Berhanu Gebeyehu, 24 December 1964 -- 19 July 2010: an obituary

It is with deep sadness and regret that we have to announce the sudden and premature death, on Monday 19 July 2010 in Addis Ababa, of Berhanu Gebeyehu, Ethiopian scholar of literature and a PhD candidate at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. He was also based at the African Studies Centre in Leiden. As he told me a few days before his decease, he had almost completed his PhD thesis manuscript.

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

On 19 July 2010 Berhanu had lunch with friends, and felt fine and in good spirits. Afterwards at home, he felt sick and went with a friend to a clinic. Treatment did not work, and he suddenly passed away at around four o’clock in the afternoon. The exact cause of death is not clear yet. He was buried at St. Joseph Cemetery in Addis Ababa on 20 July 2010 in the attendance of hundreds of people. An unforgettable friend for so many people, he also leaves behind his beloved wife Menen and his 10-year-old son Tewodros (Tedy), to whom he was very devoted. To them goes our deepest sympathy.

Berhanu was an exceptionally bright, fast, and hardworking scholar. He had two MAs: one in Ethiopian Languages and Literature, and one in Applied ICT, which he completed just before taking up his doctoral work. He was an established literature scholar at Addis Ababa University and a popular and gifted teacher. His knowledge of Islam and Muslim communities in Ethiopia was also remarkable, and he had contacts with several important Muslim personalities and literary figures. He wrote many papers and pieces in local magazines in Amharic, and also published an excellent book on Amharic poetry in 2007 (YäAmarenya Sinegit’im), which he had finished during the first year of his PhD scholarship in 2006-07. It is a well-written, sensitive work on a complex subject, and which was reprinted soon after. With a colleague he also translated a book on Ethiopian women (Candace, by Ethiopian-Dutch writer ms. Alem Desta) from English to Amharic and did this in record time. In another burst of energy in early 2009, he drafted the text of a book on Ethiopian religious media, which we would work on together. And all this without getting behind schedule on his PhD thesis. Everyone expected a lot from him, and his academic profile was growing steadily. He was on the road to become a very prominent scholar at Addis Ababa University.
Berhanu was also a very sociable and likeable man. The number of his acquaintances and friends in Ethiopia was amazing: from high to low, from traders, farmers, and craftsmen, in Addis Ababa and elsewhere, from politicians, administrators, university staff and members of the cultural elite: he knew them all. And all liked him, because he was not superficial, but genuine and tolerant, and had a good sense of humour. His ability to get information about anything from anybody was uncanny. Indeed, he was one of the most dynamic and well-informed people I ever knew. All this went with a great and deep love for Ethiopia and its people, and its problems and predicaments. People loved to be with him and could talk with him about anything. I remember our many conversations, be it about his research and his discoveries of manuscripts and precious informants in Wollo, about the fate of Ethiopia, or about Ethiopian and world literature. He would talk as easily about Thomas Mann’s great novel Buddenbrooks as about Goethe and his relationship to Islam, or about the themes of Dostojewski’s novels: he had read it all. The next day he would come up with an interesting book he had found on American foreign policy, or one about religious history. We will greatly miss Berhanu’s intellectual dynamism, his playing with ideas, his generosity, and his great humanity and breadth of vision. His death – so early, so unexpected – will fill many people with grief.

Berhanu’s work on Wollo, a society characterized by social and religious diversity but also mutual tolerance and accommodation, must be completed and his book will be a major new study of this Ethiopian region. He originally came from there and developed an inordinate level of knowledge on the area. Since 1996 he had done on-and-off fieldwork on the oral traditions, poetry, folklore and narratives of Wollo. His study is truly pioneering and will set a new standard for multidisciplinary work on Ethiopian society and culture. We hope that Berhanu’s two books will be finalized soon so that every one can see them as a demonstration of his creative powers and as a fitting legacy of this admirable person and great friend.

Jon Abbink
21 July 2010