

Voice of Ethiopia

December 30, Saturday in 1967

Letter to the Editor

This letter comes to you from a remote land—a virtually isolated “*awraja*”, in the deep interior of Western Ethiopia. Assosa Benishanguel. It is the most fertile land, so fertile indeed that, with some exaggeration, it is said any crop will grow on her soil in great abundance. At any rate, even in the “town” once can see the maize plant growing to a towering height of more than three meters. The compounds of the houses and the lanes are covered by a dense “forest” of “Meskel” flowers which to grow more than three meters. Most houses in the town have lines of mango and orange trees as well as banana and coffee plants in their gardens.

Only ten or fifteen kilometers from the town, the land is covered by hard bamboo plants growing wild. Mangoes, groundnuts, bananas and even coffee grow in abundance—almost wild. The fertility of the land is almost legendary. The “farmers” clear the land by burning the shrubs; then they throw some seeds of “nugh”, a much useful oil-seed, on the scotched land, the seeds thrive in great abundance. After the “harvest” the “farmer” leaves the land “fallow”. The next season, the “farmer” has a second “harvest” from the seeds that had accidentally fallen on the ground. Assosa Benshanguel is indeed, a land of plenty.

And yet amidst this abundance reigns a great scarcity. Goods and services to satisfy even the most basic human needs are lacking. Teff, and other crops sell at a much higher price than in Addis Ababa. (Manufactured goods, of course, sell at about the double market price in Addis Ababa). The element of exchange economy are just being introduced. Very few peasants produce anything for the market; they do not even bother to sell hens and eggs for five or six months of the year, which period they call “a hatching season”. And yet the people live at a level very near to chronic starvation.

And the people, these poor Ethiopians, fascinate one by their child-like innocence, purity of spirit, honesty and uprightness. They do not as much as touch some others or each other’s property. For all their virtues, however, these folks are totally illiterate and virtually ignorant of basic hygiene, farming, and trade. Very few “farmers” have ever seen—not speak of using—even the wooden plough.

Anyone with slightest feeling of Ethiopian nationalism cannot help to be moved by the plight of these people. He cannot help to try to find a way in which he can ease the burden of the people in some very small way, within the means he muster. Indeed, it is in this spirit that I am writing you this letter. I am

requesting your co-operation in doing something for these people-these innocent country folk.

Perhaps, illiteracy is one of the most fundamental causes that perpetrate the untold economic and social backwardness of the people of this sub-province. In this field the government is making some efforts to spread education. In addition, we, teachers in Assosa School are cooperating in a literary campaign for the adults. We have established 'Yetemro Masatemar' students' club in the school. And the students are enthusiastically participating in the campaign. However, since the adults would hardly get a book or even a newspaper after school, they are bound to forget whatever they have learned in school. What is more, it seems rather meaningless to make the people literate and not to provide with follow-up reading material on basic public health, agriculture, home economics and civic. Unless the people can benefit from their being able to read and understand such books and reading materials, the purpose of literary becoming self-defeating. The establishment of a library in this remote area, then, seems imperative, if only for this purpose. However, one hardly need emphasize the general benefits accrued from a library.

Now, then this the purpose of my writing you this letter. I am asking you to cooperate with me in establishing a public library here, in Assosa town. Admittedly, a small library would only be a far cry from solving the immense problem I have mentioned above.

However, how else can a student-teacher like me, with very limited means at his disposal, in a remote, isolated place, try to contribute a little (however little it may be) to the development of this part of Ethiopia?

I am requesting you, hence, to donate some books or other reading materials. The books should preferably be in Amharic and on such subjects as elementary communal cooperation, public and personal health, agriculture, trade, home economics etc....but the donation of any book in Amharic or English on any subjects for general reading is to be appreciated.

Please write to me in the following address to how many books you intend to donate to the library. I propose to collect the books during the two weeks before and after in the Ethiopian Xmas. For, it is only then the trucks ever try to negotiate the hard, dry weather road from Addis Ababa to Assosa.

For further information regarding the purported library please write to me also in the following address:

- Berhane Meskel Redda
- C/O Assosa and Benshaguel
Government Office
- Assosa ,(Wollega)

Yours Sincerely,
Berhanemeskel Redda,
STUDENT H.S.I. UNIVERSITY
On Ethiopian University Service