferred to another camp, till Tekle assures him that it is a pure fabrication. Kumlachew is seen trying to

exploit the weakness of Lidimo's inferiority complex, so as to fulfill his aim. Lidimo, one of the true and devoted revolutionaries, is presented with such weakness, rarely seen in the other plays. Lidimo does not give priority to the revolution rather than to his love. It is his emotions that govern him. Although he creates problems to his friends and wastes their precious time, they also do not accuse him as they understand his feelings and behaviors.

*Moresh* is a play which shows human like characters in political conflict. It is one of the best works which appeared during that period, perhaps thanks to the director, Tesfaye Gessesse.

## 2.4 Plays On the Economy

Most of the plays we have seen before have treated the economy in one way or the other. Sabotage, maladministration, looting government's money are depicted as part of the anti-revolutionaries' tactics to weaken the central government and create conflict between the people.

The plays categorized in this group were performed after the upheaval had relatively calmed down and the government had announced the Development Campaign.

*Qeyou Menetsr* (The Red Eyeglass), *Tigil Ledil* (Struggle for Victory) and *Yefit Edif* (Facial Filth or Old Filth) are the plays.

The first two mainly focus on the maladministration and corruption in government institutions. Both plays show how officials in certain government

institutions commit corruption and maladminster the budget. They are finally arrested by cadres and revolutionary employees.

During the upheaval, because of the absence of strict control, corruption and maladminstration were rampant. The government tried to tackle the problem by establishing the Workers' Control Committee which was an integral part of the Development Campaign.

The main intention of these two plays is agitating for the clearance of corrupt employees and officials to assure the success of the Development Campaign.

Though in both plays the corrupt characters are depicted as anti-revolutionaries, their motives are not political but financial. It is for their personal enrichment that they embezzle government's money, not for political ends. They are immoral and adulterous. Pleasure occupies their mind, not politics or revolution.

In both plays the top officials and their friends, the heads of units, are the corrupt ones. The employees at the bottom, the janitors, guards and mesengers are portrayed as honest. They are against the corruption who uncover the deeds of the officials. Though these characters earn a small income they are not avaricious like their bosses. They are totally devoted to the Development Campaign and are shown working hard to make it a success.

The third play, *Yefit Edif*, has a different approach and let us discuss it in detail.

## Yefit Edif

The title *Yefit Edif*, has two meanings. *Yefit* in Amharic means 'facial' or 'belonging to the past'. A clever title which refers both to the past and the present at the same time.

It is based on the story of Abate who was born in the countryside from a poor tenant family. When he is about to get married he requests payment for his labour. But the landlord, annoyed by the request, whips him. Because of this he flees to Addis with his wife and becomes a coolie. Many years after, the government launches the Development Campaign and calls on the lumpen to participate. But Abate does not want to. In the meantime he meets 'Comrade Ato Dejene', an agent of EDU and the father of the Kebele's reactionary Chairman accidentally, as he tries to smuggle weapons. Dejene promises to help him get what he wants in reward if he keeps silent.

The main subject of *Yefit Edif* is economic development. During the National Development Campaign, the government organized the lumpen proletariat as 'Production Cadres' and sent them to the rural areas. This idea had a dual purpose: to give jobs to the unemployed and to assist the farmers to increase their production capacity.

The first scene is wholly devoted to theoretical discussions on the economy. It tries to analyze and formulate how a socialist economy can be implemented. It stipulates that heavy industry is the basic factor in the process of establishing socialism. But, with the country's economy being based on privately owned small scale agriculture, it stresses the impossibility of building socialism in the near future. It

defines the time as a transition period which paves the way to socialism under the NDR program.

It stresses that priority should be given to helping farmers increase their production capacity, as there is a food shortage in the country. But, in order to avoid the risk of 'kulak' type of development who are the 'bases of the bourgeoisie', implementing collectivization in the meantime is proposed as the best solution. Collectivization is presented as a spring-board for the large scale farms which will form part of the socialist economy.

The commercial sector is also pointed out to be one of the sectors which need great attention during the transition period. Many of those people whose land and rented houses were nationalized had started businesses. These rich people can not but be considered as reactionaries. "One ought to be very attentive to the gathering of reactionaries in the commercial sector as they would create big obstacles for the transition to the socialist system" (A1:S1). Though the play does not propose a definite procedure on how to rearrange the sector, apart from applying strict control, it advises that "the revolution should make sure that the commercial sector follows the socialist road as soon as possible" (A1:S1).

The other point raised and discussed is the programming. There were people who insisted that the formation of the party must be given priority. They argued that the party would guarantee success as it would provide a strong centralized leadership. But the Derg's policy was to carry on with the Development Campaign simultaneously with working on the formation of the party. Of course the play sides with the Derg: "Comrades! The formation of the workers' party and the Development

Campaign go side by side as they are not interchangeable. Both are basic factors for the success of the revolution and the establishment of socialism" (A1:S1). And it castigates those who insisted on the party's formation to be primary as reactionaries.

It is after compiling the above theoretical analysis as a background that the play proceeds with the story.

Abate is the representative of the lumpen proletariat. He is dissatisfied with life and wastes what he earns on drink. It is his wife, working as a maid-servant, who supports the family. Since her income is not sufficient, they usually have not enough to live on. Abate is not willing to join the Campaign and go to the countryside as there is a rumour 'spread by the reactionaries' that the government's intention is different from what has been announced. Besides, the kebele used force to enroll the unemployed. Abate's unwillingness stems from this confusion. But his wife, especially his son, clarifies for him the true intention of the Campaign. Soon also the government gives an official statement that only those who were willing would enroll. With all these assurances Abate changes his mind to enroll and go.

One of Abate's neighbors is Almaz: a prostitute. At the beginning she is also unwilling to join the Campaign and go. It is not because she is confused like Abate but simply because she does not want to. And most of the people despise her. Her customers do not treat her properly. Some of them do not even pay her after having satisfied their needs. At last she gets sick of it all and decides to stop prostitution. She comes to understand the nobility of earning an honest income by using her 'healthy hands', and decides not to miss the opportunity which the revolutionary government has prepared.

These characters become true revolutionaries immediately after they change their minds and give more attention to the development of the revolutionary motherland than to their own advantages. "I have decided to campaign and cultivate my country's land. I willingly go and work. I will campaign. Yes I will go and cultivate the fertile land of my country" (A2:S11). These are Abate's words immediately after his change of mind. Before this, he had negotiated with Dejene to become a member of the EDU with great happiness. But that same night he changes his mind and he goes and informs the kebele about Dejene's intentions. He is manipulated by the author in service for the revolution and the Derg.

Woude, Abate's wife, is also one of such manipulated characters. Though she is a simple maid-servant and illiterate, she analyses the development of the revolution and its positive results thus: "... the revolution has come for us... for our good. We have to support it. We have to tend it ... Though it has done all this for us, what have we in turn contributed to it Abate?" (A2:S11).

## Chapter Three

### Conclusion

To conclude this dissertation, I would like to raise two issues: one: a new production style that was introduced, and two: the effect of these political plays on the Ethiopian audience, if there was any.

#### 3.1 Production style

Unlike other types of literary genre, a play should have to be performed to reach an audience. Performance is the key for a play to prove itself, since it lacks a lot while on the printed page.

When the revolution broke out there were few qualified professionals in the theatre houses: Tesfaye Gessesse, Tsegaye Gebremedihin, Haimanot Alemu, Debebe Eshetu and Wogayehu Nigatu, to mention the top ones. Although some of them were working in other institutions, they all returned to the theatre after the revolution. Within the next two years Getachew Abdi, Sibhat Tessema and Teferi Bizuayehu returned from the USSR with MA degrees in theatre.

These professionals, except for Wogayehu, were the ones who directed most of the plays. Besides, the best music composers like Nersis Nalbandian, Mulatu Astatqe and Merawi Sitot, and painters like Gebre Kirstos Desta had participated in the productions of most of the plays.

Until that time such participation of highly qualified professionals in play productions were rarely seen in the Ethiopian theatre. Five years later the Theatre

Arts Department was opened in Addis Ababa University. Because of this the productions of plays were highly improved. New directing techniques, especially that of Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre style was widely applied.

Brecht was against the conventional dramatic presentation because he considered that it reduced the spectator to a role of complete passivity. According to him, "the conventional realistic theatre encourages the audience to believe that things have been always the same because it presents events as fixed and unchangeable" (Brockert: 386). He also argued that the greatest pleasure comes from 'productive participation' in which the spectator actively judges and applies what he has seen on the stage to conditions outside the theatre (387). It is because of this that he formulated the epic theatre which makes the audience a vital participant in the theatrical events. His main aim was also to strengthen the theatre's role in shaping social reforms.

The above mentioned professionals who had studied abroad had had the opportunity to grasp the techniques of different production styles. Since Ethiopia was undergoing political and social change at the time, and the politicians as well as the elite were rushing to imprint the new political concepts on the people and mobilize them to back up the revolution, epic theatre techniques were found ideal.

Many plays were written in epic theatre style. Events recorded by film, radio announcements and proclamations, popular songs and narrative passages were inserted in the plays. Characters were made to have direct contact with the audience breaking the illusive fourth wall and extending the acting area to the auditorium.

Song and dance were also highly utilized, not just as background to create the mood, but also to agitate the audience. Bridge music was specially prepared to glorify the themes and arouse the audience to take practical measures. For example *Yefit Edif* ends with a song which has the following stanzas:

The revolution is mine and yours  
 The country also ours  
 Enroll and march on! Lumpen as well as proletariat  
 Like me for the Development Campaign.

### **3.2 The Audience**

Till now I have tried to study the plays contextually and mentioned some points on the production style. Another relevant question that should be answered is the effect of the plays on the audience. What was their effect? Did they succeed in their intended purpose? Actually, no study was conducted at the time on the audience in particular. I will try to answer the question based on what other researchers have said about the theatre of that period and interviews with artists who participated in the productions of the plays.

As we have seen in the previous chapters, the sweeping change was the first of its kind in the country. At that time, with the exception of few intellectuals, most of the people were new to the idea of the movement. Because of this, the people were eager to follow up the happenings and learn about the new ideas. Theatre houses became their schools (Seyoum; Getachew Debalque).

Though the audience became disillusioned in the latter days with Marxism - Leninism, it had been flooding to attend the agit-prop plays at the beginning

(Tekle:1996; Teshome). For example the number of people who had attended plays at Yehager Fikir Theatre from 1963 upto 1965 E.C. was only 51,000, while in 1966 E.C. only, the figure had gone upto 122,000 (Aboneh:93). Many of the advertisements of the plays carried the phrases *Abiyotawi Tewnet* (Revolutionary Play). Office and factory workers were attending them through study circles at low entrance fees (Birr 0.50 upto Birr 1) (Daniel: 18). The plays were touring throughout the country and were also presented at the war fronts and military training centers.

Even if “the ‘psychology of the audience’ is a fascinating but little understood subject” (Brocket: 19), we can surmise that most of the Ethiopian audience attended the plays, not to appreciate the artistic qualities, but to get political knowledge and follow-up the situation.

Encyclopaedia Britannica states the art of the theatre to be “essentially one of the make-believe or mimesis” (V.28 :516). Since the plays were agit-props which advocated ideas from a single point of view, there may be members of the audience who are intelligent and know the political situation in and out as well as the game. Even so, the Encyclopaedia highlights what happens when they sit as members of an audience: “The crowd personality is never as intelligent as the sum of its members’ intelligence, ... . Intelligent members of an audience lose, to an extraordinary degree, their powers of independent, rational thought instead” (524).

During that time, all of the people were conscious of the political conflict and struggle, but did not know the basic reasons of the conflict. They did not know which side was right, since the political factions never disclosed their programmes and

policies openly to the public. In fact the public was confused and swayed in different directions by the factions.

The theatre's effect is, as Smiley puts it: "The memory of it remains. An aesthetic experience occurs in a person's body, feelings, and thoughts. What theatre art thus generates, is a complete human experience which remains etched in human memory" (20).

To sum up the ideas raised above, let us see what happened when *Tehadiso*, Tesfaye Gessesse's play, was performed in 1980-81.

The play is in two acts. The first recapitulates the situation in the feudo-bourgeois regime and the historical development of the revolution through many scenes and effects chronologically arranged with a narrator, a kind of choral substitute who relates and comments upon the events. The second act is wholly devoted to a general meeting of residents of a certain neighbourhood with the purpose of exposing the remnants of the reactionaries.

When the play was produced the auditorium was also used as an acting area. Actors were placed among the audience who played roles of the residents. The director of the play, Debebe Eshetu, spoke thus when I interviewed him:

There were occasions when members of the audience came up to the stage to expose themselves even before the actors did. This became a day to day experience. Then we tried to drop it as it became too sensitive. But the officials ordered us to continue with it. Then the real exposing of real people, not of actors, became part of the drama. ... There were also members of the audience who tried to attack actors. One of them was a General who tried to shoot Tezera [the actor] thinking that he was a real anti-

revolutionary. He left him after I explained to him that he was only an actor. ... Later on, especially when we were touring, the local officials started arranging an exposing session immediately after the performance.

The play was written and produced using epic theatre techniques. It would have been fantastic, if Brecht were there to see the effect of his techniques on the Ethiopian stage.

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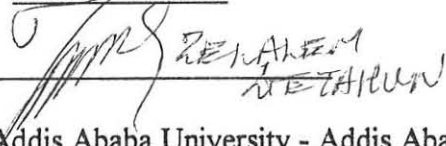
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## Declaration

I the undersigned, declare that this thesis is my original work has not been presented for a degree in any other universities and that all sources of material used for the thesis have been duly acknowledged.

Name: Zelalem Getahun

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

 ZELALEM  
GETAHUN

Place: Addis Ababa University - Addis Ababa

Date of Submission: June 1997