

Queen Sheba Site Webmaster recently conducted an interview with Aite Iasu Gorfu, a former student of Queen Sheba, and a member of the Temporary Alumina Committee.

Q Thank you for this interview Aite Iasu. Could you please, tell us a little about yourself and anything you would like to share with our readers?

A Thank you for the opportunity. I was born in Adwa and attended the first and second grades in Queen of Sheba Elementary. That was some fifty five years ago and even then, the school had some two thousand students attending from the surrounding towns and villages. Many of them used to walk two, three, or more hours every morning to school. After the second grade my family moved to Asmara and it was not until the fifth grade that I returned to Adwa. Queen of Sheba had a well earned reputation for excellent quality education and for the highest scores nationwide in the General Examination of the eighth grade. So, my father decided I should study there rather than in Asmara.

Q What do you remember most about your time at Queen of Sheba?

A I remember sitting on stones or rocks under the big Aquia trees. Some of these stones were uneven and quite uncomfortable to sit on for any length of time. And we kids used to fight over them, as some were a bit flatter and somewhat smoother. There was a huge gas cylinder hanging from the Aquia tree which served as a school bell. Every so often, Sheka Mengesh, the time keeper & school custodian, would come and strike the bell a few times. That marked the end of class and the beginning of a break, or vice versa. These are some of the fond memories I have of my early childhood in Queen of Sheba.

Q What has been the most memorable time of your life since you left Queen of Sheba?

A In relation to Queen of Sheba, the most memorable time was in 2001 when I visited the school with my late wife, Hilda, and my children. The school was in a state of utter dilapidation, and needed major renovation and repairs. It used to look much better fifty years ago than at this time. The walls were literally crumbling down and peeling off. They badly needed paint job. Windows that used to have glasses were now broken and boarded up. For a famous school that produced so many educated people and even some national leaders like PM Meles Zenawi and Aite Sebat Nega, to see it this state of total decay was really sad and quite shameful. I was heartbroken and I wept bitterly.

A couple of years earlier to the visit we had donated about four hundred desk chairs, dozens of desktop and laptop computers, and a variety of educational materials and books. So, the Queen of Sheba staff and students in expressing their appreciation, received us like royalty or some major celebrities. My wife,

my children, and I, could not contain our tears. We were moved and deeply touched by their warmth and hospitality.

Q Can you please tell us about your current work?

A Currently I live in Los Angeles, California, and work for the US Government in a Boeing facility at Huntington Beach as a Systems Engineer and Software Support Specialist. My job is to make sure Boeing products made for the US Government satisfy the contract they sign. It is a very challenging work as contractors sometimes perform the very minimum of requirements and are often tempted to cut corners to maximize profits. They might deliver a shoddy product. So, the task of Contract Management stated in simple words, is to make sure good quality product is delivered on time and within budget.

Q What do you like about your work?

A Evaluating or measuring any type of work is not an easy task, and can be pretty complex. Especially when it comes to Computer Software which is intangible and a pretty abstract process, measuring it can become rather difficult. Programmers and testers can mull around the lab for days on end and write thousands of lines of codes that might or might not be useful to the project. Measuring and evaluating that type of work is quite a challenge.

During the Communist era in Ethiopia, in order to measure the performance of work, they had what they called: “Hess ena gile hess”, where workers sat in an open meeting and assessed each other’s performance and even that of their bosses through discussion. This, I understand, has now been replaced by what is known as: “Gimgema”, somewhat of an improvement on the basic concept, but still rather crude and not that much different.

However, very precise technical tools for measuring work and for assessing the progress of any project have been developed in recent years. That is the discipline of Contract or Project Management, and that is what I like most. I have in fact, written a brief introductory book in Amharic on the subject of how to measure work. It is titled: “Sira Bemin Yilekal?” I hope to have it published someday as it can be an excellent tool to replace “Gimgema”.

Q What course(s) in college did you find to be most valuable for your profession?

A My Degree was in Electrical Engineering and I have many years experience working with Digital Computers, first as a Service Engineer repairing various equipment, and then in teaching Circuit Architecture & Design with Logic Gates. The courses I found most valuable were, of course, Math, Science, and English Language.

Q Was there anyone during your time at Queen of Sheba who acted as a mentor to you? Tell us a little about your relationship to any of the teachers there and why it was valuable.

A I was too young for mentoring of any kind because I left Queen Sheba while still in elementary school. But many of the teachers were respectable people and excellent role models for us kids to look up to. I remember many of them as if it was yesterday. First there was Aya Mekonnen Desta, a staunch and most capable director who served Queen of Sheba Elementary school for many years. Then my own aunt, W/ro Teberah T/Medhin who taught me my first and basic lessons of arithmetic. Then there were Bashai Araya and Bashai Asfaw, who taught us Amharic reading, and Haleka Mussie who taught us Grammar and Gibre Gebinet or Morals. There was also Mr. & Mrs. Abraham, the Indian director and his wife, who taught us Biology and math. And then Ato Gebre Medhin who taught us English, and Sajin Mamo, who taught gymnastics and sport. I can go on and on, but these were some of the many wonderful and memorable teachers of Queen of Sheba.

Q Why are you involved with the Queen of Sheba Alumni? Why do you feel it is important to be involved?

A Some three months ago I attended a Queen of Sheba phone-conference where some fifty or more people phoned in. That conference was a response to an open invitation to all interested people from Adwa and surrounding towns. A friend invited me and insisted I should attend. Towards the end of the conference it was proposed to form a ‘Temporary Committee’ in order to create an International Queen of Sheba Alumina that coordinates all Alumina Chapters that are now operating independently. People started nominating for that committee. Little did I know but, my friend had carefully planned it all along, and he proceeded to nominate my name. Well, I was quite surprised, but since it was a “temporary appointment”, I accepted to join and serve.

It is important to be involved. We cannot leave everything to the government. Private organizations and individuals can also contribute to the development of their country and make a significant difference. So, we should all be involved and do all we can to advance the cause of our own town and school.

Q We have learned that you were among the driving forces behind the Petition to “Save Queen of Sheba Elementary School from Destruction”; how did this come about and what is the main object for the petition?

A At the first open phone-conference, a certain Memher Solomon from Seattle announced that he had just returned from Ethiopia and had learned they were going to demolish Queen Sheba Elementary School and replace it with a few shops. He asked for the Committee to put it foremost in its agenda and address this problem as it was a very urgent matter. I think it is Memher Solomon, and not I, who should be regarded as the *driving force behind the petition.*

In our first Committee Meeting we took up the matter and discussed it. Except perhaps, for one or two people, all Committee members were deeply saddened by the news to demolish the school, and we even found it hard to believe. So, we decided to verify if it was true. The Committee then tasked the Chairman, Aite Berhane Belay, to contact some people in Adwa and report in our next meeting. This was done. Once we verified the demolition plan was true, we decided to raise awareness among the worldwide membership with a drive to petition authorities in Ethiopia to reconsider their plan and spare the school.

Q What are the basis of the argument?

A The basic arguments of those who want the school demolished is that it is too old and falling apart on its own; that it is in the middle of town, and that it is not safe for children to attend there due to high flow of traffic. Furthermore, building shops (a “modern mall” was the word some used) can bring in wealth and modernity to Adwa. But we did not buy any of their arguments.

Q The mayor of Adwa had a VOA panel discussion with a Committee member who was against the **destruction to clarify the issue and my understanding of the Mayor’s prospective is that the State Government has issued an ordinance for the city to follow the new City Master Plan & the school happens to be a victim; what is your position on such a plan?**

A Yes, it was with Aite Besrat Kebed, and the Mayor mentioned the Master Plan designating the Queen of Sheba school as a commercial zone. Well, whoever came up with that Master Plan, I am sure, never consulted the people of Adwa, the students, or the Alumina, and may not even have a good knowledge or any depth understanding of the history of the school.

Q Is it in the best interest of the city to accept a proposal from one who has no knowledge of the city to come up with such a plan without the consideration of the city board?

A I don’t think so. But I am not sure how the structure of administration works. If it is a proposal, the City may not have to accept such a proposal. It should advise the planners to amend it. But it could be a City Plan imposed upon them from the State. We were not sure. And that is the reason why we decided to send our petition to the highest office and address it directly to PM Meles Zenawi, with copies to the Tigray, and Adwa Administration Offices.

Q Has there been any response yet from Ethiopia?

A No. our Committee is still waiting for a response. The letters were sent along with the three hundred signatures collected within a matter of two or three weeks, which I think is phenomenal for a small town like Adwa. And some of the comments by petitioners are very passionate. There are so many people from all over the world who do not want to see the school demolished. There were signatories from as far as Europe, Australia, and South Africa.

Q It is my understanding that the Alumni is in the process of reorganizing itself, especially in the recruiting area; where are we on this effort and what have we accomplished so far?

A Yes, the Committee recognizes the need for a large membership organized in Chapters. So, we are encouraging those who are geographically close to form a Queen of Sheba Chapter and register with the International Queen of Sheba Alumina. The plan then is for the International Alumina to serve as umbrella organization, uniting all the individual Chapters.

We are also working on drafting Bylaws for the International Queen of Sheba Alumina that embraces the individual Chapters and gives them full latitude to operate autonomously while still remaining part and parcel of the Queen of Sheba International Alumina.

Q You have published books and written articles and poems in more than one language. You are quite a prolific writer, where does this come from?

A I don't know, but my father, Gorfu, (Zememnfes Kidus Abraha) was a writer. My great grandfather, Haleka T/Medhin Gebru, was also a writer. But I think it needs to come from the heart to be of any value. However, like any art, or a musical instrument, writing too, needs to be practiced. For many years now I have been writing books, articles, as well as prose & poetry, in English, in Amharic, and in Tigrigna. I love reading & writing, but it is in my spare time.

Q What book(s) are in a place of honor on your bookshelf?

A The Bible, of course, and following that comes Kahlil Gibran's book, The Prophet. Then I have many books like Lao Tsu and Omar Khayyam, The Vedas and Vedanta, The Koran, and then come the Classics like Shakespeare, Schopenhauer, Hegel, and Nietzsche... I can go on and on... I love reading all kinds of books, but the last few years, I have not had much time for reading.

Q What advice would you give to the current Queen of Sheba students & Alumnus?

A Even though Queen of Sheba looks dilapidated and old now, we should never despair. We can build it up if we unite and work together. I have a dream that Adwa will one day become a University town just like other world famous university towns, on an equal footing with Oxford and Cambridge. If we believe in it, we have what it takes to make it. In its heydays Adwa had the best school in Ethiopia. It can be at the very top again and serve all Africa.

Q Please share some accomplishments with us - some that you are most proud of.

A Most parents would consider their children as their greatest accomplishment. And I am very proud to be raising three wonderful children. Especially since my wife, Hilda, passed away almost a couple of years ago, raising children as a single parent has been quite a challenge, but quite rewarding too. The oldest, my adopted daughter, Selam, is advancing well in the college of Architecture, and should graduate in a couple of years. My daughter, Melissa, has just finished high school and is accepted into college. And my son, Jessie, is playing American Football for his school team, and will be finishing high school next year, 2010. So, I am really proud of their progress this far.

Q Thank you very much, Aite Iasu, and we wish you and your family the best of luck in all your future plans.

A Thank you Queen of Sheba Webmaster.