

IS ARABIC AN ALIEN LANGUAGE TO ERITREA?

By: Abdu Habib

Beqaq835@yahoo.com

NOTE FOR THE READERS:

This article was originally posted on December 7, 2016 on www.togoruba.org and www.jeberti.com. I wanted it to be re-posted (after cutting some theoretical parts to reduce the size, and replace them with some refinements, adding to the clarity of some points) because we see the controversy coming to the surface every now and then. It is sincerely hoped that it would contribute towards getting things straight, and reinforcing realism in looking at things.

“Belonging is a fundamental human need that relates to feelings of being valued, accepted, respected and cared about by others.” (Australian Early Childhood Mental Health Initiative: <https://studylib.net/doc/8323512/why-culture-matters-for-children-s-development-and>)

I am amazed, as many others, with the uneducated musings of some Eritreans on the comment section of [www. awate.com](http://www.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: “Please do Eritrea a favour, and keep your mouths shut because Eritrea has enough problems to worry about?”* 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 human life goes on, affecting the history and culture of the countries.

As to Arabic language, it could be said that it is one of the ancient languages initiated from the beginning of mankind. However, it was with the spread of Islam, in the 7th and 8th 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 Eritrean side of the Red Sea 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, drought, 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.

In this connection, 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. To put it candidly we should ask:

- **In what language do the Egyptian Copts, Syrian, Palestinian, Iraqi, Jordanian, Lebanese, and other Arab Christians, pray and read the Bible?**
- **In what language did His Holiness Pope Shenouda III, the Pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria, who died on March 17, 2012, address the followers of the Christian faith?**
- **How about his successor, His Holiness Pope Tawadros II, the current Pope, selected as the 118th Pope on November 18, 2012?**

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, Eritrean lowlands in the west, and the Muslim population in highland Eritrea (though to a lesser extent) for whom Arabic is the language with which they worship God five times a day and read the Qoran. 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 is acutely aware of it, in most cases better than I do. Accordingly, I will limit myself to the following 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 the well-known 19th century historians and writers, considered to be 19th century authorities on our region (As a history major, I am quite familiar with these sources):
 - “...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. During the pre-independence period, 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, for the sake of humour but most importantly to drive an important point home, I would like to share. It was 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 in Hargigo 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 (Source: Great Britain, *Correspondence Respecting Abyssinia, 1846-1868.*)
6. Government schools were late developments in Massawa and Samhar. But there was Hargigo School, founded by the philanthropic Saleh Ahmed Kikia in 1944. At the initial period, the newly-founded school hired teachers from the Sudan, and all subjects were taught in Arabic. It gradually expanded to include all levels until grade nine, incorporated government curriculum, in addition to

teaching Arabic and religion, with 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 Mohammed, and hundreds of other intellectuals who left their imprints on the Eritrean struggle, as ELF or EPLF fighters, 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), though it was finally taken by the government, it continued teaching Arabic and religion. Hargigo School survived during Haile Sellassie's regime and the Dergue, without any major disruption, until the massacres of 1975-1976 of Hargigo and the flight of the surviving population for their lives.

It is interesting to note here that during both the Hailesellassie and the Dergue's regime, the Ethiopian Government assigned some teachers and sent teaching materials to alleviate the financial burden of the school. The most surprising thing is that the property (buildings consisting of 40 "stores" or rooms in the area known as "Kikia Saffur" in Merkato in Addis Abeba) Kikia, the founder of the school, established in 1944, for rent, as the source for financial support of the school, were exempted from confiscation by the Dergue, at the time of the 1975 Decree or "Awaj" concerning urban housing.

Please keep in mind, this was a school teaching Arabic and religion, and looked to, by Ethiopians, as one of the centres of trouble for the Ethiopian colonialism. Nevertheless, the successive Ethiopian governments were wiser and more tolerant than the current brutal ruling gang, and more shockingly, than some intellectuals who tell us that Arabic should not have place in Eritrea. It is worrisome: *What would these brothers do tomorrow if they come to positions of power in Eritrea?*

7. As the Massawi community in Jeddah (Saudi Arabia) was the first visible foreign working community in 1950s, the first formal school in Jeddah (different from the traditional Quranic schools) 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 (as an Eritrean sub-identity or a part of

the larger Eritrean identity) opened a school that aligns with and includes their cultural sub-identity, as they saw it. They did that in 1950s and outside their country. **Do we deny them and others in that sub-identity that right, after they have become the owners of a state, together with the rest of the Eritrean citizenry or larger identity?** As sub-identity, like identity, is self-consciousness, nobody has the right to define somebody's identity. Every Eritrean citizen is equally Eritrean (that is our larger identity), and each one of us has boundaries that he/she should not cross, while I cannot stand without you, and you cannot stand without me, no matter how each one of us defines his/her sub-identity. ***Why should you care if I define myself as a Zulu, or Agnwak, as far as I did not denounce my Eritrean identity?*** It is shame that we fight on these petty issues, when we are tied by a common fate and destiny. If we think outside this framework, it will unfortunately be mutual suicide.

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, and Radio Omdurman from the Sudan ...etc). That is their orientation. ***Does that harm Eritrea?***

9. Since 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. This phenomenon was true throughout the whole country, and the result was the emergence of a large force of Arab-educated Eritreans. ***Was this against Eritrea's interest?*** Of course, present Eritrea did not make use of them, as all other intellectuals. ***But will post-PFDJ Eritrea gain or lose because of the presence of this Arab-educated force?***

Eritreans educated in the Middle East had played a key role in the Eritrean revolution. Hundreds of thousands of them are now scattered in the world, as other Eritrean intellectuals, and many of them are serving in the fields, significantly important for the reconstruction of the country. When it comes to Arabic literature, we have renowned poets and well-known writers (in Arabic language), whose names shine in the Arab world, as Eritreans. Though they are too many to list, I can only remember the following three:

- The late Mohammed Saeed Naod: novelist, historian, and activist, who was described by one Sudanese scholar as “iconic representation of the literary soul of the Eritrean Revolution”. He is the winner of short-story of 2020.
- The late Ahmed Mohammed Saad (a childhood friend), known as “The poet of the Eritrean Revolution”. His works are not yet collected.
- Haji Jabr a young renowned novelist who published four novels:
 - Samrawit (2012): the winner of Sharjah Award for Arab Creativity
 - Fatma’s Harbour (2013)
 - The Game of the Spindle (2015): longlisted for the 2016 Sheik Zayed Book Award
 - Black Foam (2018)

This is to say that these Eritrean citizens have made the name of Eritrea shine in the Middle East, and the literary world, and that was through their skills in Arabic language. ***Could some still tell us that Arabic is irrelevant to Eritrea?***

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 (specially the Egyptian “Al Ahram”, “Almussawar” and “Rouzlyusef” were among the most popular), entering legally or through local citizens working as crew members in commercial or government ships travelling to the Middle East and farther, or Eritreans coming from the Sudan. In fact, I remember two bookstores selling exclusively Arabic publications in Asmara, one of them owned by Uncle Ali Ibrahim Bashier. Arabic novels written by the detective fiction writer Arseen Lobein, or novels written by the world celebrity writer, Mohammed Hassanain Haykel, were among the highly circulated in Eritrea.

I remember there was once an interesting story that went viral (Should I say through public osmosis because there was no social media then?) in Asmara in about the mid-sixties or little later. It was about an encounter between an Eritrean student from Cairo University, who came to spend his summer vacation with his family, and the excessively hysterical Asmara Airport customs, over a fiction with the title “Fe Baitena Rajul” (There Is a Man in Our House). The story goes that, when they found the book in his bag, they asked him what the title reads. When he translated the title literally saying, “Ab Gazana Sabay Allo”, they were shocked and called the security officers, who were very harsh to him, and

wanted to know, “Who that man was”. That led to his arrest, until the book was reviewed by the Censorship Department, and they were able to verify who that man was. The book was simply a fiction (later made into a film), but that was the hysteria of Haile Sellassie’s regime towards Arabic language. However, it was not by far worse than the hysteria we sometimes see towards the language these days, and sadly enough, among some intellectuals (the condolence being they are few), who ought to know the history of the country, they proudly say they are its citizens, and the social fabric of the society, of which they are a part, while seeing diversity with the lenses of freedom, justice, equality, and democracy, whose values they claim to cherish, as justice seekers.

During my high school days in Asmara, my friends and I (as other youth of the time who cultivated the taste of reading) used to buy Arabic fictions, as used books, from street venders at Kern Street, finally to sell them with less, to the same person, after finishing reading them by turn. Further, 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.

Moreover, we should not forget that over 500,000.00 Eritreans, mostly from the lowland areas, live in the Middle East as “refugees” or foreign workers. 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 after independence, though they dreamt for decades to see their country and live there for the rest of their lives. Among them are highly qualified intellectuals and professionals that the country badly needs. Most of them are citizens who and whose kids only know Arabic (not Tigregna), have the right to serve their Eritrean state, and be served by it in the language they know. Here a couple of key questions should be raised: **How are we going to utilize this big force for the re-construction of the country, in the most meaningful manner, and accommodate them as citizens, with rights and obligations, if we do not have Arabic as the second national language? Or, Should we delibrately leave them aside, as the unwanted irrelevant?**

What I have tried to present above are few examples, starting with the particular and opening up into the general, adding some serious remarks to trigger sober thinking. But the question remains: **Did our brothers or sisters who try to tell us**

that Arabic has no roots in Eritrea bother to study the situation and the history before making controversial statements? Maybe, they have never been to Muslim cities and regions in the pre-independence Eritrea or they knew these regions only after the inhabitants had been uprooted, leaving a different reality behind. I urge them to sit with older people and learn about these regions, their population, and culture. That is the way they could learn about our shared national identity, sub-identities, and the uncontradictory relations between the national identity and the sub-identities; all these constituting precious lessons on the history, social fabric, and civic education of the country for them. I am saying this, assuming that these folks are not PFDJ agents, who want to divert the attention of the justice seekers from what is going on in our country and divide the opponents of the regime.

If Arabic has no roots and significance in the Eritrean social and political life: **Why did Isias and many EPLF leaders took the pain to master the language, probably better than most of their Muslim compatriots?** One would also wonder: ***Why do these folks want us to go back to square one or to the 1940s and 1950s that witnessed unnecessary controversies and strive around the issues of religion and language that were subsequently settled by our Founding Fathers? Does this help the country? If so, in what way? On the other hand: Does verbal condemnations, anger, and repetition (like a chewing-gum), by some Muslim brothers and sisters, of some hostile statements allegedly said about Arabic language, due to thoughtlessness, ignorance, or prejudice, solve the problem?***

To be honest, though it could vary in degree, anyone of us, whether knowingly or unknowingly, could have prejudice of ethnic, religious, or cultural nature, and hardly anyone could be free from that. But the thing is, we need to have strategies to fight and prevent that from weakening our national unity. Arrogance, contempt and offending others, in the one hand, and anger, resort to insults, and negative reactions, in the other, are counterproductive. They worsen the situation and escalate tension, instead of strengthening bonds and promoting internal motivation against bias and prejudice. That will ultimately delay working together to bring the desired change to the country. The tested strategies here would include the following:

- ***Cooperative interaction:*** involving all groups in joint activities

- **Intergroup contact:** This is to reduce prejudice between groups (Goggle the concept and the necessary conditions for that)
- **Interpersonal friendship:** a social connection or affiliation between two or more people
- **Re-categorization :** a process through which we need to re-examine, re-think, re-differentiate, re-classify, and review the previous ideas and thoughts carrying prejudice
- **Cognitive training:** training that focuses on conscious intellectual activities, such as critical thinking, reasoning, or remembering
- **Intergroup differentiation:** encouraging contact between members of different groups, with the aim of strengthening positive intergroup relations, so that the involved groups could embrace their respective group membership and at the same time acknowledge the differences that exist between groups (Goggle the model proposed by Miles Hewstone and Rupert Brown)
- **Motivating self-regulation:** Motivating the ability to understand and manage our behaviours and our reactions to feelings and things happening around us
- **Empathy:** the ability to understand and share feelings of another person

Nonetheless, to do all of the above or some of them, and to achieve remarkable results, the first step is for each side to forgive the other side for being unfair. **Are we really going towards that direction?** We *do* see some efforts underway by some organizations, in line with the above-suggested strategies, but yet we have a long way to go, unless we accelerate the process of working together, and stop infighting on the issue of language, our Founding Fathers had already settled, and we practically see the use of both languages in our struggle in place. This path will definitely get strengthened daily because language is no more a debatable issue: it had passed that stage, seven decades ago, has the support of the majority of our people, and the Eritrean reality demands it, though defiant voices could be heard. That is much ado about nothing. But before wrapping up this piece, one more aspect I would like to raise is the importance of Arabic language for us, Eritreans in general, in this modern world, as a state and people, irrespective of our ethnic, religious, or cultural background or sub-identity.

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 friend, who was his colleague, and we became comfortable with each other because he was the man anybody would love and respect because of his intelligence, humility, and noble character. Before meeting him for the first time, I had the information that his kids go to Arab Community School, though they were Christians.

As I frequently went to their office and had little chat (it was on my way home from work and they finished work one hour later), 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 am a Muslim. His reply was that, 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 historical 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 of establishing good relations and economic cooperation with the Arab world and benefitting from Arab investment,

fully at work. To suggest that we have better chances than Ethiopia to be more successful in this direction because we have a part of our population that has more cultural proximity with the Arab world, I would raise the question: ***Can't 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 us 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.”

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HAPPY EASTER to all Orthodox Church believers!