

## **Abba Yissak Ghebreyesus, a Patriotic Eritrean Priest, Passes Away**

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It was learned from close friends that Abba Yissak Ghebreyesus, an Eritrean Catholic priest who spent decades fighting for Eritrea's independence, died in Biel/Bienne, Switzerland, on 18 July 2009. Aba Yissak, the son of Bashai Ghebresu Kflai and weizero Tekha Semere was born in 1932 in his village, Halai, in the province of Akele-Guzai, to

Nharnet Team will make an effort to find more about the life history of the late the late Abba Yissak. Until then, we post the following piece that we located through a Google search in the Internet.

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### **Eritrean Profile 1/33 - 10/29/94 (Culture and The Arts) by A. E.**

What do a monk, a gourmet, a freedom fighter and an author have in common? Not much, you may say. But then you haven't met Abba (Father) Yissak Ghebreyesus. The 62-year-old academic joined the Capuchins (an order of Franciscans) at the age of 24 and the EPLF at the age of 43. Perhaps the transition from Franciscan to writer to fighter can best be understood in the context of Abba Yissak's love of his country.

In 1969 from his monastery in Nefasit, Abba Yissak wrote a book called "Neke dem Belu", which roughly translated means, "Please dine with me". The 149-page document is a detailed atlas of Eritrean food, drinks and the homegrown ingredients that are used in its cooking. According to the Abba, there are more than 68 national dishes, 13 kinds of vegetables, 29 different fruits, - unique to Eritrea -17 different types of homemade bread and various spices to be found in the country. The Abba also gives a detailed information on how to prepare each and every dish, drink and spice and convincingly writes that Eritrea is a gourmet's paradise of natural produce and invention. "It used to worry me very much to hear people, especially young people, say that Eritrea has no dishes of its own, but only those inherited from its colonisers," explains the Abba. "I was chief cook in the monastery and I started to research our national dishes." His pride in the country's heritage led him to scorn both the traditions which "relegated" cooking to "women's work" and the politics which relegated Eritrea to being the poor cousin of bounteous Ethiopia.

Because this was 1974, things were happening outside the monastery that were to have a profound effect on the young gourmet's life. Traveling by bus from Segheneti to Asmara, where the official censor of the new regime was based, Abba Yissak was searched by soldiers determined to halt the spread of "inflammatory" propaganda of the freedom fighters. Seizing the monk's document of Neke dem Belu, the Ethiopian's soldiers gazed suspiciously at the "cryptic message" it contained. "Injera, shiro, ziggini, salt, peper...O" To the soldiers such terms could only be a coded recipe for

revolution. Ignoring his protestations of innocence, the soldiers hauled Abba Yissak to prison while official spycatchers worked frantically to decode the message bubbling within Neke dem Belu. Frustrated, they released the suspect and sent him back to his monastery.

On his way back he took with him pamphlets of the EPLF and distributed them all the way to Segheneiti. Ironically the soldiers never searched him again, thinking that a holy man would not sympathise with those who took up arms. In 1975 the word was spread that Abba Yissak was an EPLF messenger and he left Segheneiti to join the field. He couldn't take his precious Neke dem Belu document with him but came back for it two years later after the EPLF liberated Segheneiti. But seeing the famine and devastation widespread in his country, he decided that the time was not right for a celebration of national food. Nevertheless believing what was written could be put into use after independence, he once more started working on his book.

In 1979 disaster struck - the document went missing. While its loss did not cause a major strategic upheaval within the ranks of the EPLF, it was a devastating blow to the Abba - who by this time had written six other books on Eritrea's customs, ancient monuments and history, as well as translating Italian works on these subjects. Despite launching a successful line in beles (cactus fruit) jam and tomato sauce from a makeshift factory in Durfo, Wina and Nakfa, his heart often was on his lost, culinary work. It was not until 1984 that he was reunited with his manuscript, which was found in the dusty depths of the Logistics Office of the EPLF, five years later and several miles away from where he was stationed. Seizing it triumphantly he took it home to amend and edit, adding from the copious notes he had made in the field. Although fried snake and boj-boj, ad hoc features of the fighter menu, do not feature as traditional foods in his newly-published book, swa and Imchek have not been forgotten in Abba Yissak's Neke dem Belu. Further feasts are yours to discover - and hopefully it won't be long before "Neke dem Belu" is translated into English so that foreign guests can see that there is more to Eritrea than injera, shiro and ziggini.