

## Awate Archives: Why Idris Aba Arre Is Arrested

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*The following archived article is being republished for the third time] Seven months after this controversial article was published, Idris Aba Are, a severely handicapped veteran EPLF fighter, was arrested. The article deals with the author's observations of the government's policy regarding "education in mother tongue." At the time of his arrest, he was a director within the Ministry of Labor. Regardless of what you believe about "education in mother tongue", it is important to note that, like all the political prisoners of Eritrea, Idris Aba Arre hasn't been charged with anything and is being held (16 months now) incommunicato.*



*The following is an English translation of the article, originally published in Arabic by Eritrea Alhaditha on February 10, 2001 and in English by Awate.com on 3/28/2001. – Awate.com.*

### ***Education in Mother-tongue between the Anvil of popular rejection and the Hammer of the Academics of the Ministry [of Education]***

*By Idris AbaArre, published by the Arabic Newspaper, Eritrea AlHaditha on Feb. 10, 2001*

Several months ago, for the first time, the media raised the issue of education in "mother tongue", and the public rejection that faces it pointing to the importance of reconsidering the "the policies of education" which originally is the decision of the Ministry of Education, a decision it took without consulting the parties that have the right to look into such major national issues.

The public rejection was not new. The strange thing about the matter is that every time the discontent and contempt surfaces, the stubbornness of the ministry increases. The ministry, it seems, replied to the articles that appeared on the newspapers regarding the issue by holding seminars and workshops here and there, and issued directives to stop the registration in some schools that taught in Arabic. At the same time, it stopped [teaching] the Arabic subject in some regions,

a matter that increased the discontent and anxiety. No one knows what the ministry is planning to do [next], though the matter is certainly disturbing.

Without delving into whether the ministry has the mandate to decide or not on this matter, the missing link here is, if the benefit that the society would gain from education in mother-tongue deserve this confrontation with the society, or is it that the ministry believes the rejection was not there, but [is] only in the minds of some ignorant [persons] who do not know their society? Or, it is ignorant about the existence of views opposing the philosophies of its experts. At any rate, the problem needs to be attended to because the issue is considered [one of the] basic national issues.

Once, I coincidentally met with a senior official from the Ministry of education. And in a brief discussion I noticed his vague understanding of the issue while at the same time he accused me of not looking into the matter in depth. That fact convinced me more that the relation of the experts of the education with theories is stronger than their understanding of the cultural and historical realities that lurks behind the popular rejection.

What prompted me to write this [article] was a statement by an official from the Ministry of Education. It was extensively covered by the local mass media last month. The statement, that technically came without an occasion, reiterated that three-fourth of the mother tongue project has been accomplished. And the Ministry [of Education] continuously claims huge popular acceptance for the mother tongue without refraining from mentioning some hurdles that are meticulously cleared due to popular support as a result of the eagerness by all groups to educate their children in the mother tongue.

Personally, this doesn't shock or surprise me. I also think many would not be surprised even if the ministry announced that educating in mother language have covered one-hundred percent of Eritrea, [simply] because the case here doesn't require more than taking a decision to stop Arabic schools and replacing it with the [schooling in] mother tongue. Such a decision, if not taken by the ministry in a specific day for all schools, and throughout the country, based on a circular of few lines, it can be taken by the person in-charge of education in a region. Or, by a school administrator provided he is brave and greatly immunized from thinking about the consequences. I don't believe that the ministry lack such daring persons.

The problems of "public acceptance" and the importance of guardianship because the people are "ignorant of their interests" are the core problems in this case. Before delving into the case of whether the mother tongue policy is popularly

accepted, as the Ministry of Education says, or is paternally imposed as I claim, it is very important to pose two basic questions, that were triggered by the statement and which I think are important, and they are: Is the issue of education a national issue that should be taken care of by the state, the people and the whole society or is it a strictly professional issue defined through showy tests and laboratory experiments of experts? And isn't the medium of teaching, – which is part of the educational problem as a whole in societies that have language problems in particular – defined by the social reality and national facts, even if the cultural body is immune against such innovations???

The problem doesn't cause argument as much as it invokes fear. Fear for the future of the child. Fear for what might transpire in political, social, educational, and on development as a consequence of the stubbornness of the Ministry of Education and its paternalistic determination to impose the Mother tongue. And importantly, the extent of the naivety of the idea of reviving the mother tongue, and distancing the resources of the educated children of these groups without putting any reference and educational bases and foundations, or, without [putting] any effort towards this project.

In a previous article that I wrote on this subject, I pointed out to the importance of resolving such issues through the legislative institution and other institutions that we have, just like the way such cases [are handled] in any other country of the world. This is because the issue of education is so big to be decided upon by the Ministry of Education or its experts, whatever their education and knowledge. Importantly, the case is not a professional or a technical case that is attended to by experts and on which the Minister takes the final decision; it is a case of drawing national policies that should only be attended to by the legislative body.

Here, I don't want to continue more or sound [as if] lecturing on institutionalism because that is [stating the] obvious and is not the subject of this article. There are more important issues than the issues of legal and institutional means regarding this specific issue.

When I set to write about this subject, I put in front of me facts that express themselves in the form of figures, incidents and arguments without resorting to the global institution or any other institution [that deal] with public polling. And for a moment, I thought about which of the three arguments I should choose. And which one is more helpful for a calm dialogue. Because those to whom this article is targeted are supposed to be linguists or have an interest in phonetics, or at least are educational experts, and not the common guardian who is witnessing the matter (because I assume that they should talk to the people from this fort). I

preferred it to be digestible by all sorts of stomachs. Then, I decided to excuse the reader from pumping his head with the figures and incidents, which might load [the reader's] head with worries so it will not [be the cause of] bringing him more disturbances. I convinced and committed myself, so far, to do only with the arguments that I believe are strong enough without the need to support them with figures. In addition, the defence with figures and facts is not limitless. Therefore, I will finish my earlier article, which was previously published on "*Eritrea Al-Hadditha*", with some advices, arguments and proposals. I have committed myself to refrain from presenting figures except for some common knowledge. But the arguments that force me to dispute the credibility of the Ministry of Education in relation to the announcement regarding the successes of the education in mother tongue can be summarized as follows:

**First:** There is a clear and wide popular rejection for the mother tongue by the majority of the Eritrean linguistic groups. I say linguistic groups because, according to my knowledge, scientifically, the term of nationality doesn't apply to all the Eritrean linguistic groups since the geography, religion and various other knowledge about the self-racially, historically, and culturally—is considered a basic condition for a nationality, whether that is explained based on Marxism or according to the definitions of accepted political sciences.

The recognition, or declaration, that there are cultural diversities should be followed by the recognition of cultural and other rights. We ask, are there such components of tension among the Eritrean linguistic and ethnic groups? According to my humble knowledge, I say such tensions are not present, at least in many aspects, even according to those who were introduced to Eritrea through the books of travellers and the pioneers of conquests. Despite that, there is no knowledge or accepted reality that enjoys immunity. At any rate, and importantly, the rejection for the mother tongue that are based on this historical, cultural, etc, are explained in the following:

- Refusal to send Children to school.
- Smuggling them out of the country
- Preferring to send them to Khalwa [traditional Qoranic School].

And the surprising thing is that the education officials of the six regions know these realities in figures— which I have so far refrained from presenting.

**Second:** There is registered complaint from most linguistic groups.... in spite of the media hoopla and the countless number of workshops, including the

condemnation of the Khwajas [Europeans] who unjustly neglected the African languages, and the preparation to struggle for the respect of languages and treating them equal to other [languages], not only in Eritrea, but in all of Africa. Tigrigna is the only influential language. It is taught as a language in all regions and to all nationalities while the languages of the rest of the groups are taught only in the countryside, and Tigrigna is transformed to the language-of-mothers of the sons of the other nationalities in the big cities, because, it is not uncertain that that the ministry of education will open schools [that teach] in "Saho" or "Tigre" or "Afar" or others, in Asmara, which is inhabited by all Eritrean nationalities... And if one day [the ministry] considered doing that, it will certainly need the support of "cultural cartographers" to draw borders for those groups along the neighbourhoods, streets and houses. Since it is a right, urbanites should not be exempt [from boundaries] when the countryside is not. The practical difficulties that the ministry will face are undoubted in that the Eritrean cities, unlike many other cities in the world, are not divided along ethnic and linguistic neighbourhoods.

Some families would be exposed to meticulous interrogation by the scientists of the educational demography to classify them and determine their origins. It might also be embarrassing for some to decide which nationality to side with, especially those who belong to two or more nationalities and speak all languages equally. That is because, for more than a century, Eritreans were mixing naturally without any interference whatsoever. Although it might not be difficult for the experts of education to decide on the matter courageously with the usual simplicity, imagining the sufferings of those families stir worry and anxiety ...something I rule out with optimism.

The equality of languages and cultures in this country is difficult to comprehend. When the shouting-slogans that fill and deafen the country, especially during the many festivities (the religious and the worldly), the typists, scribes and translators never witnessed a flourishing business as the one they are enjoying since the Liberation. That is because public officials request translation of all document into Tigrigna... even in the regions that have eradicated illiteracy through the mother tongue, and where a university graduate from the Middle East becomes an illiterate in front of translators who mostly arrange alphabets with difficulty. Despite that, the mother tongue doesn't stand-up in defense of this poor person [the graduate] who in the worst scenarios, would have been helped by his second-grade son.

So, is this the equality of languages? This is the open and secret conversation of the street, the homes and the teashops. How did the experts reply to these

observations, and did the ministry hear about this problem? Worse, the other languages will certainly look at the influential language with jealousy as if it [the language] did that on its own, something that is not likable for the harmony and unity between the groups. It is harmful to the national unity, which is protected by all Eritreans as if it were the retina of their eyes. Thus, probably a big portion of this problem might have been caused because of the non-existence of an official working-language for the state, ... and that is another issue. At any rate, the ministry should have defended its philosophy outside classrooms by relating the goals of education and public life. Otherwise, the aim of education becomes secrets and wizardry directed towards unworldly activities

**Thirdly:** The mother-language is accused of widening the inequality of opportunities between the linguistic groups, rather, between Tigriña and the other groups, on jobs and higher education. That is because the low number of high schools in the regions, and because the ministry prefers to send students who are qualified to enroll in universities, to the teachers training institute to teach in "the mother-language". And the percentage of students from the nationalities that the ministry celebrates the development of their languages is a hard evidence [supporting] this accusation. It is a fact that accelerated the widening of the gap of inequality during the past years. The convention of the PFDJ that was adapted by the Third Congress in 1994, tied stability, economic and social development to narrowing and removing the gap of education and jobs between the different Eritrean groups. It is natural to ask: is it the mother tongue that gives the priority to produce teachers instead of enabling students from the less developed groups from being admitted to the university, and does this serve the political direction of the organization [PFDJ] or is it against it? The answer is in the question itself. These are some of the fingers of accusation pointed towards the ministry; naturally, they are not all.

An observer to the matter increases conviction that those in charge of education deal with the issues of their people in the style of the nineteenth century 'Khawajas' [Europeans], since they test what they espouse of anthropological theories by carrying-out social experiments. It is sad to observe that the Italians who wrote about the cultural realities of this people where more understanding than our current educational experts. Needless to say, I don't doubt that nationalist seriousness is behind their search for the new and the need for "renewing".

The problem is that cultural issues are not mechanical creativity and technological inventions that depend on laboratory experiment. The former is a humanistic

interaction, which cannot be separated just because of good will, or a simple renewal-obsession or a euphoric need by the youth to change the cultural, historical and psychological realities of any people. This is what makes the Eritrean peasant, herdsman and fisherman reject the mother tongue as a learning tool in substitute of Arabic. [Because he is] more realistic than the educational scientists who went through enough universities and workshops and high-sounding seminars. The simple person is the only one who can express himself with honesty. It is a state of conflict between the forces of reality that expresses itself culturally, religiously and the stored history and between the ideas of change that is nourished with knowledge from all continents... is there a fault in the awareness of history or total ignorance about the cultural reality? I do not think so. But, the differences of cultural environments have created a double standard [in the judgments] for our elite when looking at the issue at hand: a natural development for a society with diverse cultures.

In relation to this matter, I remember when the first language conference was held in the field on the issue of replacing the "Geez" alphabets by Latin alphabets. The [Geez] alphabets were considered not able to cope with the technological development. Then, many were upset considering the idea a detachment from the cultural, religious and historical reality. That was wise because Geez has a deeply rooted history in our country and is tied to the monasteries and the church and has become part of our culture and Eritrean history. Hence, it is not possible to uproot it just because of reasons that might seem practical. And pursuing this project was equal to a preparation for a confrontation with the society. Luckily, the project was dead on birth. And posterity will record that many of those who objected then were those who took enough from the Marxist ocean. I was supportive of this view even though I didn't have the chance to participate in that conference. But an irony that always comes is the determined refusal to be detached from Geez [then] and the current determination to be detached from Arabic — a matter that confuses the standards. What needs to be pointed at is, why the paternal relation in a period of Globalization, Internet, global village and the intermingling of peoples in an unprecedented manner that humanity has never witnessed?

In the field of science, or in the field of developments that are carried out by different government departments and non-governmental organizations, especially in the developed world, there is an independent field for the science of project management that is taught in universities and specialized institutes. It is called Logical Framework. It is a logical arrangement of the goals and means [of achieving them] in a reasonable way that the human brain can digest without the psychological discomfort or indigestion due to difficulty.

The framework shows that mixing the ends and the means leads to confusion and makes one who is in charge of the project as if he is wearing his pants inside-out, especially when the end is put in place of the means and vice-versa. Note that this applies to the language policies of the Ministry of Education, because sometimes one doesn't know whether the idea of schooling is language or education. And what if the paternalistic imposition of the mother tongue, that some push, becomes a cause for detesting education, and abandoning schools? Is it putting the cornerstone of education or destroying it, even if this was unintentional, though we assume it is? And is the aim of education the building of a society or directing a culture? And is the idea behind holding workshops for publicity or for enriching the ideas laid down by the beneficiaries? Are all of these means, or means of achieving a goal? Questions that beg for answers.

Nevertheless, the issue is not new, and will keep reappearing until a logical arrangement of goals and their means of achieving them are set in place. Also, until the aim of education is specified in a programmed and clearly scientific way with the participation of all who can contribute to it and have an interest in the matter from inside Eritrea and the Diaspora, it should be done in a manner different from the preparation of the best papers that are in the libraries. Such work will be added to the efforts of educational scientists, and will not lower their status. Drawing educational policies, as mentioned, should be looked at only by the legislative body.

Until that happens, the Eritrean father, whom God alone has given one of the languages of his creations, will remain worried about his sons and daughters. As for the mother, who carried the honor of the name [mother-tongue] might be fooled momentarily until she wakes up in horror when her son flees away across the border in search of the Father's tongue, and when the father brings unacceptable reasons to refrain from sending his daughters to school. He will not allow her to go [across the border] and look for a language like her brother. Then, [the mother] will feel the dwindling of the already limited authority of the mother, which originally is supported by flashy names and slogans.

Man is naturally logical. And that is what makes him overdo speculations when he sees an incident that is not controlled by the framework of cause. I have mentioned that in an embarrassing situation when I had a heated debate with a mixed group of the well and the not-so-well educated. They had identical stands and identical arguments in attacking the mother tongue and they brought up similar evidences from different regions that prove the rejection of the mother tongue. I purposely challenged them by playing devil's advocate and defending the policies of the



Ministry of Education. Certainly, they cornered me and convinced me; but I don't know why I did that and continued with my stubbornness without resorting to logic. Suddenly I found myself being convinced of what I was saying. But at the same time, I was looking for a straw to hang on to. I found my support in speculations in analyzing the aim of forcing the people to use the mother tongue as a backing, which they repeatedly presented as accepted fact. That provoked me to the extent that I was pushed to challenge them strongly to the extent that I imagined I was totally convinced with what I was saying.

But, I felt that they were right; and I was convinced and submitted to their logic for an important reason: not only do the education officials deal with others as if their [the officials] views are accepted facts that are not subject to criticism or rejection specially when dealing in matters of the "mother-tongue", but also use 'obligatory' in the right sense of the word as is evident from "the obligatory education in the mother tongue". The only thing that they repeat when they face "Bores" like me is that "it is the policy of the State". I claim that the state is innocent of this policy, but the problem of guessing has got into me and I got an idea: maybe the Ministry of Education doesn't know the extent of the public discontent regarding the mother tongue. Specially considering the fact that the Curriculum Department, which is entrusted with the task of taming the mother tongues of all linguistic groups, might not have educational experts who are conversant in all the languages of "nationalities". In addition to that, the workload of the ministry in dealing with files, and the many scholarships from the Arab countries which, according to word on the street, has stopped – even though in this regard, it doesn't concern us – and that the guardians [parents] didn't present the case to the officials in serious manner, or what has happened to the head of education in a region upon interpreting [a conversation] between him and the guardians... and...and...and, etc.

Because of this, the curriculum experts have the right to fully occupy themselves in marketing the successful experiments that they receive through reports. The yardstick for measuring success is not difficult because it is measured by the number of mother tongue schools that were opened, or the number of Arabic schools that were stopped or by the number of Arabic [language] teachers who were laid-off from their work in the Southern Region... and honestly, this case doesn't require more than a courageous Administrator in whose presence all the creatures whatever their size, height and posture would be dwarfed.

If we left the science of education and the mother tongue aside and referred to the science of projects, there comes a question: how are educational policies and

workshops set up? Is it a product of the participation in the studies by all the stakeholders and the concerned, or is it prepared by geniuses who resort to the best books that the pens of the writers of whole world has produced? This is a basic as well as a technical case. I say this to attract the attention of the honorable experts, that the workshops, and the educational policies become beneficial and positive only when it has an input from both the producers and the consumers. I say this because I feel, that our brothers consider the concerned – the Eritrean people – ignorant who do not know [where] their interest [lies]. Patience, don't be surprised. In an article entitled "Teaching mother language, a wise choice which was not adapted by the people", — I hope I have translated it right – which appeared in Tsegenai, the writer, who is one of the teachers of these languages, concludes that the Eritrean people are ignorant and don't know their interest. Therefore, the ministry took [the people] by the hands and led them to a better way (No comment on that).

Yes, the use of logical framework as a means of verifying is an important matter. But the road towards drawing that framework is neither easy nor smooth. It passes through another field that is called the science of logical questioning... the Why-way. It is supposed to be, in this field, that after certain ideas are fermented in the minds of individuals or groups, it is presented to the producers, consumers and financers and anyone who has a close or a distant relation to the case. And the answer to the questions of "Why?" "How?" "What if?" "Did...?" would automatically determine the nature of the logical framework that would guarantee the success of the project, and its healthy development. Any project that doesn't follow this method becomes so deformed that you cannot tell its head from its foot. Apologies for the repetitions of the accepted facts though I never worked as a teacher. Nevertheless, this might wet the appetite of those who believe workshops determine everything. All this and I have no doubt the brothers in the ministry "have done it again and again" as we say in the Quranic School.... Worse, it might entice them into holding a workshop for the "development and education" and on which, they might put education in mother-tongue — which doesn't have [even] a geography textbook and nothing was translated to it from Tigrigna except up to grade three — as a pre-condition for development in our country. Despite all of that, one doesn't wish them but to be convinced of [the need for] the role of the stakeholders because the philosophy of guardianship is different to the philosophy of participation... and what a wide gap between the two.

If the educational experts would be convinced on using the logical framework as a means of investigating and drawing plans and advocate the return to the scientific investigation to be led by logical framework, I promise, from this position, to

prepare a rich paper, be it in my mother's language or my father's language or any other neutral language that I master, since I am one of those who would be harmed from the drawing of the lingo-cultural boundaries. This is because my father and mother are from two different linguistic groups; I voluntarily chose to follow the language of my mother's folks. My father, who didn't think of consulting those who put boundaries to stop the intermarrying and intermingling between the cultures and languages, didn't object.

Finally, I would like to wrap up my case with some proposals, which are options that might benefit those who take initiatives:

1- Each nationality to hold a congress in which it decides in what language its children should be educated on condition that people are not excluded because of their views and provided that such a congress should not be a show of power by gathering supporters to adapt what the ministry wants as a result of academic reasons, as I have justifiably explained above.

I repeat, the exclusion of the educated because of their views regarding the mother tongue is a very harmful to any development effort, be it in a national scale or in the scale of the groups. It will be harmful if they are excluded or distanced from contributing in this vital field. I say this knowing that in a country that has thousands who carry certificates of higher education in addition to specialist in the sciences of education, even if the majority resides outside the Eritrea, the language development unit in the department of curriculum doesn't have a single person who is a college graduate.

My proposal for such a congress emanates from my belief that the ministry believes and insists with urgency to educate the mother tongue on one side, and my understanding that language is a basic component of culture, and culture is the sole property of any people or group since it is tied to its identity and uniqueness on the other hand. Because of this, I don't think it is right or wise to try to influence it politically and administratively. Human beings define culture with sensitivity. What I say is not philosophizing, but a logic that all social theories prescribe to, including the literature of UNESCO.

2- The ministry should call for a national congress on education where the language of education is one of the cases that will be discussed. All the educated from all the groups should attend...and the congress should be attended by citizens inside and outside [Eritrea]. The congress should discuss all the problems of education, such as the problem of the education of girls, and education in the

places remote from urban centers, and the problems of participation in higher education by all regions and linguistic groups.

3- An announcement by the ministry stating that it will abide by the resolution of the Second National Congress of the Eritrea Peoples' Liberation Front [EPLF] that gave guardians the right to decide the language of education... this is in line with the convention of child right to which Eritrea is a signatory.

But meanwhile, for the hammer to arrogantly increase its beating is something that will not contribute to anything but to the polishing of the anvil.

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