

An Ethiopian Life without Adam

Senedu G/Mariam | 7Kilo Magazine

A number of Ethiopian literary critics borrow western concepts, categorizations, ideas and philosophies to review Ethiopian literary trends, content and forms. Can this fallacy be blamed in the face of the paucity of choices? Isn't this the "mainstreamed" tendency in any case? Doesn't the entire southern hemisphere use what white people created to judge white peoples' work?

The first time I questioned this "mainstream", I was well over my thirties and practically an old woman. And the "defining" moment, as it were, was an interview I read on the Amharic Reporter newspaper in 2006. The professor was explaining his vision for a renewed, revamped interest and study of the Ge'ez alphabets and the need to place (re-place it?) in its proper hierarchy – the hierarchy of civilizations in the world. He reminded us rightly that there is as yet no definitive proof that Armenians wrote before ancient Ethiopians did and that only the weakness of our universities and researchers has led to the "mainstream" conclusion that Armenian comes first. He also lamented the fact that we could have gone further and altogether pushed for the creation of a whole new "categorization" of civilization called the "Teffcivilization".

The argument is that "Teff" is not only almost as ancient as our dated history itself but it is exclusive (and in this utterly confounding when one thinks about it) to the country. This age old, ancestral, well transmitted, refined and even poetic skill deserves a category and glory of its own. With this glory will follow that of the Ge'ez alphabet.

Now the professor had the misfortune of evolving in an American university and teaching there. He also had the added misfortune of being himself Ethiopian and not, say, French or American. So when he went to the Addis Ababa University (AAU) with his proposal and offer for support and lobbying from other scholars in the world, AAU, administered as it is by the same breed of *illuminati* that are in charge of everything else in the country, sent him back, tail between legs, with the following characteristically simplistic comment: "Since when are Oromos experts in the Ge'ez alphabet?"

Myself, having recently been baptized *hetsenawi*, was shattered at the time to know that these malevolent critics (*meqetegnoch* as goes in *Mereq* to say *meqegenet yalebet tichet*) are teaching my kids and other peoples' kids.

Of course ideas can also have unlucky timing. Now that non-Ethiopian white people have made us "discover" teff and "shown" us its value, will the professor have better luck? Is he somewhere reading this and mending his broken heart? I would like to think that he will rejoice in the knowledge that, in at least one other Ethiopian called Adam Reta, he has found a brother.

When the world's Christians pray "Give us today our daily bread", Ethiopian Christians pray "Give us today our daily injera". Ethiopians call the task of earning a living "seeking one's injera". An Ethiopian's fate is his *injera*. Indeed *injera* is at once food and destiny.

Injera is the arduous translation of *teff* processed through days of elaborate stages that ends in fire and soil. Even if you equate all the preceding stages of sowing, weeding and reaping that leads to the sand sized jewel of grains that is *teff* to the mysteries of nature and agriculture, what of the metamorphosis of these grains into triple coloured life sized pancakes? Even if you argue that it is manmade skill perfected through millennia that made these tiny fragile flakes escape from their tall

feather like prisons of leaves, who first saw the flour in these small things? Who is the first woman who grounded them into powder and kneaded them into paste?

Think of the three-day long and not one day less fermentation process, and most baffling of all, the extracting of yeast within the yeast (double yeast?) that is the *absit*. The rest of the world is happy to bake with “one” yeast and eat its blind bread blindly. *Injera* has eyes because of its *absit*, and *absit* is what you get from boiling a fraction of your paste in water. Indeed, your *injera* would be blind if lukewarm *absit* didn’t go back in the paste and raised the remaining fermented paste higher. Think of the oven – the *metad*! The marriage of this flat disk with a conic top cover indeed inspired the pharaohs to build their pyramids. The *metad* is what inspired the shape of flying saucers. Could the instinctive knowledge of thinning your paste to the just the right texture of liquid and pouring it over the oven disk have come from mere mechanical practice? Adam Reta’s six books (deliberately excluding Mahlet) building up to (or that built us up to) Mereq invite us to take this age old knowledge of turning *teff* into *injerabeyond* history books and accept it as an Ethiopian philosophy and our contribution to universal human amazement. If one must use comparison, this knowledge is Ethiopia’s gift to mankind just as Socrates, Bach or Michelangelo are. Put simply, if we understand the knowledge of making *injera* we will find our destiny.

Mereq asks, in fact demands, us to open our own eyes to the all-seeing *injera*. What are our ancestors trying to tell us through *injera*? How is it that civilizations have come and gone even in the fraction of space that this land called Ethiopia occupies on earth but that *injera* “carried through the toiling backs of maids, tenants, slaves, mothers, virgins...” has survived through it all? Isn’t there a reason for this trembling greyish silky *injerato* have reached this hurried and harried iPhoned generation untouched, unscathed and unwavering through the thick and thin of our history?

The stuff of *Injera*

Just as any other matter *injera* is composed of atoms. Matter normally exists in four fundamental states: solid, liquid, gas and plasma. *Injera* is of the “first” state- solid. We can see and touch and even taste the matter of *injera*. Its solidity makes it fundamental and its solidity prevents it from taking the shape of its container. And unlike gas, *injera* does not expand to fill the shape of its container. What you get on your plate when you sit for dinner is what came out from the oven. Geracha Qacheloch, Adam’s eldest, explored *injera* as matter. It played with the proximity of the word *injerawith* the word *injoree*– for strawberries. Adam made us ponder at the fact that both matters have what Ethiopians call “eyes” or the tiny valleys and hills that give them their texture and feel.

Unless we are physicists, ordinary human beings explore matter through our senses. Each human being’s sense is unique and exclusive to its owner. *Injera* does not escape this nature. And so each of us sense this solid state through unique senses. In addition, though the solidity of *injera* is not a state exclusive to *injera*, even if manufactured by machines, each *injera* enjoys unique solidity. Geracha Qacheloch calls us to consider the eyes of the *injera* to understand this select state of solidity. No two *injeras* have symmetrical shape and placement of eyes. In fact no one *injera* has two similar eyes. The eyes are haphazardly shaped and even more haphazardly placed. So unlike other man made solids, man only decides part of *injera*’s solidity- this solid has the final say on its own final state.

Still more confounding *injera* is the only solid staring back at and even “judging” its maker. “Don’t throw away *injera*”, “You can’t sing in front of *injera*”, “you can’t broach certain subjects in the presence of *injera*”...These admonishments all Ethiopians grew up with indeed make one wonder at this solid which takes a life of its own. There are things you cannot do “to” *injera*. Play with it, walk

on it, forget to cover it, put it in water, serve it face down, roll it in your fingers eyes side up, eat it with your left hand...This particular matter is a living breathing solid with rules. There is the even greater fear in all Ethiopians that to mistreat your *injera* will lead to your losing your *injera* altogether. *Injera* not only watches you but it remembers, it has a memory and will come back (or rather it will withdraw itself) to haunt you.

The form of *injera*

Geracha Qacheloch borrows from these peculiarities of this matter to introduce us to an innovative novel form.

The introduction of footnotes in the novel form, Adam's biggest contribution to literary form, is inspired by the eyes of the *injera*. Like *injera* eyes, these footnotes can take any shape and form and can be placed at any point of the main text- or the "linear novel" as he calls it. Like eyes, they are there to help the reader see. Just as *injera* can't be called *injera* if flat, eye-less and therefore blind, Geracha Qacheloch cannot be a novel without its footnotes.

Injera's eyes, Adam tells us, "are connected by minuscule tunnels" that link them at once to each other and to the whole. Similarly, the footnotes are related both to the main text and to other footnotes through references, mentions and sub-references: a name, another type of food, smells etc.

The chapters of Geracha Qacheloch also match the incalculable geometry of *injera*. *Injera* is circular but no *injera* is a perfect disk. This absence of diametric, geometric, mathematical perfection makes it futile to look for the centre of the *injera*. In any case, is the heart of the *injera* more *injera* than the rest of the *injera*? Whether you start eating your *injera* at the centre or at the edge, it is still *injera* you are eating. Dr Feqade Azeze wrote this about Geracha Qacheloch "this book sits by my bedside like a Bible and like a Bible, I pick it and open it at any page to read".

Injera is a circle so it has no beginning and no end. As goes in Mereq "if you try to find the beginning of a circle you end up at your starting point". Pick any of Adam's 75 short stories and any chapter of his 2 novels and tell me if you can definitively say this story began with the first words and ended with the very last sentence. This does not make Adam special, much less unique, for as he himself said in an interview: "no novel truly ends". What makes Adam special, if not unique, is that his stories and chapters have no beginning either. Like an intruding paparazzi, he catches the characters in the middle of something – from staring at a light bulb to walking the streets looking for someone, from throwing a spoilt smelly banana out the window to sitting at a bar flirting with a woman.

Adam has never provided a "complete" biography or a "full" description of any of his characters. Indeed who can say where the *injera* on your plate comes from even if one made it oneself? Can you tell where "each drop of the Gefersa" (Mereq) that provided the water that contributed to the *injera* comes from? There are no serial numbers marking all the *injer*as in the history of *injer*as. In this, the *injera* is much like us humans- impossible to truly know where we come from and where we fit in the chronology of mankind.

In his subsequent collection of short stories, Adam experimented with the *injera* form further. Perhaps the most developed stage of this experimentation was with his *Etemete Lomi Sheta*. Here the footnotes are often dialogues, monologues and interviews which have engaged the reader to such a point that readers forgot the footnotes themselves were fiction. Readers allegedly called Ethiopian *Sheger* FM station to ask where they could find full versions of the interview Mekbeb Geresu gave to *Abiot* Magazine.

If you persist in using western defined literary comparisons, the stories themselves while in the same photographic vein of the chapters of Geracha Qacheloch₂ were laboratories of writing style. Readers were invited to his lab and were enjoying various tests before the “discovery”. He took us on a ride of first person narrations, dialogues, description of dreams, third person narrations, dramatized historical events, tales, poetry, scenes and hallucinations. He tested various paces, structure, complexity, atmosphere (or lack thereof), genres and various degrees of humour.

Adam’s experimentation with *injera* does not stop at the solid *injera* and its form. He also played with the place *injera* occupies in our collective psyche (so to speak). Consider Alenga ena Meser for example. This is a book about childhood and childhood is a recurring theme in all his books and stories. But this particular collection focuses on punishment and reward. Most of us have gone through at least one of the situations of the children in Alenga ena Meser; our mothers have withheld our daily *injera* for punishment and cooked us great food when we have pleased them; we have measured kindness by the amount and availability of *injera*, we have observed our mothers give or not give *injera* to the poor beggar who knocked our door, and we have seen how difficult it is to stay a family without *injera*. The title, an *Ethiopianization* of the “stick and carrot” expression, is not an accident.

Etemete Lomisheta’s central characters are women. But look around you, oh ye Ethiopians! Who holds the power over *injera* in your homes, in your cities, in your villages and in your favourite restaurants? Our chefs and the key to our survival are women. If you don’t believe me, try and remember the very first time you saw a man in a kitchen. All Adam did was simply point out that not only do they shape our minds and almost decide on our fate but the way you treat your women is really the way you treat your *injera*.

Some *injer*as are simply divine gifts tells us Ke semay ye worede ferfer and Adam takes us back to how far we have travelled for *injera* in Hemamatena Begena and the trials and triumphs of finding your *injera* in Yiwosdal mended, yemelesal mended.

The synthesis of injera

And now we come to Mereq. Adam mentioned a number of times that Mereq is a synthesis. If you think of the sauce, it is it is a synthesis of many ingredients which in themselves may not even be edible but together make your *injera* palatable. Indeed *injera*, not being bread, cannot be eaten on its own. In Mereq, the sauce also stands for all the other liquids that are part of our human and the rest of the living world’s essence – the juice from the trees, sperm, sweat, the rain, the rivers and lakes that feed our soils, the juice from your sugar cane etc...

However, synthesis is also and in essence the result of the marriage of novel materials. In chemistry, the idiot-proof way of explaining synthesis is to say that it is *a purposeful execution of chemical reactions to obtain a product, or several products*. In effect, the science of the study and identification of this mix and the resulting chemical composition is called *solid-state chemistry*.

What Adam did with Mereq principally is give us the product of the various test rides he led us in through his preceding books. The result of his solid-state chemistry; here he tells us is the discovery. This is where his observation of *injera* has led him.

In this book, he has perfected the use of the form of *injera*. Here the eyes of the *injera* have effectively synthesised with the main text to the point of being indistinguishable, inseparable from the *injera*. Where is the footnote you ask? It is in the main text.

This book does not have a heart, a centre. Each page is a heart (and what beauty in its beating- but that is for more qualified than I to say). Here we watch the characters at various moments of their lives but just like our *injera* they are watching us back- they are made to laugh at or even insult us in

short verses here and there at their most intimate and vulnerable points of their lives. (You're laughing at me, Makeda asks, and what of your own dirty little secret?)

Injera is better than *berana* (our first paper), Adam said in one of his interviews, because it has stood the test of time (Thankfully! It's so hard to live on paper!). *Yesinjera* has memory and has seen all that this land of ours has gone through in its history. It is our collective memory. This being the philosophy, in *Mereq* we experience that perhaps the most adapted form of this study is through flashbacks. We never see any of the characters in the book in live action. Indeed, even what they remember is interlocked, confronted to and compared with what the others remember. And thus, we find a synthesis of memories.

Adam also seems to have concluded that what completes the *injera* is really the sauce and while, as he said in another interview, *injera* can be found in all our homes perhaps what makes the difference is the sauce. The sauce here, the *mereq*, can be determined by a number of circumstances as we know from our own realities. Hence, while the *injera* is our collective memory our individual destinies are in the sauce. So he opens another door to a new study, like palmistry for example- *mereqistry*. In fact he has added meaty sauce to his own use of the *injera* form with words repeated and highlighted throughout the various pages which he then separated in the last chapter. For the sauce can effectively be separated from the *injera* but when poured onto the *injera*, it can end up anywhere and yet not lose its nature. Think of your meat sauce: the liquid and the meat on your *injera* from whichever angle you look at it on your plate is still meat sauce. You can serve the sauce separately from the *injera*. Each of the two have their individual significance but synthesised, they also tell a story and through *mereqistry*, we can find this story.

Where injera takes us

I have noted with pleasure (forgive my patronizing to old age), the public's interest in *hetsenawinet* and what it means. In brief, Adam tells us, it means "intangible complex web of connection that exists beyond and within the tangible linear connection". In other words, how do I know that my grandmother did not wink or even flirt with your grandfather? (Actually knowing her she probably would have)

Nature we say is the most mysterious of all mysteries that we know of. So can the farmer in Gojam confidently say that the soil he grew his *teff* on does not contain a single grain of sand from Afar, a microscopic piece from Oromia or was not fertilised by children's football game in Gambella? Is the old man sitting by the Omo River convinced that his *borde* does not contain the saliva of the mother in Benishangul and in Menz blessing her children? Don't you know that it is the sands of the Sahara that fertile the Amazon and that the Amazon in turn is responsible for the oxygen that we breathe? If, by some miracle (un-miracle, curse), you are able to de-synthesize this "natural" synthesis, just the mere fact of talking, speaking and telling our stories, life stories, our jokes and other trivialities in our lives we let the connection happen. The sooner the words come out, they do not belong to us anymore. This alone connects us to the "others" in the entire mankind.

This simple little thing called *injera* is itself a synthesis of all the soils, sweat, water, rain, sun, saliva, stories, curses and blessings on this land of ours. It is our collective synthesis and the synthesis of all the history, the stories and the words told before us. The study of *injera* will take us to *hetsenawinet*. *Hetsenawinet* is the philosophy of *injera*. If in this *hetsenawinet*, you wish to find your individual *hetsen* use *mereqistry*.

In effect, all ye Ethiopian (by choice or despite yourselves) *illuminati*, scholars, philosophers, historians, politicians and other fate makers, gang leaders and mob-herds today, *Mereq* is asking you to first look unto yourselves. If you look in there and can de-*hetsenize* yourselves, yes I will vote

“Yes” in your referendums. Mereq is asking us all to look into our history to clarify our future (As goes in Mereq– “even saints look into the Old Testament to explain the New Testament”).

Old age

If I may be indulged one last time on account of my old age, I would like to conclude here with a little humour to lift this miserable piece to a better note.

My friends are used to hear this little wishful thinking from me: *I live to one day kiss Madiba’s feet and Adam’s hands*. I take that back. Not only is it perhaps too late (and sadly I have missed both of Adam’s visits to Addis Ababa) but what is one more admirer (do not like the word fan) to them? Instead, if God is reading this too, I would like Him to take 20 years of my old age to give another 20 young ones to His son, Adam, so he may write us long.

You see life for us Ethiopians without Adam is life without redemption. At this point, I would like to call on you to listen to Redemption Song, the version played by Playing for Change- who have found *hetsenawinet* through music.

The philosophy of injera takes us to *hetsenawinet* and the ultimate, final, highest expression of *hetsenawinet* is love. The philosophy of *injera* is the philosophy of love. And in the final analysis, it is love that Adam is preaching and it is through love that we find redemption. I say it again; life without Adam is life without *injera*. As the redemption song goes, “*emancipate yourselves from mental slavery, none but ourselves can free our minds*”.