

Asfaw Yemiru obituary

Teacher who rose from poverty to found a school for street children in Ethiopia that has survived coup, rebellion and famine

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Asfaw Yemiru at Asra Hawariat school. In all he was responsible for educating 120,000 pupils.

A 1970s visitor to the always crowded, sometimes chaotic Asra Hawariat school for Addis Ababa's street children once overheard a lesson given by its founder and longtime headmaster, Asfaw Yemiru. "What was the name of Russia's greatest writer?" he intoned, drawing a flummoxed silence from the class. "It begins with T," he continued, as did the silence.

"Trotsky," came his eventual prompt, "Leon Trotsky, of course." Only as the hubbub returned did he correct himself and tackle the unit on Tolstoy. The mistake might seem innocent but with Ethiopia then ruled by the murderous Stalinist junta known as the Derg, lip service to communist dogma was an artful survival mechanism.

This genius for working alongside whoever was in power, while avoiding ideological entanglement, served Asfaw well. From the imperial pomp of Haile Selassie in the 1960s, through the Red Terror, to the Tigrayan hegemony of the 1990s and even the current civil war in the north, his school survived coup, rebellion and humanitarian crisis.

Almost single-handedly he grew it from a beaten earth patch shaded by a tree, where he first taught street children in about 1960, to a double campus today offering the full primary curriculum. So good are the results that Asra Hawariat, which means “Footsteps of the Apostles”, routinely tops annual grade tables. In all he was responsible for educating 120,000 pupils.

On the occasions when he was picked up by the security forces, detention rarely lasted long. So numerous are his alumni that he would soon find a friendly official, policeman or community leader to intervene on his behalf.

One of 12 sons born to a village priest in the area of Bulga roughly 75 miles south of Addis Adaba, he faced a life of rural poverty. No official records exist, but he was born in about 1941, making him a mere child when his father shepherded the brothers to the capital at the end of the 1940s for a common rite of passage in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, ordination as novitiate deacons.

This was Asfaw’s first encounter with Addis, then the imperial seat of Ras Tafari, better known by his crown name Haile Selassie. The little boy felt he belonged so after briefly returning to Bulga he ran away, back to the capital, surviving on his wits, sleeping for a year among the graves of a city centre cemetery. Once he stowed away on the colonial-era train to Djibouti. He was uncovered and sent back up the line but not before seeing the sea, a rarity for children from the hinterland.

His life changed when an Armenian woman dropped some of her groceries. Asfaw rushed to pick up the shopping before it spoilt, a good Samaritan gesture rewarded

with a domestic job in her household. When not doing chores, he enrolled at school for the first time in his life, cramming eight years of primary syllabus into two.

A scholarship followed, to the General Wingate School, named in honour of Orde Wingate the colourful British officer who helped to drive Italian occupiers out of Ethiopia. Its common room of colonial-era diaspora teachers helped Asfaw to become fluent in English.

Soon he was putting word round the same graveyards and street corners that he used to inhabit, urging waifs to come to him for schooling. After his own school hours were done and still in his teens, he would turn from student to teacher, convening ad hoc classes under a tree between the Wingate campus and the Church of Petros and Paulos. The roll surged, helped in part because Asfaw made sure that all scraps from the refectory at Wingate were not thrown away but offered to his new pupils.

Committed to teaching, he left Wingate without graduating but not before petitioning the emperor for support. With a waft of the imperial hand, the land surrounding the original tree was transferred in perpetuity to the new school.

In the early days the pupils chipped in by building what they could. Often only a fence separated classrooms so a teacher's voice could carry allowing two classes to be taught at once. Asfaw moved onsite to a shack, living there for years, hardly bothered when the roof let in the rain.

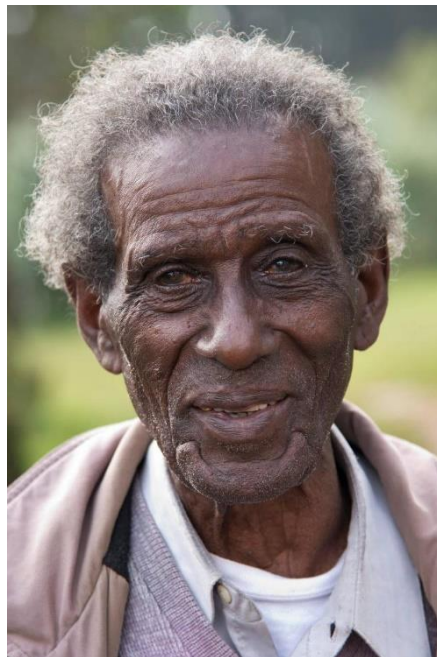
Visitors would find children sleeping on shelves, tumbling to the floor when their classes began. Asfaw was a man of strong Christian faith, praying routinely, and driven in part by nagging self-doubt, fretting whether the students were going to become good citizens, good neighbours. He was a voracious reader and student of contemporary thinking; a friend remembers him being fascinated by a theory of modernising traditional education espoused in the book *Deschooling Society*.

Self-deprecating almost to a fault, Asfaw courted little publicity. When he was persuaded to attend a ceremony in Sweden to receive the World Children’s Prize for the Rights of the Child in 2001, he had to borrow a suit and a pair of shoes.

Late in life he married a former student, Senayet. She survives him along with their two daughters, Liya and Besiem, and a son, Yisihq. All of them won scholarships to American universities.

Thousands of former students turned out for his funeral, watching solemnly as the coffin bearing their “Gashe” [guide] was interred not far from the tree-shaded spot where he first began teaching.

Asfaw Yemiru, Ethiopian school founder, was born c 1941. He died of pneumonia on May 8, 2021, aged about 80



Yemiru in 2015

FACEBOOK