

**“The Resilience we have Learned from our people  
Keeps us Strong Throughout our Struggle”**

**Professor Ghideon Abbay**



By :Ruth Abraham

*Professor Ghideon Abbay is a mathematician, a historian and, as he proudly says, an Eritrean struggling to inspire the Eritrean youth and fix distorted images of Eritrea. He is a professor of mathematics at the University of Richmond, Virginia, USA, and labels himself and his fellow Eritreans in the diaspora ambassadors of Eritrea engaged in public diplomacy. This interview focuses on the challenges Eritrean-Americans face in the United States and the efforts they make to defend Eritrea.*

- **Thank you for your time Professor. Please, give us a picture of ‘Hizbawi Mekete’ in North America.**

It is an all-encompassing Mekete and I like that you left it undefined because it is unparalleled. Wherever they are Eritreans are passionate about their country. There are accusations that are repeatedly made by some people with agenda or by special interest groups. Firstly, Mekete is directed at making Eritreans, especially the young, grounded in their identity. As African Americans living in America, they have to deal with a lot of challenges. The governments there want the Eritreans living there to forget their identity and melt away. So, making sure second and third-generation Eritrean Americans in the US stay rooted in their

own background and identity with all the challenges they face as African Americans is a challenge.

Secondly, when we live in the US as Eritrean Americans, we want our youth to be successful academically, professionally, and economically. People of color have to pass through a lot of hurdles to be successful, so we want to ensure that we build successful youth in all aspects of life. Thirdly, as Eritreans, we have a country for which a lot has been paid for its survival. A lot of young lives have been paid for independence and to guard Eritrea's sovereignty. So, we want to make sure that Eritrea is presented in the real light because there is a lot of distorted information spread by enemies of Eritrea, far and near.

There is a pervasive distorted perception of the US-led world that considers Africans subhuman, capable of committing any crime. So, first and foremost, as African Americans, we have to fight for our dignity. Secondly, we have to fight for the proper presentation of our population against the racist narrative in which all of us black people are presented. On top of that, we have enemies, close and far, that really want to misrepresent us. We were misrepresented when we were fighting for our independence, during the TPLF war of aggression from the 1990s to this very day. The negative narrative by the media and the misrepresentation of the Eritrean people and their government is so pervasive that even those that know us are tempted to be influenced by; let alone people who don't know us. That is why 'Hzebawi Mekete' is multi-dimensional. It is a word that cannot be distilled into an English word. I am an advocate for 'Hzebawi Mekete' to be adopted as an English word just as there are several English words that cannot be translated appropriately into Tigrigna and have been adopted.

- **At the seminar you conducted, you said that to live in the US, you either have to be great in number or financially, two things we Eritreans don't have. How are the small number of Eritreans living in that sea of a world?**

Individually, it is a struggle. We struggle as people of color are struggling. Politically, as you mentioned, the US political system only cares about two

things. You either have to have money or be big in number. That way they could benefit from the majority and power of a certain people in terms of votes and other economic contributions or you have to have a padded pocket. We don't have both, so how do we make up for this? By working hard and making sure that every Eritrean is an ambassador for his country. Our little number and meager resources are multiplied by our resilience and continuous engagement, from the young to the old, men and women alike, those of us from the rural or the urban areas, from taxi drivers to vendors who have small businesses in city corners. We all consider ourselves ambassadors who represent our people and tell the plight of our people that has repeatedly been served injustice. The injustice on Eritreans is unparalleled in history. I know there are people who went through genocide and other forms of atrocities, but from the 53 countries in Africa, why were we the only nation to be deprived of our independence?

It isn't today's or yesterday's government's fault but our strategically important location that exposes us to continuous aggression. The Red Sea is very important to those who want to dominate and control. Those powers don't want Eritrea to exercise its self-determination and decide its own future. We have been repeatedly wronged; wronged by the US, wronged by the UN, the EU, the AU, you name it. Yesterday, Eritrea had to depend on, today it has to depend on and tomorrow, it will depend on its own people, its own children, and we are playing a very minor and very small role compared to the population inside the country. For us, it's our national duty. We cannot allow Eritrea's image to be distorted, vilified, or sullied while we are there.

In the 1940s and 1950s, there weren't many Eritreans out there but people like Ibrahim Sultan were trying to defend Eritrea. Today, we are bigger in number which encourages us to continue the 'Hzbawi Mekete' in fighting for our rights. We are not fighting to take away people's rights, but we don't want people to step on our toes. That's why we try to work in tandem with our people here. We, in the US, don't consider ourselves to be doing anything more than any Eritrean elsewhere in the world is doing other than the fact that we happen to be in the middle, the epicenter of world domination in the form of the US government. We are part and parcel of the US population and we respect it and have admiration for it, but the US political system, particularly the special interest

groups don't want to see small countries like Eritrea succeed. So, should we let this small but, for us, our world, Eritrea, be stepped on? Eritrea may be small for others, but, for us, it's our world. Eritrea has to be defended to the nail and that's what we are doing.

- **What challenges do Eritreans living in the US face and how do they deal with them?**

It is tough, especially when you are vilified culturally, politically and religiously. If you are not well grounded in your history and you don't have solid knowledge of your own culture and values, you wouldn't be able to defend it. There is a machine very well-designed to confuse the youth so that they could turn their backs on their own people. The information from WikiLeaks made it clear. Indeed, as exposed in the WikiLeaks Report, their approach hinges on: "let's try to infiltrate the Eritrean communities and basically reshape them in our own image". This is a well-designed and coordinated attack, but the youth are organized in the form of YPFDJ, NUEW, and many other organizations that are not willing to accept this false narrative about people of culture and value. Eritreans in the diaspora might come here [Eritrea] for not more than three to four weeks, but they are willing to give their necks for their country.

Living in the US is difficult, particularly for those who were born and have been raised there. If you are supposed to give negative examples of your own country in your history or civics lesson, what is to be expected? They want to scare you so that you won't visit your own country. They do that so you don't get connected to your origin. What our young in the diaspora see when they visit Keren, Asmara or Massawa is one thing, but it is all overshadowed by what they see in social media, which is filled with a lot of false narratives. On top of that, there is another layer, the fact that we are black, and we all know how African Americans were treated in the past. If someone is standing on your neck until you die for a minor mistake, what does that mean?

Our youth, especially the males, are always threatened by the system in the US. So, you have to teach your children their culture and history. It becomes a source of energy to succeed academically, professionally and so on. They work

hard in spite of their meager resources. When you tell them ‘Zgadel Yiewet’ in Tigrigna, which is translated as ‘one who struggles, wins’, they become very motivated. This was a motivating factor for me when I was young and it still is like that for the new generation. We do a lot of work trying to lead the youth on the right path at home and also at the community level. We have organizations that cater to those under 18 in mother tongue schools, and we have organizations like Hdri and YPFDJ and student associations in all educational platforms. So, it’s a constant struggle and we believe that our small number and lack of resources don’t scare us because the resilience that we have learned from our people keeps us strong throughout our struggle.

- **Many Eritrean academicians and researchers are gathering to write about Eritrea based on research. What can you tell us about that and the NCEA?**

The NCEA, which stands for the National Council of Eritrean Americans, is an umbrella that brings together PFDJ, NUEW, YPFDJ, Hdri organization of Eritrean Americans, Horn of Africa Foundation and multitude of Eritrean business owners, and the Voice of Eritrea in Washington DC. We have Eritrean communities across the US, and these groups named their organization NCEA basically for lack of a better term. It is not a new organization; it just combines these groups together so their work is multiplied. Call it synergy if you want; synergy to bring about this whole collective energy that we have in these organizations. There are those that do the research academically and there are also others that work hard on the streets for Eritrea. Therefore, the work being done is a collective work that isn’t attributed to a single group. The magazines, newsletters and overall information campaign that we work on is a collective work. Of course, there are people who lead the work but it’s an Eritrean tradition to work and claim together. There are many Eritrean sayings that reflect the advantages of collective efforts. For example, we say “Habiren zsehaba qtni arqay yexemb’A,” which is basically translated as “thin threads that pull together break down a Bamboo tree”.

We succeeded in the past, as Eritreans, in defending our country and subduing an enemy that was supported by massive powers because we were united.

Individual efforts might be negligible but when efforts are combined, they give amazing outcomes.

We cannot take it when someone that knows basically nothing about Eritrea opens their mouth to badmouth Eritrea. It's unacceptable and I cannot allow someone to badmouth my country as much as I don't like them to do so to my mother. It's unfair for a parachute journalist who knows nothing about the culture, language and context of a country that is known for its values, hospitality, and good culture, to come and write about the country. What they do is come with a script and get any image that fits their script. I will give you an example. A journalist once came to Eritrea and saw what we call 'Weferá,' where people were helping someone to build a house. The journalist reported this saying 'behind Eritrea's eyes, we saw slave labor.' Only a person that is grounded in slavery and benefited from slavery might think of slavery simply because they saw a genuine group of Eritreans' work of 'Weferá'. Growing up, we ploughed and harvested our fields in 'Weferá'. It is an honorable Eritrean culture of supporting one another. So, for someone that has no clue about 'Weferá' to come and badmouth the beautiful tradition is abominable. It's unacceptable and the journalist hasn't apologized to this day. Worse still, she isn't even indigenous to Europe. But she was given a narrative, and she was looking for slave labor. She came and asked this man at the 'Weferá' how much he paid the people who were working. He said that he didn't have to pay because they were helping him as it is the norm. She labeled it slavery just like that. It is strange that she wasn't even smart enough to mute the audio.

Another thing is the Ethiopian civil war that we saw two years ago and how it was reported to misrepresent Eritrean values. Throwing all those crimes and accusations against humanity at Eritrea's feet is unacceptable. So, we have to respond to these accusations. The media in the West don't care about Africa and its people. The journalists run to the press with whatever appears to be a weapon of accusation against the people of Africa; no verification. They tell us their journalism seeks the truth by comparing and verifying facts but when it comes to Africans, they don't care. If by some miracle, their sources are Africans, they take the words as words of the Gospel or Quran. These things make our blood boil and provoke us to defend Eritrea as we are entitled to it. Some people might

give information that is alien to the Eritrean people and their culture just to be granted asylum. So, as an Eritrean living in the US, all of these force you to speak up.

- **Can you name a few active Eritreans that are involved in the efforts you're making to defend Eritrea?**

There is a famous Eritrean song that goes 'who would I praise and who would I leave?' All I know is that they are all Eritreans, real Eritreans working for a common goal. I cannot mention names here because they all have their share of hard work and efforts. The youth that we have, are so active in social media that they make twitter ban their accounts. This speaks for itself. Of course, now I am talking about Simon. But there are many Simons on Twitter doing the same work as every Eritrean. In most of the documents that we prepare, there are no names. They are Eritrean documents and no more.

- **What will your writings focus on?**

The writings will continue and, as I said, all of us in our respective fields are working on it. It takes a lot but, hopefully, we shall be motivated to write books so that we can tell our own narrative in our own words. I am honestly sick and tired of people writing about Eritrea when they have no clue about what Eritrea is. I am tired of people who get their Ph.D. and other degrees writing on Eritrea when they actually know nothing about it, writing about Eritrea that would not pass the litmus test of an ordinary Eritrean let alone that of those who are making history and know details about it. The easiest way for non-Eritreans, especially those from the global North, is to write their thesis about obscure places which they know that their committee would not know about. Just like the person that gets accredited for badmouthing a country they never get to know. Then, when there is a need for a testimony of some sort, it's usually those fake experts that are called to testify to Congress and Parliament. This is because they write about a country they want to subdue. An African isn't asked to come to testify for issues of Africa because, for them, what is a black man after all? 'Yesterday, they were our slaves,' is what they think. The US might have left the old slavery but the mentality about Africans still persists. That's why instead

of asking Africans to testify for their own lives, they count on their own people that repeat the narratives they want. While the Africans are deprived of such a right, the outsiders sit on chairs to judge them. Based on that, they come up with inhumane policies to punish Africa. This is what we are fighting against, both as Africans and as Eritreans living in America.

- **Any final message, professor?**

Well, as Eritreans, we have come far through our own resilience and unified efforts. If there are forces and individuals that want to subdue Eritrea, they would have to disturb this unity, and we should never allow them to do that. We have a history that all of us should be proud of and we need to build on it so that the young inside and outside of the country can keep the values of hospitality, love, kindness and peace on which Eritrea stands. This shall help the world to know us for who we are and not for what our enemies want us to be. Thank you so much for giving me this opportunity.

- **Thank you, professor.**

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