

## ***IS ARABIC AN ALIEN LANGUAGE TO ERITREA?***

By: Abdu Habib

sabbahar@rocketmail.com

**“Belonging is a fundamental human need that relates to feelings of being valued, accepted, respected and cared about by others.”** (An Australian resource material)

I am amazed, as others, with the uneducated musings of some Eritreans on the comment section of awate.com, under the article USE: The United States of Eritrea, written by Ahmedin Osman and posted on November 28, 2016. The first most close-minded and unenlightened remark says, “Arabic has no root in Eritrea.” The second reads, “Muslims prefer their religion to national identity...” **Is it enough to tell these folks: “Do Eritrea a favour and keep quiet?”** I trust it is not. Essentially, it is important for us, Eritreans, to have a sense of our own history and know how we came to be what we are today, recommitting to values of respect and inclusion.

There is no doubt that borders have always existed to separate political entities. Irrespective of that, there have always been flows of people and goods across these borders. It is a universal truth that border crossing has always been done by merchants, pilgrims, immigrants during calamities, marriage and kinship networks, in addition to shared linguistic and cultural commonalities. Eritrea, as home of human society, could not be immune from the role of geography that shaped, preserved and transformed the way of human life, affecting the history and culture of the countries.

Arabic language is one of the ancient languages initiated from the beginning of mankind. However, it was with the spread of Islam in the

7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries that it gained importance and came in contact with the European languages, enriching them to a large extent. Taking this historical fact into account: **Could any reasonable person deny that the other side of the Red Sea (I mean the Eritrean side) should have witnessed the influence of the Arabic language and Arab culture even earlier, given the lubricant trade between both sides of the Red Sea during the time of the Axumite Kingdom and the migrations of people from the Arab Peninsula to our side of the Red Sea due to wars, draught and other social calamities?** In fact, our side of the Red Sea is geographically closer to the Arab Peninsula than Chad, Comoros, Northern Africa, Mauritania, Mali, Senegal and Maldives, where Arabic language is either the only official language or one of the official languages, in case the country has multiple official languages, though any of these countries could hardly claim any Semitic background.

We should not take Arabic language for Islam, though it was the tool through which Islamic culture could spread. It is the language of Arab Christians too. **In what language do the Egyptian Copts, Syrian, Palestinian, Iraqi, Jordanian, Lebanese, and other Arab Christians pray?**

Regarding the relation of Arabic language to Eritrea, I will give examples from Massawa and its hinterland, Samhar, because I am more familiar with the region than other parts of Eritrea. However, what I say here are mostly true for Dankalia, other Eritrean lowlands in the west, and the Muslim population in all parts of the country for whom Arabic is the language with which they worship God five times a day. I will not dwell on the relations of Arabic language or Arab world with the Eritrean Revolution because most of us are contemporaries to that and every reader knows that better than me. I will limit myself to few examples, just to remind the reader:

1. In his book, **Red Sea Citizens: Cosmopolitan Society and Cultural Change in Massawa** (written in 2009), Jonathan Miran, starts his introduction with the following three quotes from very well-known 19<sup>th</sup> century historians and writers who are considered to be 19<sup>th</sup> century authorities on the region:
  - “...Although geographically pertaining to Africa, the natives are more Arab than Abyssinian or Negro in character.”(Hurmuzd Rassam,1869)
  - “The Massowah [Massawa] race is far from pure; being a mixture of Turkish, Arab, and African blood.”(Henry Blanc, 1868)
  - “The mixture of races at Massowah [Massawa] renders it hopeless to give its inhabitants a distinct name.” (Water Plowden, 1869)
2. On his “Note on Language” (pages xiii-xiv), Jonathan also confirms that he interviewed his informants in Arabic.
3. The only written language the inhabitants of the region used in their daily life was Arabic. They recorded their births, deaths, signed agreements and business deals with one another, and corresponded in Arabic. Every shopkeeper had a book in which he recorded all credits in Arabic.
4. It was after mid 60s that government employees in Massawa and its surroundings (as elsewhere in Eritrea) were forced to learn Amharic and that was limited to alphabets only. There was a very interesting story I would like to share about the great, humble and popular Uncle Naib Hassan Mohammed (Naib of Hargigo in the 1960s) who was forced by the government to learn Amharic. Some teachers from the local school once jokingly asked him how he was

proceeding with his Amharic lessons. He said that the last alphabet he had learned looks like an eyeglass with a broken ear (In his Massawi accent, he said, “Hante Eznu Letsabarat Eukuyale”), leaving the young and fun-seeking teachers with an assignment to figure out which letter he was referring to (“Ma Rabie” or “Mi sades”?) but at the same time feeling his pain caused by the act of forcing an alien language down his unwilling throat.

5. Even King Tewodros of Ethiopia wrote letters to the Naibs of Massawa in Arabic. A compiled British reports printed in the form of a book indicated that an Armenian called Abuna Malta was his Arabic scribe (Great Britain, Correspondence Respecting Abyssinia, 1846-1868.)

6. Government schools were late developments in Massawa and Samhar. There was Hargigo School, founded by the philanthropic Saleh Ahmed Kika in the early 1950s. It hired teachers from the Sudan and all subjects were taught in Arabic and had grades 1-9, in addition to a separate Girls’ School. Many families, even from outside Samhar (Dankalia, Asmara, Adi Kayeh...etc), sent their kids to the school. The late Osman Saleh Sabe, the late Ahmed Nasser, and hundreds of other intellectuals who left their imprints on the Eritrean struggle were the products of that school. In addition to that, there was an Islamic Institute in the port city and Shieck Al Amin School in Twalot (grades 1-6).

7. As the Massawi community in Jeddah (Saudi Arabia) was the first visible foreign working community in 1950s, the first school in Jeddah was founded by that community for their own children. The language of instruction was Arabic and the curriculum focused on religious studies. **Why do I want to share this piece of information?** The crux of the matter here is to emphasize that, as a society’s culture (values, beliefs ...that influence daily practices), determines how that

society educates its kids, the Massawi community in Jeddah opened a school that aligns with and includes their cultural identity. They did that in 1950s and outside their country. **Do we deny them that right at this era?**

8. As it is true today too, people only listened to radios broadcasting in Arabic (B.B.C. from London, Sawt Al-Arab from Cairo, Radio Umdurman from the Sudan ...etc).

9. As Amharic language was the biggest hurdle for further education, specially for non-Tigreña speaking kids (Tigreña speakers knew at least Geez alphabets and operated under less handicap to learn Amharic), families sent their kids (of course, illegally) to Cairo through the Sudan.

10. The people in Massawa and Samhar (as in the western lowlands and Muslims in other parts of the country) read Arabic newspapers and magazines (usually Egyptian), entering legally or through local citizens working as crew members in commercial or government ships travelling to the Middle East and further or crossing the Sudanese border. Arabic novels written by the detective fiction writer Arseen Lobein, or novels written by the world celebrity writer, Mohammed Hassanain Haykel, were highly circulated in Eritrea. The presence of Jalia School (Arab Community School) and the coming of Eritrean students from Cairo to spend their vacations with their families helped a lot in the circulation of Arabic books.

Further, we should not forget that over 700,000.00 Eritreans live in the Middle East as refugees. Tens of thousands have been in the Sudan since the 1940s, and hundreds of thousands are in the Gulf. They have been denied the right of return, hoping to see and live in their country one day. Among them are highly qualified intellectuals that the country badly needs. These are citizens who and whose kids only speak Arabic, have the right to serve their country and be served by it

in the language they speak. How are we going to utilize this big force in the most meaningful manner and accommodate them as citizens if we do not have Arabic as the second national language?

What I tried to present above are few examples. But the question remains: *Did our brothers/sisters who try to tell us that Arabic has no roots in Eritrea bother to study the situation and the history before opening their mouths?* Maybe, they have never been to Muslim cities and regions in Eritrea or they knew these regions only after the inhabitants had been uprooted, leaving a different reality behind. If Arabic has no roots and influence in Eritrea: *Why could Isias master the language more than his Muslim colleagues?* One would also wonder: *Why do these folks want us to go back to square one? Does this help the country?* On the other hand: *Does verbal condemnation and repetition (like a chewing-gum) of some hostile statements once might have been said about Arabic language due to ignorance or prejudice solve the problem?*

To be honest, anyone of us has prejudice of ethnic, religious, or national nature, and none of us is free from that. But the thing is, we need to have strategies to fight and prevent that from weakening our unity. Anger and negative reactions are not solutions. They worsen the situation and escalate tension instead of strengthening bonds and promoting internal motivation against bias and prejudice. The tested strategies here include: cooperative interaction, intergroup contact, interpersonal friendship, re-categorization, cognitive training, intergroup differentiation, motivating self-regulation, and empathy. But to do all these, the first step is to forgive. **Are we going to that direction?**

I think some of the confusion we see regarding the relation between Arabic language and Eritrea might have come from treating culture,

nation, and identity as equivalent terms. Although some nations are predominantly inhabited by one cultural group, most nations have multiple cultures within their boundaries. While “nation” is a political term by which we mean the government and a set of formal and informal legal mechanisms that regulate the behavior of its people, it should be clear that the culture or cultures within the boundaries of the state certainly influence its regulations but both terms are not synonymous. This will lead us to the question: **Is Eritrea a homogenous society?** To answer this question, we need to see what the concept of homogeneity means.

A homogenous society overwhelmingly shares certain traits and characters that include: ethnicity (common roots), language, religion and cultural practices, to mention a few. The opposite of a homogenous society is a heterogeneous society, whose population has diverse traits and characters. Japan is a good example of a homogenous society: most of the population shares common roots, speaks the same language, and have the same religion. A homogeneous society could or could not be considered a nation-state, depending on the development of the society along social lines. Unlike the previous definition we gave to the concept, here the word “nation” refers to an ethnic group of people having a commonality of history, culture, language, blood ties, economic integration and more, whereas “state” refers to a legal group of people connected by common loyalty, usually history, citizenship commitments, daily interaction and more. Then in the case of a nation-state, there is an overlap of the two and so it is the most advanced form of homogeneity of the society. **Is homogeneity advantageous or disadvantageous to a state?**

We cannot deny that homogeneity could be a source of inspiration and shared experience. Nevertheless, the attempt to artificially create a homogenous society or to falsely claim to be one could be used as a justification to exclude other groups, and in an extreme case, to eradicate them through genocide, as it happened in Nazi Germany.

Opponents of the arrival of new immigrants in some Western countries show anti-foreign sentiments because of the homogenous mindset.

In Africa, chauvinists, who secured ruling positions in the country due to some historical reasons, do not accept other ethnic, religious, language or cultural groups as their equals and they appoint themselves as the custodian of the state, making many different arguments that ensure them a grip over the whole population. A good and contemporary example, yet not the only, is the Sudan where the chauvinism of one ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious group has led to the secession of the south and the eruption of civil war in different parts of the country. In this connection, it is worthy of mention that one of the tools African chauvinist groups use against the oppressed groups or the gown they try to wear is their vague claim about national identity which means different things in different countries. **What is national identity then?**

Though national identity could mean different things, for our purpose, it refers to the sense of belonging a person has to a state or nation. Its collective elements include national symbols, traditions, and memories of national experiences and achievements; all rooted in the history of the nation.

National identity is not a trait with which people are born. It is rather acquired from life experiences one has to build. It could be summed up as shared values. **Does national identity always play a positive role?** *It* becomes positive or tends to be stronger when it typically takes the form of patriotism. That happens only when a state or a country undergoes a military, cultural or economic threat or when it becomes a part of a foreign empire. The most relevant example for us is the Eritrean national identity that emerged and retained during the war of liberation with Ethiopia. The mind boggling question here is: **What happened to it after independence?**



On the other hand, in countries with ethnic diversity, national identity could also turn into chauvinism, in case it turns into a conflict with ethnic identity, leading to an ethno-national conflict. The most famous example is the struggle between the Australian Government and the aboriginal population of the country. As the knowledge about this conflict is alarmingly enlightening and teaches great lessons for the process of nation building, I would like to see it below in detail.

Our readings show that the Australian Government and the majority culture imposed policies and framework in favour of the majority who have European-based cultural values, making English the national language. In short, the state did not support the aboriginal cultures and languages, and during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, their cultures and languages were nearly eradicated. As a result of that, the Australian national identity among the aboriginal population became weaker and the ethnic identities of these minorities remained intact and salient. This is a case which shows that national identity could turn into chauvinism, if one ethnic group tries to force things into the unwilling throats of others.

This general discussion on the issue of national identity leads us to the questions: **Is there an Eritrean national identity?** If we think there is one: **What is the Eritrean national identity?** In other words: **If national identity is about shared values, what values do we Eritreans share?**

I think we, as Eritreans, are notorious for wondering about who and what we are. It seems that the only thing currently certain about us is our shared feeling that we are different from Ethiopia, which is not enough and could be seen as a negative formulation of national identity. I have reasons to say this. **Do we have a shared understanding of the Eritrean history as unfolded in all our regions and throughout all ages?** If we reject all the shared memories of ELF

and EPLF, the songs, the heroes and the expressions of each contingent of the national struggle: **Can we claim to have national identity? Do we agree on issues of culture and language? Do all of us value tolerance, equality, the peaceful solutions of disputes, and a spirit of cooperation? Do we agree on the flag? Do all of us agree who our national icon(s) is/are? Can we speak about Eritrean patriotism after independence except in sports? Is dislike for our neighbours patriotism? Do all of us honour the Bet Giroghis Agreement by our Muslim and Christian fathers on national unity in the 1940s?** As the answers to these questions are not complete “YES”, then national identity for us, as Eritreans, is what we should be in future; not what we regrettably are.

In a nutshell, our national identity is a work in progress: the future being more important than the past. National identity is not something or a policy statement a regime invents. It is a set of feelings and values that bind us together. **If they fail to bind us, in what way are they ours?** Then the national identity some had raised in their remarks at the comment board of awate.com is invented for us by the junta regime. That is why they are in conflict with our cultural, religious, and ethnic identities. That is the root of our crisis of identity.

From the discussions above, we could see that our society is not culturally, religiously, and ethnically homogenous. The best system that could secure peace, stability, participation of all citizens, and the utilization of all human resources for development of the country is to have a decentralized state. For the time being, agreeing on this principle would be enough, while some could go ahead studying different systems of territorial curve-up so that we could have some studies ready for action when the right time comes. But to come back to the question of national languages in future Eritrea, it is good to see the experience of Switzerland which is not and has never been a

homogenous country. The Swiss federation has four national languages with clearly defined regions for each: German in northern, central and eastern Switzerland, French in western Switzerland, Italian in southern Switzerland, and Rumantsch in southeastern Switzerland. There is no Swiss school system, but each canton or state has one of its own. Accordingly, the kids learn one of the four national languages, depending on their canton or state. In addition to that, they learn a second official language and English. This is the way they have solved their problem, but: **How do we solve ours?**

As we do not have many languages, the Eritrean case would be easier, provided that we are realistic enough to recognize our cultural, ethnic, and religious differences and work out a language policy that is fair and accommodating to all. The technicalities related to the question of how things will work in government administration and school system could be studied by experts at that time. But put simply, nobody should be forced to speak, study, or use this language or that. Citizens should have the right to decide which language to use and in which language their kids should be taught in school. One more issue I would need to raise is the importance of Arabic for us as Eritreans, irrespective of our religious backgrounds.

In our world today, Arabic is of utmost importance specially for us Eritreans, neighbouring the oil producing Arab countries. The knowledge of the language can open doors to employment in oil and travel industry, business, and other fields. Particularly, the knowledge of the language coupled with the honesty, industriousness, and law-abiding nature of our people, would give us a cutting edge in all fields in the Arab labour market. The story I share below says it all.

In 1985, I had the honour to know an Eritrean gentleman in Addis Ababa, who was working as the Head of the Accounting Department of EDDC (Ethiopian Domestic Distribution Corporation) which is the

former BISS Company. I knew him through a mutual friend, and we became close because he was the man anybody would love and respect because of his intelligence, humility, and noble character. Before I met him, I had the information that his kids go to Arab Community School, though they were Christians. I asked him once, out of curiosity, why he wanted his kids to go to an Islamic school; something I did not do though I was a Muslim. He said the best thing he could do for his kids at this economically worrisome world, with rampant unemployment, is to prepare them for life, taking into consideration that we live in the neighbourhood of oil-producing countries that have ever-growing and highly paying labour market we need to exploit. Blaming the Ethiopian prejudice against the Middle East and the lost opportunities caused by their reluctance to use that available market to the maximum for their advantage, and remembering the phrase “Tarikawi Talatotachen” (our traditional enemies), he told me that Italians say, “God gives bread to the toothless.” Appreciating his foresight, down to earth pragmatism, and wisdom, I wish him a successful and healthy life, if he is alive, and pray for his soul, if he has been deceased. I do not know if he has whispered something into the ears of the current Ethiopian Government or sold his great ideas to EPRDF. I see our brother’s strategy fully at work. **Can we cross the psychological barrier and think outside the traditional box?**

I could not find a better view to conclude with other than a quotation from Richard Florida (born in November 1957 in New Jersey), an American urban studies theorist, who is the director of the Martin Prosperity Institute at the University of Toronto and Global Research Professor at New York University. The professor has candidly this to say, as if he was talking to Eritreans:

“It’s time for diversity’s skeptics and naysayers to get over their hang-ups. The evidence is mounting that geographical openness and cultural diversity and tolerance are not by-products but key drivers of economic progress. Proximity, openness and diversity operate alongside technological innovation and human capital as the key engines of economic prosperity. Indeed, one might even go so far as to suggest that they provide the motive force of intellectual, technological, and artistic evolution.” =====