

THE  
CONSCRIPT

A NOVEL OF LIBYA'S ANTICOLONIAL WAR

by  
GEBREYESUS HAILU

*Translated from the Tigrinya*

*by*  
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*Introduction by Laura Chrisman*

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## Translator's Note

This is the first complete translation of *The Conscript* into English or any other language. Since 1995, when I first read the novel, I have had a strong desire to translate it as a tribute to celebrate the vitality of African-language literature(s). More than a celebratory gesture, however, my decision to make the novel available in translation was inspired by my wish to share this extraordinary story of human suffering and moral courage with my family members, friends, and colleagues in African and world literature studies, who encouraged me on several occasions to translate the book.

*The Conscript* is a magnificently complex novel both in its thematic concerns and in its form. Equally fascinating is the life of its author, Gebreyesus Hailu, who was born in a small village in Eritrea in the early twentieth century and who rose to become a prominent literary and public voice. This is not the place to enter into a long discussion of the book or to provide an extended biography of the novelist. I will content myself here with offering a few remarks about the themes and language of the novel; a brief profile of its author; some reflections about how the

novel, set on the boundary of modernity and tradition, both engages with and revisits ritualized oral versions of the history of conscription in Eritrea; and my own engagement with the text as a translator. My hope is that the information provided will enhance the reader's appreciation of the novel. I begin by offering a short description of the author.

Gebreyesus Hailu was born in 1906 in Afelba, in the southern region of Eritrea.<sup>1</sup> At an early age he learned to read and write. He attended San Michele School in Segeneyti and in 1923 began his education at the Catholic Seminary of Keren. In 1924, he began his studies at the Ethiopian College in the Vatican, where he earned his *licenza ginnasiale* in 1927, finishing the program in three years rather than in the standard five. Hailu proceeded to earn advanced degrees in philosophy and theology, and in 1937 obtained his doctoral degree in theology, writing his dissertation in Latin. On his return to Eritrea, Hailu became an influential figure in the cultural and intellectual life of Eritrea during the Italian colonial period, and in both Eritrea and Ethiopia in the post-Italian era. He was the vicar general of the Catholic Church in Eritrea and played several important roles in the Ethiopian government—including cultural attaché at the Ethiopian Embassy in Rome, member of the national academy of language, and advisor to the Ministry of Information of the Ethiopian government—until his retirement in 1974. He died in 1993.

Acclaimed by its Eritrean readers as eloquent and thought provoking, this classic Tigrinya novel by Hailu was written in 1927 and published in 1950. Although fiction and nonfiction prose in the Eritrean language predate it, *The Conscript* is the first novel in the literary history of Eritrea and one

of the earliest novels written in an African language. The book depicts, with irony and controlled anger, the staggering experiences of the Eritrean *ascari*, soldiers conscripted by the Italian colonial army to fight in Libya against the nationalist Libyan forces fighting for their freedom from Italy's colonial rule. As Laura Chrisman insightfully notes in her introduction to this edition, Hailu, anticipating such midcentury thinkers as Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire, paints a devastating portrait of Italian colonialism. Some of the most poignant passages of the novel involve the awakening of the novel's hero to his ironic predicament of being both under colonial rule and the instrument of suppressing the colonized Libyans.

The novel's expressive language is just as distinct as its thematic quality. Particularly moving are the descriptions of Libya. Those passages awe the reader with mesmerizing images, both disturbing and tender, of the Libyan landscape, with its vast desert sands, oases, horsemen, foot soldiers, and wartime brutalities. (As the reader will find, it is uncanny how these images connect with the satellite images that were brought to the homes of millions of viewers around the globe in 2011, during the country's uprising against its former leader, Colonel Gaddafi.)

A further essential aspect of the novel's interest is its engagement with oral tradition. As Harold Scheub once noted, reflecting the conclusion of many Africanist scholars, "There is an unbroken continuity in African verbal art, from interacting oral genres to such literary productions as the novel and poetry."<sup>2</sup> In *The Conscript*, this "unbroken continuity" is best manifested in Hailu's use of language and the method he has appropriated to structure his narrative. The language is poetic;

it is figurative, allegorical, and rich with proverbs. Hailu also makes effective use of (oral) poetry, which, imitating one of its several functions in Tigrinya oral tradition, he repeatedly adopts in the novel to punctuate a crisis or a transformation that the novel's hero is undergoing. At the sentence level, too, Hailu's language makes repeated use of the poetic devices of repetition and parallelism. All of these features are associated, primarily though not exclusively, with the art of oral tradition. Additionally, whereas the novel's story progresses linearly in time, Hailu's narrative proceeds by a traditional recursive technique of telling, which, subsequently, enables Hailu to structure the novel circularly. In fact, because the language of repetition and parallelism and the circular structure of the novel are so intertwined, the narrative structure of *The Conscript* echoes (or flows from) the poetic language of repetition and parallelism.

Hailu's engagement with oral tradition is also clear in the thematic content of the book. Whereas *The Conscript*, as a novel, is part of a modernist genre in the literary history of the Tigrinya language, the story it tells, the images and memory it evokes, and the songs it reproduces are deeply embedded in the oral tradition, and therefore in the collective consciousness, of the people of Eritrea. Such stories, even today, are passed on as part of the oral tradition from generation to generation in different versions and renderings. Even though the Libyan war described in the novel took place a century or so ago, many families in Eritrea tell stories of fathers or grandfathers or other relatives who were conscripted into the Italian military campaign in Libya. There are also similar stories of conscription that relate to colonial Italy's aggression toward Ethiopia from 1935 to 1941. Italy used Eritrean

conscripts over an extended period of time to serve in different geographical spaces. There were thus two generations of conscripts. The first generation was sent to fight in Libya and Somalia from roughly 1910 to 1930; a second generation fought later in Ethiopia.<sup>3</sup> The number of Eritreans who served in the Libyan and Ethiopian campaigns was strikingly high, relative to the Eritrean population of about 600,000 in 1935.<sup>4</sup> Uoldelul Chelati writes that although, “in fact, often those [conscript] battalions were not composed exclusively of Eritreans but included soldiers from neighboring countries, particularly Ethiopia and Sudan,” the estimations are that “approximately 130,000 Eritreans served in the Italian colonial army between the years 1890 and 1935 with an apex of roughly 60,000 during the campaign invasion of Ethiopia in 1935.”<sup>5</sup> During my childhood and adult life in Eritrea, I heard many stories about both generations of conscripts, stories sometimes told by the veterans themselves. My father told stories about his experience as a conscript in Italy’s campaign against Ethiopia (in 1935–41), where he ended up as a prisoner of war after the Italians surrendered to the British in Gondar, Ethiopia. Further back in time, my grandmother also told stories about her brother and his friends, who had undergone traumatic war experience in the earlier Libyan war.

Despite their essential historical and cultural importance, however, the oral versions of conscription that have circulated in the Eritrean culture tend to highlight certain features of the conscription history while glossing over other important aspects of the experience. *The Conscript* complicates those stories, evoking a historical and cultural memory that makes for a complex picture of the conscription experience

at different levels. In *The Conscript*, Hailu provides a counterpoint to correct local Eritrean perceptions that either celebrate the conscripts as heroes or dismiss them as dupes. In creating Tuquabo, the central hero of the novel, who rebels against colonialism, he tells the untold story of those conscripts who resisted Italian colonialism but were forced to fight. Though Hailu creates a dissident central character to expose the evils of European colonialism on the African continent, his concurrent acknowledgement of an African native complicity—very clearly articulated in the novel—shows the tragic reality in which the colonized found themselves under colonialism. Ultimately, it is this deep understanding and analysis of the evils of colonialism—that is, the abuse and misuse of the colonized—that makes *The Conscript* distinct and important in the world of African literature. By the same token, it is the unapologetic ethical audacity to speak the truth to colonial power that defines Hailu’s genius as one of the earliest literary voices of African literature.<sup>6</sup>

As a last remark, let me also say a few words about the translation process. The project has been on my mind for a long time. Although I had worked on the project in fits and starts in previous years, this translation was completed during an intense work period of eight weeks in the winter months of November–December 2010. Working on the first translation draft of *The Conscript* (and the many subsequent revisions) has been as exciting as it has been intricate. I have spent many hours blissfully thinking, translating, revising, and editing the text. Beyond the pleasure that is associated with finding the “right” words, expressions, and syntax, all of which are crucial to render meaning from one

language to another, translation has also helped me better understand how Hailu's text is held together by linguistic subtleties, both verbal and structural, and by a parodying voice, a voice prevalent throughout the text and also one that Hailu articulates early on in the book when he speaks in the preface of an "ironic contrast." In this translation, my effort has been to truthfully render the form, meaning, and voice of the Tigrinya original in the English text. My hope is that this translation does justice to Hailu's extraordinary work, as it reaches now an English-reading audience, more than half a century since its first publication in Tigrinya.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the unconditional love and support of my family throughout the translation process. My heartfelt thanks also go to my friends and colleagues Steve Howard, Geri Lipschultz, Alemseged Tesfai, and Charles Cantalupo, and to my research assistant, Elizabeth Story, who read and gave me valuable feedback on the manuscript. I am deeply grateful to the members of the editorial staff at Ohio University Press for championing the manuscript and for their caring and enthusiastic production of the book. This book would never have become what it is without the editorial guidance of Gill Berchowitz, who gave me both time to work on it and deadlines to work against.

Of course, all mistakes and errors of judgment in this translation are mine.

This book is dedicated to my mother, Wahed, who always saw the wisdom in all, and my father, Negash, who saw the humor in everything.

*Ghirmai Negash*  
*June 2012*

## Notes

1. This section about Gebreyesus Hailu is taken almost verbatim from the biographical entries provided in “Gabra Yasus Haylu,” *Encyclopedia Aethiopica* (2005), 630–31; and Abba Agostinos-Tedla, *La Lingua Abbisina* (Asmara: Edizioni “Adveniat Regnum Tuum,” 1994), xii. See also Hailu’s preface to the novel, in which he speaks about his journey to Italy.

2. Harold Scheub, “A Review of African Oral Traditions and Literature,” *African Studies Review* 28, no. 2/3 (1985): 1.

3. For a fuller historical account of the different periods of conscription of Eritreans in the Italian colonial army, see Uoldelul Chelati Drar, “From Warriors to Urban Dwellers: *Ascari* and the Military Factor in the Urban Development of Colonial Eritrea,” *Cahiers d’études africaines* 175 (2004): 533–74; and Zemhret Yohannes, *Italiyawi Megza’ati ab Ertra: 1882–1941* (Asmara: Hdri, 2010), 373–76.

4. Drar, “From Warriors to Urban Dwellers,” 549.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Parts of this section have appeared in my essay “Gebreyesus Hailu,” in *Dictionary of African Biography*, ed. Emmanuel K. Akyeampong and Henry Louis Gates (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

# The Conscript

## A Portrait of Youth

He put down his gun beside him, knelt down before his parents, and asked: “My mother and father bless me, for I do not know what my fate will be in Tripoli.” Tuquabo was dressed in a gray uniform with a colorful belt that embellished his waist, and from his ankle to his knee was bandaged with a thick strip of cloth that looked like a horse blanket. Overwhelmed with emotion, his parents were speechless. They looked at their son’s uniform, which they had never seen before, with eyes filled with admiration and shock. They were both older by now. Tuquabo’s father was in his mid-seventies, his mother in her late sixties. But if anyone were to guess their ages at that moment, they would each gain ten years. Their faces were worry-stricken, their eyes were hollow, and their brows skinny.

Tuquabo was their only son. This does not mean they had not borne other children; all the other five children had been taken by God long ago. This seeming rivalry with death caused great anxiety in them. When he was small, God almost took Tuquabo too.

Just a few weeks after his birth, his mother took him to the village church. Forbidden to enter the church out of custom, because she was still recovering from labor, she stood in the compound cradling her newborn; eyes full of tears, she prayed and begged. “Jesus, my Lord, the savior of the world, you

have already taken many children from me; as you can see, I am an old woman and can no longer bear children. Jesus, be kind, show mercy. Please leave this one child for us so that when his father and I get old he can be our cane and eyes. I beg you to give this one as a gift.” Already weakened by her labor and trembling with emotion and maternal feeling, her head began spinning and she felt dizzy. She soon recovered and went back home with a strong feeling of hope for her child. On arriving home, she dozed off into a deep sleep that was filled with dreams. Her son was lying on her breast all the time. In her dream, she saw herself in a wonderful wilderness. She saw six flowers, called *hawohawo* (haemantus), waving with the wind. As she came closer to the flowers, admiring their beauty, she saw an unknown hand with a sickle plucking them away one by one. Shocked by the incident, she stood frozen as the sickle continued cutting off the remaining flowers. When the sickle approached the sixth flower, an unseen person moved it away so that it would not be cut off. The action was repeated three times. Then, as she wondered anxiously about what was happening, she suddenly saw a handsome figure clad with bright light. “The vision you saw is a symbol of your children. Five have died. I am sparing you the last one. I am Medhaniye Alem, the One who you trust and prayed to,” he said, and disappeared. She woke up with disbelief and joy; the boy woke up crying, and, after a long period of illness, he started breastfeeding eagerly as he had never done before. She hardly believed her luck as she kept kissing him. Hot tears of joy came down her cheeks, and she thanked her God for his kindness and mercy for keeping her son alive. Over time her son grew strong and healthy. And on the day of his baptism,

his mother insisted that he be named Tuquabo Medhaniye Alem (God's gift) for receiving a great blessing from her God. And so they named him. His father was called Habte-Mikael, and his mother, Tek'a.

Tuquabo Medhaniye Alem, or Tuquabo as he was called, because people like to shorten names, grew up into a robust young man cultivating his talents at home and in the fields. He loved and respected people. He expressed his love for his mother often by hugging her around the neck, embracing her, and pouring sweet and loving words upon her. He delighted his father by being with him, doing chores, and learning the names of his ancestors from him. At dusk, his father would play with him by testing if he knew his pedigree, and ask him, "Who is your father," to which Tuquabo would answer, "I am Habte-Mikael's son," to the father's expectant joy. His father would add more to the list, each time teaching him more. "Habte-Mikael is the son of Hidru; Hidru was the son of Red'ai . . ." It was pleasing to see Tuquabo, the child, playing with his parents this way and growing to become the source of happiness in the house. As he grew older, his father sent him to school. He was a quick learner and excelled beyond his peers in memorizing what his teachers taught him, and in not forgetting what he had learned. But he was also growing as a *Habesha*, and he developed an interest in weaponry and the military. Regarding this, his father was delighted and encouraged him to be brave, promising that this sword or that spear would be his later. There is a Tigrinya proverb that says that "a razor is created with a sharp edge," and it reminded Tuquabo's father of his son's valor and intelligence in handling the weaponry, which made him proud. Tuquabo's mother also took pride in her son's bravery and

ability; whose mother wouldn't? But she was also worried about it. Her mind was haunted by concerns that her son would die in war one day, and where would he go to fight? Would he ever come back once he left for war? Unable to quiet her mind, she would try to appeal to her husband, but to no avail. He would constantly dismiss her saying, "Don't be silly . . . it should give us joy to see the bravery of our son . . . not sadness." His mother would calm her fears by completely relying upon her God to protect her son from every calamity or disaster.

They were a rich family with abundant cattle, and they hired a Moslem family to look after them. Sometimes Tuquabo and his father would go to the Saho Moslem family overnight to look after the well-being of their cattle. When they traveled, Tuquabo, more than anything else, loved the mule ride, when his father sang and told stories, and the rhythmic motion of the mule, smoothly floating on the plains, carried them along, like water running on the ground. As a child, Tuquabo was riveted by the sudden movement of flying birds, and shuffling sounds in the bush would make his heart throb. As they rode by, they might see a flock of baboons, and Tuquabo would laugh at the sight of a monkey's swift jump away from them. In his young heart, he wondered about why the baboons, so strong in numbers, were running away from them, but he kept such thoughts to himself. After reaching their destination, to be entertained with milk and porridge by their Saho Moslem friends, they would enjoy themselves under a full moon and listen to the chewing of the cattle. The silence was now and then broken by the ugly baying of the hyenas and the barking and yelping of dogs, which amazed and frightened Tuquabo. All these impressions he easily absorbed and preserved

in his clear and innocent heart for a time later in life when he would leave for another country so that his homeland might remain a treasure in his memory. On returning home from such trips with his father, Tuquabo would cling to his mother and tell those stories to her.

This was a time when there was war going on in Tripoli, and it was deemed fitting for the people of *Habesha* to be willing to spill their blood in this war. The youth were singing, "He is a woman who refuses to go to Libya," and small children in return sang, "Come back to us later, Tribuli . . . give us time to grow up," dispersing their poisonous words. Tuquabo was listening to all of these. Since he was a very bright boy, he would question all these issues in his mind. After a while, for someone born at this period of time, it happened gradually that all the songs and information were stamped on his heart. As it is a fact that what you hear during your childhood becomes clearer as you get older, he resolved to go to Libya to fight as a hero and gain fame. He resolved so just because he heard that there was war going on there. His ambition may also have been influenced by those *Habesha* chiefs who said they hated to sit idle after a brief break from going to war. They begged, "Lord, don't let us be dormant, please bring us war." Their eagerness was evident in their boastful saying that the exercise might help trim their fattened bodies. In any event, once decided, Tuquabo began to talk less and isolate himself more. His mother sensed something in the air and began to incessantly question him, but his only reply was "What are you saying, Mother . . . nothing is going on . . ." He avoided his mother's scrutiny and shifted his eyes around, fearing exposure of what was in his heart.

One night he left home and joined the army as a conscript bound for Tripoli. To feel and imagine the distress he created for his parents, let anyone who is a parent or who has parents fathom the intensity. In the beginning they couldn't believe or accept the reality of the event, but later they let out all their tears and remained in deep sadness. It was to no avail. He was now in the hands of the heartless Italians, and there was no way they could get him back.

When the day came for departure, his parents decided to see their son for the last time, and walked slowly to the train station. They stood beside their son, and, as we saw him at the beginning, he knelt down and waited for their blessings. They were silent for some time but then forced out words. "You were our light and joy. We feel orphaned. Why do you wish to fight for a foreigner? What use is it for you and your people to arm yourselves and fight overseas? You have all you want, why? But what can we say; it's all God's wish. Go, and may our Lord protect you and give you strength. As for us, we are old people, beaten by sorrow, and we may not survive your return after two years. We hope to see you again, but all is in God's hands." After they had blessed him, but before they could kiss him goodbye very well, the guards snatched him from their embrace. His mother, catching sight of her son sobbing terribly, could not contain herself and fainted. She would have fallen to the ground if not for the support of her husband. The people around were all touched by this and couldn't control their tears. "What a cruel son! How could he leave his old parents behind?" They were cursing him. Tuquabo kept looking at his mother and heard the curses of the crowd; the world turned upside down for him, and he ran away from them. He wanted to bury himself

under the ground. His father was meekly pleading with the crowd not to curse their son, but to bless him instead. His mother, because she had fainted, missed the curses upon her son. It would have been painful for her to hear. Had she been able to speak, she would have concurred with the father's pleas. They loved their son so much. They went back to their village and were overtaken by suffering, driven by sorrow. Darkness fell upon the house. It was like returning home after the funeral of a beloved one.

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