

Announcing the death of the Ethiopian Poet Laureate TSEGAYE GEBRE-MEDHIN in NYC on Saturday, 25 February 2006 at the age of 69.

Below is an Obituary, provided by the family

(Source: nazret.com)



Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin, Ethiopia's Poet Laureate, was born in 1936 in Boda, in the vicinity of Ambo, Ethiopia. After receiving his primary and secondary education in his country, he earned a Bachelor of Law degree from Blackstone School of Law in Chicago in 1959. From 1959 to 1960, he studied British and French experimental theatre at the Royal Court Theater in London and the Comedie Francaise in Paris.

In 1971, Tsegaye was awarded a visiting research fellowship in African cultural antiquities at the University of Dakar, now known as the Cheik Anta Diop University of Dakar. On the merit of the research he conducted during this fellowship, he was then granted a Fulbright Scholarship, which enabled him to tour various universities in the United States presenting lectures on Ethiopian art and literature.

From 1961 to 1971, Tsegaye was Artistic Director of the Ethiopian National Theatre, and editor at the office of Oxford University Press in Addis Ababa through 1972. In 1973, he served as General Manager of the Ethiopian National Theatre, and was later appointed Vice-Minister of Culture and Sports in 1975. A year later, Tsegaye was arrested as a result of the military government's reaction to his plays, and was imprisoned without formal charges being brought against him. In 1977, Tsegaye became assistant professor at the Department of Education of Addis Ababa University, and later founded the Department of Theatrical Arts where he served as director and professor for two years.

Throughout his life as a prolific poet and playwright, Tsegaye has won a variety of awards including: Emperor Haile-Selassie I International Prize for Amharic Literature in 1966; the Gold Mercury Ad Personam Award in 1982, Fulbright Senior Scholar Resident Fellowship Award at New York's Columbia University in 1985; Human Rights Watch Free Expression Award in New York in 1994; Honorable Poets Laureate Golden Laurel Award given by the Congress of World Poets and United Poets Laureate International in Buckinghamshire in 1997. More recently, the Norwegian Author's Union, together with the Royal Norwegian Ministry of Cultural Affairs conferred its coveted prize, the Annual Freedom of Expression Prize, on Laureate Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin. Arrangements were being made for the award ceremony which was to take place here in New York sometime in March.

In June 2000, the Society of Ethiopians Established in the Diaspora (SEED) awarded Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin its annual outstanding professional award in Washington DC. On the occasion of his 67th birthday in 2003, a celebration of Tsegaye's life and art was held at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC where prominent Ethiopian artists came together to pay tribute to his work and artistic legacy.

Tsegaye held membership in many distinguished national and international organizations, including the African Writer's Union and the African Researcher's Union.

Tsegaye embarked on his literary and artistic path at the young age of thirteen when he wrote his first play and presented it to an audience among which was the Emperor Haile-Selassie. As a playwright, he wrote, directed and produced many plays in Amharic, Oromifa and English. His poems are innumerable. He has translated works of Shakespeare and Moliere into Amharic. Beyond his literary endeavor, Tsegaye has also carried out anthropological research in ancient African art and mythology.

In 1998, Poet Laureate Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin's failing health forced him to leave his beloved country and come to New York for treatment that was not available in Ethiopia. Although his illness was serious and had taken a severe toll on his strength, Tsegaye remained undefeated throughout his ordeal. Undeterred by a weakened eyesight and a harsh regimen of medical procedures, he continued to educate and inspire through his art. Those who knew him marveled at his unwavering sense of purpose and duty. Dignified till the end, and resilient in the face of adversity, Tsegaye was revered by young and old Ethiopians around the world who saw him as a shining repository of their heritage, and a rock of the Ethiopian identity they held very dear.

Poet Laureate Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin passed away in his home on February 25, 2006, surrounded by his loving family. He is survived by his wife, Woizero Lakech Bitew, and his daughters, Yodit, Mahlet, and Adey; his sons Ayenew, Estifanos and Hailu, and his grandchildren, Nardos, Menelik, Isaac, Nathan and Yared. He was 69 years old.

Tsegaye's family would like to express their sincere gratitude to all of you here in New York and around the world who have supported him and celebrated his life. Thanks to your love and devotion which never faltered, Tsegaye's life away from home has been rich and blessed. The family are overwhelmed by your generosity, and your kindness has touched their hearts. May God bless you all!



Photograph made in 2004 of Poet Laureate Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin by Chester Higgins Jr.

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