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Merchant of Misery

Ex-Cadet of American Marines, Léonard Vincent : beyond words

“I’m not ashamed any more to say that the only solution is a coup d’Etat, a palace revolution.”

So says Léonard Vincent during an interview he gave to the journalist of the daily, La Tribune de Genève, on June 27, 2012 who asked him if there is any hope for change in Eritrea.¹



Leonard Vincent

These unkind words against Eritrea are pronounced by a person who endorses depending on the situation, the journalist's or the humanitarian cap. The above quote echoes the discussions he recently had with the Cybernauts, to describe the events that took place at the Ministry of Information in Eritrea on the 21st of January.

Coup de force or coup d’Etat, what seemed to be a simple discussion of semantics, was in reality hiding a difference of political perspective. These words that glorify violence can only be the natural conclusion of an activist who endorses the arguments of those who wish to eliminate the Eritrean government. No matter how. In fact, suffice to read his interviews or his book to conclude that Léonard Vincent does not bother himself with professional ethics. You cannot claim to be an independent journalist, while at the same time you are only defending small political factions.

Why so much interest in Eritrean affairs? Why end up interfering in its internal affaires?

At first glance, one would say nothing. Especially when you hear him repeat that Eritrea does not belong to the collective memory of the Western World.

Born in France 1969, Léonard Vincent started living in the United States at the age of 12. He went there along with his parents who worked in the music world. His teenage years

seem to have been dominated by boredom that eventually led him to join the U.S. Army. In the Marines corps, he became a Cadet and served for several year
At that time, he met a Vietnam veteran, who introduced him to photography. Later on he turned into a Musician, actor, theater director; he has worked in many sectors, but did not follow the path of Philosophy he is supposed to have studied after his return to France.

He also has been working in different sorts of jobs such as a packer, an assistant in the IT service of a private television and a salesman in a bookstore.

In 2004, while he was collecting information for Reporters Without Borders (RSF), he had the opportunity to meet Eritrean refugees at the Italian shores. The epic tragedy of the refugees drew attention of the reporter. However, none of the information he got at that very moment gave birth to articles or to any sort of significant campaign.

When he became the Director of the African Desk within RSF, Eritrea remained to be his favorite subject. The cliché "North Korea of Africa" was hammered from then on for the promotion sale of the NGO's annual magazine.

In 2009, he left the organization with the ambition to be full time on the Eritrean question. He admits himself that despite the fact that he had no job and no allowances, he was forced to pay himself his travels.

Completely unknown to the French public, he started to be visible in mainstream media, with bluff-blown title of specialist of the Horn of Africa, and in particular that of Eritrea. That is the snag. This designation is in no way justified. He has no knowledge of Eritrea for the simple reason that he has never set foot in that country. He, in fact has traveled several times to Ethiopia, about which he speaks with infinite precaution. As an example, he indicates in his blog, that he does not want to comment on the very serious illness of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, because he has not enough information. However, the only book he has written so far is devoted to a subject he does not know at all, and is entitled "The Eritreans."

Aware of this incongruity, the author clears future critics by writing in the prologue, "I know. But I have no proof, not even a clue". He pretends to know even if his conclusions are from his intuition rather than proven facts. This quote borrowed from Pasolini is too presumptuous for the poor work he has done. Pier Paolo Pasolini, writer, poet and especially highly talented filmmaker is known for his unambiguous position. Man of the left, he has moved the lines of a sclerotic Italian bourgeoisie, by creating fictions that reflected their time.

Here we have a beginner writer whose stand is not clear. Yet he wishes to change the course of the political life of a country, works actively towards this change while at the same time he wants to keep his status of a journalist. In between the writing of his only book and the installation of Erena, clandestine radio geared towards the Eritrean public, under the auspices of Reporters Without Borders, the American-French has given himself the mission to save Eritrea. This absence of a healthy distance required from a reporter is even more blatant when one examines closely his other activities.

Meetings, articles and interviews, he multiplies his interventions to capture the attention of his audience and struggles to demonize the country he still pretends to defend. Young people in particular are for him of an unabated attention. He tries, for example to dissuade the Swiss parliament which was questioning the full refugee status given to Eritreans deserters. To justify his position, Vincent tells a story that is partly amputated. Among other things he deliberately fails to mention the very existence of the Badme war and consequently the no-peace no-war situation of today.

In line with the truncated logic of his arguments, he passes under silence the resolution of the conflict by the International Court of Justice, which awards to Eritrea, Badme, the territory that has been at the heart of the war between the two countries. The reason is obvious. His explanations could not hold and all his positions would collapse like a House of cards, if he would admit that Eritreans are struggling to recover their sovereign territory occupied by Ethiopia. Thus, he is forced to obscure the geopolitical context of the Horn of Africa in order to give logic to his skewed arguments. But this proves only that he does not stand up to the caliber set by his predecessors, specialists of the region.

His book gives us the best hint to understand what the final goal of this author is. "The Eritreans" is not a pamphlet, nor is it the result of an academic work. It is a hybrid object that mixes true and false by accommodating too many assertions without irrefutable evidences and a high number of defamation. Vincent wants us to believe that he has painted the portrait of a people through various testimonies. In fact, the evocation of refugees is an alibi. The largest junk of the book is devoted to the other characters, those elected by Vincent to represent the Eritrean Nation.

Vincent takes the guise of this book to present his mentor, his inspirer, whose ideas and opinion ooze throughout the book. He gives a literal transcription of Amaha Domenico's insanities pronounced against the Eritrean society. The latter is a man who had abandoned the struggle in the 1980s, and had suddenly appeared like a ghost emerging from the depths of the night. The French journalist was convinced that he was attending a major political turning point, when he accompanied Domenico and his group to a conference in Addis Abeba.

This was organized by the Ethiopian government to gather all Eritreans in the diaspora and include them to implement their own declared position of a regime change in Eritrea. Even though he had been elected as a vice chairman in the first conference, Domenico has been evicted by the old Eritrean politics veterans, whose permanent address is in the capital city of Ethiopia. This is the heart of the problem. The author has not yet understood that whoever comes with the blessing of Ethiopia can not at any time be credible in the eyes of the majority of Eritreans.



Paris based Biniam Simon & Amanuel Ghirmay (Radio Erena)

Another long chapter is devoted to Erena, clandestine radio for the Eritrean public created by Vincent to install the journalist Biniam Simon in Paris. Vincent narrates the incredible journey for defection of the Eritrean sent by his country to attend a course in Japan.

In fact it is a chapter that demonstrates how the author adapts the truth to his own advantage. He describes his friend as a superstar of Eri-TV and actively sought after by his government. The trainee was sent by his country for a course to Okinawa when the French journalist encouraged him to defect.

The French man puts in place a plan worthy of a great detective movie that takes place in the Far East and he remotely controls from Paris. He tells his colleagues in Japan to help the Eritrean escape from the clutches of the "secret agents of the embassy" who are sent to follow and bring the man back to Africa.



Biniam Simon – *(Standing 4th from left)*

Vincent needs to know, that it is a common knowledge by Eritreans, that their embassy in Japan counts only one ambassador and that the rest of the staff are Japanese.

Therefore it is hard to believe how such an embassy could ever have the necessary logistics to kidnap an Eritrean national from a friendly host country.

This episode of “Tintin in the Land of the Rising Sun”² is another evidence of the little knowledge he has of the Eritrean society.

Convinced that he came across a Terra Incognita, the writer gives a few numbers of truths coated by a large number of lies that will go unnoticed.

War and its consequences are tragedies that do not need any additional hubcaps.

This journalist has not done a serious work in order to shed light on a country and its people, but has behaved like a travelling salesman.

A merchant of misery and tears, all for his own benefit.



¹ Tintin is a popular comic's character for kids by Hergé which depicts the adventures of a young amateur journalist. Incidentally Léonard Vincent had Tintin's portrait as his Twitter's avatar.

The journalist replaced it after the 21 January events by a caricature sent by Eritreans in the Internet, that represented the French man himself squeezed in the middle of the three Eritrean sites that are his main sources of information: **Awate - Asmarino – Assena.**