

A note on the Role of the Eparchy of Keren in establishing a Multi-lingual
diocese

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To the memory of the late Abba Kiflemariam Fadega (+2008) The Modern
Father of Blin Language¹.

By

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¹ This paper is a draft version taken from a larger study dealing with “Multilingualism in Eritrea”. In its present form the paper is merely a personal reflection and reconstruction of the struggle leading from monolingualism (Tigrinya, Ge'ez) into multilingualism in the Eparchy of Keren. The paper does not discuss the major struggle conducted by all the Blin-speaking and people of good will whose efforts led to the current multilingual and multicultural Church we witness in Eritrea. As such, the author bears a sole responsibility to any limitations or mistakes referring any third party. This is beyond the scope of this brief note, and therefore readers are reminded about the limited scope of the paper

I. Background

The pre-1995, and the century-long years since the Catholic Church was established in Eritrea, one could fairly characterize it as exhibiting a ripe field for the study of *language use and language policy* in a religious context, or lack of language policy thereof. But that lack of language policy was to be transformed greatly by the establishment of three Eparchies in Eritrea, and especially the struggle that led to the emergence or context where *monolingualism* was found to be untenable in the long run, eventually giving way to *multilingualism*. In formal terms, the domination of Geez was replaced, first by the practical domination of all religious practices by Tigrinya, into a form of multilingualism where the three languages of Blin, Tigre, and Tigrinya simultaneously and rather on equal terms have come in use in the pastoral work of the Eparchy of Keren². As for the Eparchy of Keren, the struggle in this story is exemplified by one of the leading proponents and activists of multilingualism – Abba Kiflemariam Fadega.

II. The Kick-Off event in 1973 (Keren Seminary)

I never thought that he would ask me to join him to a trip on the eve of Christmas in 1965 Julian calendar (6th January 1973 GC). He had just arrived on bus from Asmara to the then Minor Seminary of Keren, ate lunch with the priests there, and came to the library for reading some weekly newspapers. As everybody else before us during those times at the seminary my former colleagues and I were conducting what was called pastoral service (*temekro*), discontinuing our studying at the Senior Seminary of Asmara, after completing grade 10, and spending the year at Keren Seminary which had lived before for three years (1968-1971). These friends and former colleagues, whose names cannot escape anywhere in my mind, are none other than Teklegergis Woldmariam, Halibmentel (now residing in the USA), Mesghina Sebhatu, Guba Raki (now in the USA), and Petros Mikael, Adi Qonsi in SiaH (residing in Toronto). Two classes, 7th and 8th grades were studying at the Seminary that academic year 1972/73, including the only seminarian who got to ordination, Abba Negusse Fessaha.

As part of pastoral service year, four of us taught different subjects to the then 7th graders. As newly ‘named’ teachers, we were very proud of teaching 7th grader seminarians and determined to spend the pastoral service year just doing what everybody expected us to do: teaching, being good examples to the seminarians in our talk (mind you, using the right language and right words in our communication) and behavior (show good examples by being punctual, saint-like during prayer time, learning to be patient and forgiving, etc.), and obeying the priests out there: rector Abba Ayelle Teclehaimanot (or Padre Mario, as the Capuchins had double names, a Habesha name, and an European saint’s name, which was practically an Italian name); Abba Amir, Abba Woldesellasié and, later that year, Abba Teweldemedhin Tseggai (who later on moved to Addis Ababa and served as the rector at Seminary out there). Most of our time was spent either reading school books in the library as part of preparation for the classes or chatting endlessly (*jinga*), mostly in Blin even if Petros was there). Blin and Tigrinya were the only languages that we could speak on our spare time; all other school

² This may also apply to the Eparchy of Barentu with respect to Tigre, Tigrinya, and Kunama.

subjects were in English. However, Blin did not have the green card Tigrinya held in formal, religious services (also Geez) as well as spare time chat with seminarians. As seniors, we three Blin speakers also felt a bit responsible of not speaking Blin all the time even if there was no formal rule that forbade it - lest we jeopardize the friendly spirit and brotherhood that dominated the seminarians' life at that time. Even with the Blin speaking fathers, Abba Amir or Abba Woldesellasi, conversing or exchanging views in Blin was a bit risky business, lest one should be understood as a 'deviant' from the mainstream behavior of communicating only in Tigrinya. During confession time, even if one was Blin speaker, the practice was that one should tell his sins to the priest in Blin, albeit you also may lack the right word to express it in Tigrinya. It was a world in which spirituality, God, and his messengers included, could only understand Tigrinya (or Geez for *ziema*).

It was also during that academic year when the rector announced the celebration of the 100th Year Anniversary of Keren Seminary, which took place sometime in Spring of 1973 with a three day seminar discussions pertaining to the last 100 year of the existence of Catholicism in the country and the pedagogical, pastoral and religious situation not least at the Seminary. It was planned to be a busy year for all of us. But none of the above promises of engagements dominated my own life and activities after January 7th 1973. What happened?

This story is thus not about those good fiends or the junior seminarians as such but about a marginal coincidence at that time - that changed my whole life ever since. I am only putting the context in which the story took place. It is about an inspirational and visionary man whose farsighted dreams came into reality and affected positively many thousand people (including the Blin Language Research Group, *blina gabsi tebdowd diba*, which was behind the Blin Dictionary) and many other Blin speakers who are spread over the world and who write, develop, translate and care for Blin language, including the clergy in Eritrea. *It is about a narration of a minor happening, an event, on that Christmas eve and night that sparked my interest in Blin ever since.*

III. The event: Do you want to say the Mass in Blin?

As I alluded in the opening statement above, Abba Kiflemariam Fadega had just arrived from Asmara on that very Christmas eve. After lunch he asked me if I could join him going to Shinara to celebrate the Christmas, and to serve during the Mass. I conceded. But he did not stop there. He also asked me to sit beside him at the second apartment of the seminary where Abba Amir often sat and relaxed, sometimes having his coffee and or bear during the warm evenings. Abba Kiflemariam Fadega tended to have prepared a pen and an exercise book to write down what he was thinking to say during the Mass in Shinara. I thought this could be on his sermon. But wait, it was not! Abba Kiflemariam started explaining to me that we were going to say some parts of the Geez mass in Blin. He opened the big Mass book in Geez and started opening the anaphora of (I think Dioskoros) which starts with *Im Qdme Alem wo iske lealem halo egzibher bemengstu*

“*ketebina enfa*” he said to me. “Boy, write down”. I started writing down as he inscribed and translated the *Im Qdme Alem* anaphora, both those parts said by the celebrating priest and those said by the deacon. I was confused, excited and rejoiced at the same time. As we proceeded in our work, half way, the late Abba Amir Ashera came by, stopped a bit for a while, stared surprisingly at both of us and murmured: “What are you doing? Are you going to say the Mass in Blin”? *Blined ma qedesto jerebre* Abba kiflemariam? Abba Kiflemariam Fadega responded, *wra an nad qedesiya ferow blin akenen blindma qedeselli?* If the

participants in the Holy mass are Blin speakers, shouldn't I say the Mass in Blin except the ziema part? Abba Amir said, "*enta Ayib na geedlid shishidgena*": Please let us not deviate us from the Geez, please let us not deviate from Geez tradition. We only continued our work

After translating some parts of *Im Qdme Alem*, we travelled, on foot towards Shinara, 5-6 km North West of Keren town. For the last 3-4 years, Ethiopian soldiers had destroyed almost 90% of Bogos villages but Shinara mysteriously escaped the tragedy of being burned down but it was abandoned. No one was living in the village. As soon as many Shinarites saw Abba Kiflemariam and I marching towards the village, many who temporarily resided in Keren town, mostly in the so-called Gezabanda area, also followed the suit. Shinara church building was out of service after the burning of St George building at MegariH, in November 19, 1967³. Many nuns (*felesti*) including Abba Kiflemariam's sister – almost 9 of them also joined us and the village got new life, at least that night! Once in Shinara, I was again excited to have met many *felesti* and people I never knew before. But Abba Kiflemariam Fadega also shocked me (not only excited) a second time. I had my seminarian cassock on me and many of the nuns/*felesti* talked to me in Tigrinya, to whom I responded in suit; Abba Kiflemariam continued talking to me in Blin. When the *felesti* discovered that I could also speak Blin (nevertheless my Tigrinya was illustrative of being my second language, I was not good in it all, and I am not still) they told Abba Kiflemariam if I was really a *Blina*, Blin speaker. *Blin ama enti blin akruma deshklisi gabruna ergrxun?* Do you imagine what he responded to them.

To my surprise he responded to the *felesti*: *Blina ma ni ima deshkiya ar-estolle illa*: "I am not sure if this guy is a Blin or a Tigrinya speaker". While I had been excited by the idea and action of the good father in translating the geez Mass into Blin, and saying of the Mass in Blin, I was again incited to speak Blin all the way, and still be an obedient seminarian, a 'normal' seminarian who spoke Blin and at the same time, not feeling guilty! '*Oh My God*', a sound came once again in my mind; '*Blin can also lead to salvation!*'"

That changed my life once for all and how norms, values and regulations can be challenged provided one gets the right inspiration, , a form of what nowadays is called zeal, or civil courage! Since that moment when Abba Amir wondered if saying the Mass in Blin could be possible, time has shown that Abba Kiflemariam Fadega was indeed a visionary man! He could influence many youngsters at that time, and that today Blin has become one of the official languages in the Eparchy of Keren.

Back to Keren the next day, my previous engagement in teaching and reading at the library was reduced. I started to write poems, verses, prayers and grammar as well dictionary words in blin. Many of the verses and similes are still with me, in my 1973 hand writing! Whoever I read them I remember that day when Abba Kiflemariam was directly challenged by Abba Amir "not to distance us from the Geez tradition". When Abba Kiflemariam started saying the Mass in Blin for the first ever time at that Christmas night, January 7, 1973, I don't know if the current actors who inherited his enthusiasm and make things happen could have done so!

IV. The scientific inspiration: The leading role of Abba Kiflemariam Fadega (1984)

A seminal work by a Blin speaker on the language use and maintenance was an a Conference article, also by Abba Kiflemariam (1984). In that paper, the author asked not why did Blin remain 'obscure' to other language speakers in the country but why *Blin could survive for so*

³ It was St Mikael's day in November 12 Geez Calendar, when the rector of Besikdria School, Abba Mikael Asfaha, sent us home the previous day

long. His answer was that ‘*Bilin language persists to survive in an island-like area by means of its in season and out of season folk-songs, poems an tales*’ (1984: Italics added). He then goes on to discuss four poems and a tale in Blin, and believed that these illustrate why an unwritten Blin language could survive through these folk songs and tales. He argues: “such linguistic tools are still the major means whereby Blin language is kept alive”. According to Abba Kiflemariam Fadega (1984), Blin language is maintained through the oral tradition. The author hoped that “the following four poems and a tale in Blin be a stimulus to others for further efforts”. He also pointed out for any possible past links between Blin and Tigrinya by selecting a poem by Meconnen Amanuel who recounts the traces of Blin place names in the former Hamasien and Serae regions, the home of modern Tigrinya (Abba Kiflemariam 1984: 2-6).

The Conference paper showed the lively way through which Blin speakers use and maintain their language. The Conference paper was still an eye-opener for young Blin writers who saw the possibility of extending their efforts on the role of oral traditional folk poems. Until that time, many elders and educated Blin individuals considered Blin folk poems, tales, and ‘rural’ living styles as old fashioned, only to be abandoned as people gradually adopt modern values, such as modern music, shift to Tigrinya/Arabic language, and other markers of modernity, including hair style and dress (Abrehe Amar, Dafla Itman, folksingers). For example, folk poems and songs during the 1960s and 1970s depicted playing traditional Blin dances and folk poems as ‘irreligious’, ‘uncivilized’, uneducated, or otherwise symbols of an illiterate whose fate was dancing and enjoying life but not advancing modernity and societal development. This note is based on my collection of Blin poems and folksongs where the ideas of modernity are linked to education but away from traditional dances and poems (Kiflemariam 1986b). Hence educated and urban Blin started imitating other urban inhabitants, and the Blin ethnicity ‘markers’ of identity were gradually losing ground, and with them the special words and terms. Abba Kiflemariam Fadega encouraged use of Blin in all contexts. Because he taught many Blin seminarians in the 1970s who later followed his steps in writing and conducting several projects on the Blin language, I dare call Abba Kiflemariam as *the modern father of Blin language*

V. Finally, from monolingualism to multilingualism in the Eparchy of Keren⁴.

“All people have the right to listen the Good News in their own vernaculars” (II Vatican Council).

It is my pleasure to witness the generation, including the clergy of the Eparchy of Keren being able not only translate all the anaphora’s from Geez into Blin but also *officially celebrating the Mass in Blin*, teaching catechism in Blin, preaching sermons in Blin, and of course conducting almost all their pastoral communication in Blin where that language dominates. From monolingual context, the Eparchy of Keren emerged as a multi-linguistic one, serving its people simultaneously in Blin, Tigre, and Tigrinya, depending upon the needs and expectations of the faithful, and without prioritizing any one language over any other.

⁴ As alluded in the limited scope of this paper (footnote 1) the author appreciates, acknowledges, and rejoices by the many seminarians, non-seminarians, members of different religious organizations, and all the Blin speaking priests in the Eparchy of Keren, especially before its establishment, of the efforts, projects, and final success towards the current praxis of multilingualism! Space does not allow naming them all, but I also pray for late Abba Yacob Zeru who pioneered translating the Gospel into Blin (1993). I pray God to bless them all!

Didn't the Apostles witness that different people understood them, on the first ever Pentecost day, in their respective languages?

However, I try to recount how Abba Kiflemariam Fadega affected many people including myself, I can rejoice to see one of his *strongest inheritors* being the current Bishop of the Eparchy of Keren, Abune Kidane Yebio. Do you think any priest could wonder today if saying the Mass in Blin could be an exciting event? Who can think today that there is an official Blin translation of all the anaphora, not only *im qdme alem*?

- I rejoice, celebrate and thank God that the vision of Abba Kiflemariam Fadega has been personalized on one of his pupils who following his footsteps, **Bishop Kidane!**
- Thank Our Lord for all groups of **priests** in the Eparchy of Keren who worked for the fulfillment of a dream –putting out that vision into reality!
- I pray that God will provide his providence to all those **religious leaders in Eritrea** to work for co-existence, love, care and respect of one another!
- **Finally**, I pray God to provide the **Dr Amine Kidane** the organizer of this Conference, to keep him in health!

References

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