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Book Review

Social Change

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[AQ1] Mengesha Habte, *Memoir of a Countryman* [Mezekir Wedi Hagereseb], Tecumseh, 2021, vi + 393 pp. ISBN 978-1-63752-695-8.

Through a villager's diary, this book discusses the traditional life and indigenous knowledge of the Tigrigna ethnic group, found both in Eritrea and the Tigray region of Ethiopia. The context of the book is set in Milezanay Anseba, a village located in the central highlands of Eritrea and the birthplace of the author. The book is based on the personal trajectories of the author, but is narrated by a character named Hans, a university student. While Hans and some other names in the book are fictional, the events and places are real. The author also indicated that the events are not different in other villages of the Tigrigna ethnic group and reminded readers to reflect and enjoy the story by taking the events and characters in the book to their settings (p. 10).

This book came at a critical time when many Eritrean youth were carried away by the wave of modernisation and when the debates on cultural and national identities were intensified within the Eritrean diasporas. Hence, soon after its release, the book was read by many and became the topic of discussion on social media, drawing numerous enthusiasts and a few critics.

The book is divided into five parts and includes a few paintings and photographs, mainly used to illustrate the culture or topography of Milezanay Anseba. Part one covers the largest part (165 pages) of the book, addressing social and economic relations within the family and the entire village—farming, herding, love, resource management as well as eating and coffee-drinking rituals. The author does not only describe the traditional way of life that is conducted within the village but also uses traditional words, phrases and proverbs of wisdom that add an authentic flavour to the book. Furthermore, although the book is centred on the Tigrigna ethnic group, the author has illustrated the cultural relations and intermarriage of the Tigrigna people with other Eritrean ethnic groups. In so doing, he has challenged those who see cultural identity as a means of social and political identification and polarisation and showed the beauty of a multicultural society and the role of cultural tolerance within societies and a country. I found this to be significant in creating an alternative perspective for individuals concerning multiculturalism, cultural tolerance, and peace and development.

In addition, the author has written about the influence of Western cultures and the socio-economic interdependence of the Tigrigna (and Eritrean) people. He argues that the phrase 'thank you' has little position in the villages or traditional Tigrigna life because people's lives are interconnected. If one is giving something

today, they will be at the receiving end tomorrow. Therefore, ‘who is going to thank who’ (p. 126). It is true that culture is fluid and changes over time. However, the author has noted that people are different partly because of their culture. For instance, if someone hears the name ‘Mackele’ in Eritrea or Ethiopia, it might not be difficult to know that the person is from the Tigrigna ethnic group. People also need to closely study the cultural values, norms and practices that they give up and those that they want to adopt. For example, people can indeed learn many things from the West and their scientific knowledge. However, it is also important that they should not devalue their culture and indigenous knowledge. The author posits that societies need to decolonise their minds and methodologies, which is in line with the argument of Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s work, *Decolonizing Research: Indigenous Storywork as Methodology*. The author states that Smith (and her work) is one of the three authors who inspired him to write the book. The other two are George Ayittey, who wrote *Africa Unchained*, and Michela Wrong, the author of *I Didn’t Do It For You: How the World Betrayed a Small African Nation*.

The book has included some stories and elders’ perspectives regarding the opposition of Eritreans against colonialism and the imposition of colonial (or foreign) cultures. The transmission of knowledge from parents to children and vice versa has also been included in the book. In particular, the author has emphasised the role of elders in cultural learning and wisdom transmission through different means, including storytelling. The elders see it vital to pass their accumulated knowledge and wisdom to the next generation and, in most cases, serve as family advisors on many social and legal issues. In this book, women’s rights have been the main points that have placed some readers in a dilemma. It is not a surprise that traditional cultural practices are characterised by patriarchal superiority, both in social and economic aspects. Women through intermarriage have even been used as a means of conflict resolution between two families, although such women were treated with special care and responsibility. The reader expected the author to denounce such an act, but he has left it for further studies.

In the other four parts of the book, the author explains the villagers’ lives—child-naming, maturity, adultery and its consequences, and parenting. He notes that there is a great tendency of people towards taking Western names while abandoning their indigenous Tigrigna names. The irony is that many use the English version or translation of the Tigrigna name. For example, they take Mercy instead ‘Mihret’ which means Mercy in Tigrigna. In addition, he emphasises the beauty and challenges of maturity and the fear of crossing the taboo regarding sex before marriage, particularly for girls, as it does not only affect the girls’ future but also the social values and respect of their family. The author further discusses the economic and political life of villagers by explaining the process of selling surplus and purchasing or bartering other needed materials, discussing the customary laws, and elaborating the traditional food preservation and ceramic-making mechanisms. Similar to choosing names, these issues also raise significant questions as to why people prefer Western things, including Western ceramics and Western democracy, when they have their own production or system. It is essential to use things that are familiar to a society’s culture and way of life. This could minimise the hustle, confusion and other complexities.

That said, the book has some gaps. It would have been useful if the author had made references to existing scholarly works on indigenous and endogenous knowledge to strengthen some of his arguments. The author should have also included the source of the paintings and photographs used in the book.

Overall, the author's main argument is that indigenous people have produced knowledge that remains relevant even today for people's daily lives, but many have failed to recognise and appreciate this aspect. The book, in my opinion, encourages a change of paradigm both in our social and academic arena that the value and legitimacy of indigenous knowledge should be closely examined by societies and educational institutions. Hence, the book contributes to interrogating and understanding cultural values, norms and practices and assessing their applicability in modern times. It also helps in appreciating the traditional or customary products and supports the socio-economic and political development of the country. Moreover, the book has put many cultural practices for further inquiry, and this can expand research and debate on indigenous knowledge.

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