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New Businesses

Modanova Ladies
Discount Store in L.A.

Ambassel Restaurant
in D.C.

Lion Insurance
in L.A.

Al Kassa Insurance
in L.A.

Artistic Printing
in L.A.



KEBEDECH TEKLEAB

THE ART OF SURVIVAL

Arts & Literature

Kebedech Tekleab: The Color Of Words

By Teni

"Where Is It" is a book of poems from which "Mendera" is picked. The author of this book writes a burning feeling of indignation, and with mixed feelings of anger and sadness.

An impressive painter, she has chosen human suffering as her thematic subject for her artistic expressions, both in painting and in poetry. Her messages strike with such force that they generate an immediate desire to discover more about the author of such powerful messages.

Rapidly gaining recognition as a serious African poet, and a painter, Kebedech Tekleab, author of "Where Is It" and whose work appears on the front page, is a recent honors graduate from the School of Fine Arts at Howard University where she earned the Bachelor of Fine Arts degree. She is the recipient of several awards and honors for her works in poetry and painting including the Award of Excellence from the Ethiopian Council of Research for her major contribution to the body of modern Ethiopian poetry.

Although she graduated in May of 1992, Kebedech did not enjoy the luxury of leading an ordinary normal life that would have allowed her to pursue her studies and develop social contacts. Kebedech's harrowing experience actually began in 1978 during the height of bloodshed caused by anarchic fighting between the many political factions vying for power within the Ethiopian revolution which brought about the downfall of the government of Haile Sellasie in 1974. The conditions of Addis Ababa were especially dangerous for young people, both male and female. The rational thing to do for those who were not directly involved in the blood-letting was to find ways and means with which to flee the violent conditions that prevailed throughout the land. Kebedech, along with a hand full of trusted friends opted to escape the conditions by fleeing on foot across the roughest of terrains to Djibouti. The irony of it all is that in their mad rush to escape, they were captured by the Somalis who were, at the time, engaged in a full scale border war with Ethiopia. It is in this manner that they began their incredible ordeal of human suffering at the hands of Somali troops in a prison camp that had no match for its physical as well as psychological brutality.

One of the processing centers was called Mendera and was located in the Berbera region of Somalia. This was the processing center for prisoners of all kind. Captured Ethiopians were brought to this center where they first experienced the feeling of the loss of hope when they were forced to sit for many hours in absolute darkness.

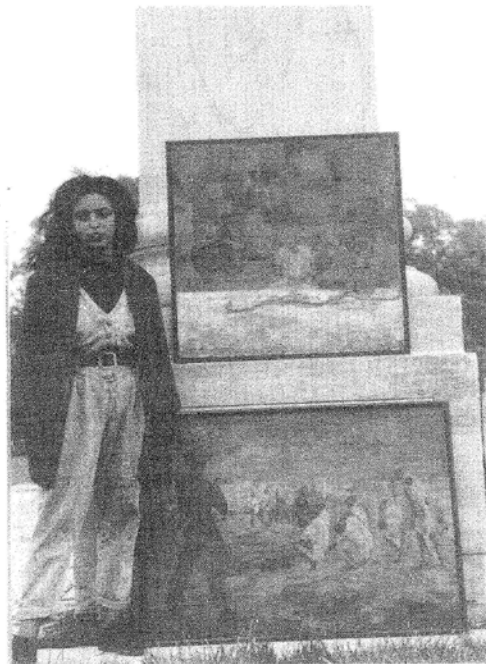
Kebedech describes it as a forbidding place, isolated by natural ragged hills from the surrounding open desert. Such a place, she says, could have been discovered and selected for a prison site only by minds that had human suffering and torture as their goal. Kebedech spent a short time under these conditions at Mendera before being transferred to a place which, unbelievable as it may seem, was infinitely worse. The new site was called Hawaii as a metaphorical contrast to the notion of paradise associated with the Hawaiian islands. This Hawaii is, in fact, virtual Hell. The place was crawling with virtually every species of poisonous reptiles, scorpions, huge desert insects, and was overrun by disease bearing rodents of giant sizes. Inside the living quarters, which was only a makeshift tent, it was teeming with all sorts of horrendous parasites that fed off the bodies of the prisoners.

Food was no more than a hand full of parched corn with a daily allotment of one liter of water. There was no variety in diet to speak of. Trying to rest or sleep under the extremely crowded conditions was by the nature of the conditions totally self defeating. One simply could not rest by any stretch of the imagination. On those rare occasions when it rained, these conditions were made doubly worse because of the porous state of the tent cover. Moreover, the guards constantly engaged in literally throwing the prisoners out of their make-shift sleeping arrangements every morning at the break of dawn. The cycle went on relentlessly from day to day.

The combined assault on the human mind and body by these conditions resulted in the extremely poor health of the victims.

Common epidemics of malaria, bilharzia, aggravated by other environmentally caused illnesses such as asthma, diarrheaa, and assorted epidemic diseases were very common. With all of these conditions, the prisoners were further assaulted by their captors who forced them to labor under extremely hostile environmental conditions. Daily work which consisted of working in rice and corn fields was conducted under temperatures in excess of 100 degrees and in the open market, was done under grueling long hours which taxed the eyesight of the workers. When these conditions were at their peak, it was not common to have a death toll of three to four prisoners a day.

Prohibited by the authorities to communicate with each other and to seek comfort in one another, the prisoners began to devise different ways to accomplish this and to win over some of the guards on purely humanitarian appeal. This resulted in



Kebedech paints thematically. Her subject area is the abstract and concrete nature of human suffering at hands of other human beings.

some degree of emotional sustenance and the easing of unnecessary harshness from some of the guards.

One of the impressive accomplishments of the prisoners was the ingenious way in which they were able to start and carry on a clandestine educational process. Fortunately, the prisoners were comprised of a large variety of educated people from different walks of life. Their skills and knowledge was put to good work in the educational effort that proved to be extremely successful later on. As one of the teachers, Kebedech remembers that one of the most successful contributors to this effort was Dr. Tibebe Haile Sellasie, a fellow inmate. The fact that he was a medical doctor proved to be an asset to both the prisoners as well as the captors. Because he provided medical services he had greater freedom to circulate and to acquire needed things from time to time such as extra food, medicine, and assorted educational materials and books. Medical packing and wrapping paper and paper bags served as writing materials. Those prisoners who took part in teaching the guards were allowed to keep the books they were using from time to time. The books which were printed in English and Somali were, in turn translated into Amharic and used among the prisoners. The consequences of the education program was that, beyond serving the needs of the prisoners, it was found to be of value to the captors. In this light, the

beneficiaries of the program from the side of the captors began to bring pressure to bear on the authorities to formalize the program. From the prisoner's side, in addition to demands for the rights to education, various tactics such as hunger strikes were used to force the authorities to recognize their needs. The education program was sufficiently impressive so that together with the other pressure tactics, the authorities were persuaded to allow its practice openly, except that it was restricted to the hours after duty. A reduction in work schedule for educational purposes was not authorized, but despite the long hours and incredible fatigue, the prisoners found a rallying point of hope around the process and as a result revitalized their self confidence and will to survive. Kebedech also recalls that absolutely no physical or material support was made available for the program. She says that it is important to remember that what they did was under the most severe and adverse conditions for human beings and that it should not be confused with a complimentary setting of any kind.

Other cultural bonding practices such as the practice of ones religion was disallowed unless they were of the Moslem faith which is the state religion of Somalia. This meant the Christians were not allowed to practice their faith openly. The only time this was allowed was during the consecration of the burial site by a christian priest or deacon. Even this was