



Tilahun's songs challenged us to become more human and to reach out in love to others.

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This week Ethiopia lost part of itself when one truly great Ethiopian, Ato Tilahun Gessesse, died suddenly from a heart attack related to his diabetes. He will be greatly missed by millions of Ethiopians, including me, who truly loved his music and who will mourn his passing. Yet, Tilahun was remarkable in many ways.

He was not only an extremely talented musician who was gifted with a beautiful voice, he was also a hero, a teacher, a mentor, a devout Christian believer and a great human being who lifted us up to become better people through his music, his lyrics, his ideals and the way he lived his life. He had room for all of us in his embrace.

As an Ethiopian who so greatly respects and admires Tilahun Gessesse, I want to personally express my condolences to the family of this extraordinary man. Please know that you are not alone in your grief, for many of us Ethiopians are standing at your side, sharing your loss.

Tilahun's songs challenged us to become more human and to reach out in love to others to affirm their mutual humanity, dignity and worth. Tilahun became a part of the greater family of Ethiopia and no one was left out of that family. He taught us about loving, caring and protecting one another, regardless of any differences.

As a young boy in a small village in Gambella province of Ethiopia, I listened to his music, but I did not understand the meaning of his music until I became involved in human rights and learned that he, in his own way, was a human rights advocate. I finally was honored to meet him in person in 2007 when I met him at the soccer tournament in Los Angeles. He was all I expected—a true man of grace. Instead of focusing on himself, he told me that he was very aware of what I was doing and really encouraged me to keep on with my work.

The loss of Tilahun is something that affects all of us across the country. *To most of us, he is a symbol of unity with other human beings.* In the over 400 songs he has recorded in his lifetime, most of them spoke of love, forgiveness and such unity. *His songs remind me that he lived his life being an example of putting "humanity before ethnicity" and caring about what happened to others because "no Ethiopian will be free until all Ethiopians are free." His songs never spoke about one village, one tribe, one region or one religion; but instead, spoke of one nation.*

Over many years, Tilahun has nurtured the hope of Ethiopians in times of desperation and difficulty. When the Ethiopian people were broken, his songs were like a healing balm that strengthened body, mind and soul. His lyrics made so many Ethiopians to be proud of Ethiopia even when our image has been a negative one to the world. He accepted us as we were, but could envision what we could become and kept urging us on.

During Mengistu's time, his songs spoke about injustice and the hope for a better Ethiopia. He has shown us what it means to be a true leader who loves his nation. ***Even today, when things look so bleak, grim and dark and when Ethiopian people are so divided, his songs give hope that we might find that that "Mother Ethiopia" he used to sing about. That "Mother Ethiopia" was one where people would reach out to each other in new relationships, where there would be forgiveness for past wrongs and where Ethiopians would live together in harmony.***

Tilahun may have done more to nurture and care for our nation than any politicians in office. There are now other great Ethiopian musicians who have joined this great tradition, like Teddy Afro, Gossaye Tesfaye and too many others to name, who are also affirming these life-giving messages as they cry out to Ethiopians to stand up and embrace one another in order to transform this nation. Will we listen?

They are telling us that a New Ethiopia is possible if we reach out to all Ethiopians within the corners of our country; yet we know these musicians and artists are people of courage because it is these very kind of lyrics that have condemned people like Teddy to jail. Why? It is because they are so full of the light of truth in a dark country where the light is suppressed.

Today, the physical flame from Tilahun's candle is now extinguished from us, but his light is still with us. All we need to do now is to look back at his songs and lyrics to remind us of the hope, direction and instruction he has left with us. As his people took him to the resting place to meet his Father in heaven, he is finally home and at peace. What Tilahun has left with us here, did not die with him, but can live on for generations in the lives of others.

It is now up to each of us to pass on the flame so it does not go out. His truth led thousands of Ethiopians to come out in Addis Ababa to give honor to a life well-lived and a life that was given for the benefit of many others. I must give recognition to Meles and the EPRDF government, even though we disagree with them, because to their credit, they gave this hero the state farewell he deserved.

We hope the government of Meles will now start to listen more closely to Tilahun's voice as he also calls them to love humanity. He challenges them to not favor one tribe, but instead to reach out to all Ethiopians to begin reconciling with the people. One way they could show their change of heart would be by releasing Mr. Teddy Afro, Ms. Birtukan Mideksa, Ms. Lalise Wodojo (a justice-loving sister from our Oromo people), Mr. Bashir Makhtal, (brother from Ogaden region and a Canadian citizen who has been held without trial for the last two years in Ethiopia and the countless other prisoners of conscience being held in prisons, jails and detention centers across Ethiopia. Let the Meles government then make a public statement that they are releasing these Ethiopians to show that they are finally ready at the occasion of Tilahun's death to bring Tilahun's lyrics to life in Ethiopia.

In conclusion, I urge Ethiopians, wherever you are, to answer the calls given in the songs by Tilahun, Teddy Afro, Gossaye Tesfaye and other musicians who call us to join together as a greater family of Ethiopians. ***What is missing in our country is the daily practice of loving, caring, respecting, accepting and protecting one another. If we would do this, while seeking God's strength and guidance, we could transform our nation.***

We could become like a shining candle in this dark continent of Africa so that those neighboring countries around us, could use our candle to light their own flame and to then pass it on to other neighbors until the entire dark continent of misery, hopelessness and suffering became a continent of justice, peace, hope and prosperity.

As all Ethiopians mourn the loss of a truly legendary musician, let us honor what he stood for by coming together, simply as fellow humans, to grieve together in one tent that stretches over all of Ethiopia, welcoming others from all different backgrounds as Tilahun would have done.

Tilahun did not sing about one village or one tribe where we devalue or war against everyone else simply because they are not of our own ethnicity, region, gender, religion, political view, language or class; instead, this is a man who sang for all of Ethiopia. He knew that neither the name of Ethiopia nor its red, green and yellow flag ever hurt anyone.

He knew it was those in power who hurt the people and incited hostility towards each other, but he sang to us about rejecting such ethnic hate and division with the most powerful of all weapons—love. Now it is our duty to live out his songs so that his life will be a lesson to us for the future.

As you may already know, Tilahun was shaped by his own personal faith in Jesus Christ, a conviction that flowed through his veins and came out in his voice, emotion and in his lyrics. ***He has gone on to his next life, but his songs still call us to become more than we are. For those of us who remain in this world of greed, guns and exploitation, we can know that God can help us, like he did Tilahun, to become a different kind of people.*** Tilahun would want us to know that God loves all of us and that He will never abandon us, but Tilahun's music reminds us that our problem is that we have abandoned God and His life-giving principles.

The best honor we could give to this man is for his music and the truth of which he sang, to transform us as a people and as a nation. ***He was a model for us, giving us light to see a new path to a New Ethiopia. He spent a lifetime challenging us Ethiopians to choose a different future than what we have settled for in the past.*** Even the Meles regime reacted to the respect and love given to this man by the people in that he was allowed a state farewell where many thousands of people came out to honor him on the streets of Addis Ababa this week.

It put the Meles regime in a very difficult position for to ignore Tilahun's death could have caused outrage, but to allow such a public expression from the people, was also a risk. I personally give EPRDF credit for taking the risk on the side of honoring this man and the values for which he stood. It was the right thing to do, even if it was a political decision.

May Tilahun's ideals and how he lived his life, penetrate through the hardened exterior to soften the stance of this regime. Events such as these sometimes present opportunities for change that might otherwise not be taken. It is now a golden opportunity for the EPRDF to correct their wrongdoing and to choose a different direction. This might be that time for the EPRDF to give the nation back to the people.

We should not underestimate the difference that individual decisions, for right or for wrong, can make on others. ***One life, Tilahun's, has opened up a challenge to the rest of us Ethiopians, starting from Meles to the person on the street or the person in the smallest of villages. That challenge is to love, to forgive and to respect one another as God would want us to do.***

Do not underestimate how this could set ablaze a country and a continent. It is such a transformation of our hearts, souls and minds that could become the beginning of a beautiful new song—one that will give the highest tribute to someone who truly knew what it meant to live humanely. That man was Tilahun Gessesse!

May the God who loves Ethiopia and its people, lift us up to sing like Tilahun to our fellow brothers and sisters in this world!

Please do not hesitate to email me if you have comments to: Obang@solidaritymovement.org
Mr. Obang Metho, Executive Director of Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia

To read a tribute to Tilahun by Dr. Golto Aila go to
www.solidaritymovement.org/issues/090425TearsOfaFallenGiant.php