

## The Heros

A partial translation of "The Eritreans", a book written by Vincent Léonard in 2010.

(Léonard Vincent, is a former American marine cadet and administrator in Reporters without Borders and currently a militant against the Eritrean government).

All the Eritreans that I know who are fighting to liberate their country are heroes. Biniam, is a very ordinary person. The first evening I heard his voice, in December 2006, there was a trickle of shyness that painfully confessed on a telephone line. Far from Japan where he was sent for training by the Eritrean Ministry of Information, the former presenter of the evening news at Eri-TV admitted, with great difficulty, that he wanted to defect.

In recent weeks, his friends and colleagues were rounded up one by one. They were sent to Agip to be interrogated. The authorities were seeking to know who organized the flight of the personnel from the TV channel. Eminent personalities considered as the flagship of the propaganda had recently left the country never to return. Isaias lost his preferred interviewers, including the gifted Temesghen Debesai the "kid" who headed the English service. Biniam knew that if he goes back to his country, he would probably be picked from the airport by Homeland Security. He was next on the list. And anyway, his life depressed him. All these years he had composed with the phantasmagoria of the government. He had swallowed quite a few bitter pills. He was threatened, his family tormented, reprimanded for his alleged whims against revolutionaries. He had gone to the front during the war of Badme. Obediently he had learned everything about his profession at the ministry. Today, it was too much. He had decided not to return to Asmara, to seek refuge elsewhere, no matter where. From his hotel room in Okinawa, he spoke on the phone in a low voice. Talking to me would already lead to a death sentence.

Biniam was to fly back to Eritrea, under guard, few days later. His passport was in the hands of the "mosquito" accompanying him. The Japanese government had guaranteed not only the security of its guests, but also for the smooth return to their homeland. Hanging up the phone, I no longer had much of a choice. Either I had to admit to the thin voice that had contacted me that nothing was possible and he must return to his cursed country, or I had to try something, without knowing what, to find a hiding place, a refuge, a safe haven, whatever it is, to a man who asked for it.

As the day of his departure approached, I still did not know what to do. The only solution was to find someone fairly confident in the justness of the smart move to divert Biniam from the path traced for him within the airport of Tokyo, before he embarks to Asmara. This man was Michel. French journalist resident in Japan, he was the local correspondent for Reporters Without Borders in Japan but I did not know him. I had to explain to him the situation in a few minutes, avoiding the clichés and digressions.

It was midday in Paris and twenty hours in Tokyo. The idea was to literally kidnap an unknown Eritrean the next day from the departure lounge of Narita International Airport. Michel immediately accepted, unconditionally and without a slight hesitation. The target is called Biniam, it should happen at a precise time leaving on precise flight. He should take him to a hotel and give him a good care as much as possible.

The next day, Michel and friends arrived at the airport carrying a plate with the name of the Eritrean. Each passenger was scrutinized. He waited for a black man, an unknown victim, a strange bird that would respond to a name written on a white board. Men and women embarking on their planes paraded indifferently before them. No one showed up. In Paris, I waited anxiously for a sign from Japan. But nothing came. My phone was silent as a closed harbor. I imagined what would happen if Biniam failed to outmaneuver his escort or if he would renounce at the last moment. Nobody was aware of the operation. My heart weighed down by anxiety, I felt bad of playing a dangerous game. At the International Airport of Tokyo, passengers passed one by one before Michel without batting an eyelid, without reacting. And then a small round man, with bulging child eyes and cheeks strafed freckles, presented himself before him.

"Biniam?"

- Yes

Michel immediately grasped the huge suitcase with wheels from Biniam's hand and pushed out the guy without looking behind him. With a gesture of authority, he stuffed his mysterious Eritrean into a car and ordered the driver to hit the road. Suspicious of the Japanese, the French had planned to change cars regularly. A stop in a garage of a hotel, jump from one taxi to another, a false destination address would suffice to beat them. In thirty seconds, the two men entered the world of illegality, abandoned the regular papers and defied normal processes of an abiding citizen.

The two men stayed together for several weeks in Michel's apartment, perched on a high floor of a tower in Tokyo. Anxious, almost silent though strangely relieved, Biniam devoured the video library of his new French friend. Black and white Movies, old American movies, Italian cinemas, Thrillers...The Eritrean was unbeatable on films, told me Michel. Every day I called him he told me about the amazing duo he forged with the young man I did not know yet. Michel liked him. His companion already befriended the unknown from Narita.

The French spoke of the good humor and timidity of his guest, the child's genes and his sudden descent into depression. Both discussed long hours about their respective lives until late at night. At fixed hours, I also called Biniam and spoke at length as if it was with a cousin I had not seen since high school. Strangely, I could already manage to make fun of him, as he was also mocking of me. His voice, timid in Okinawa, was invigorated in Tokyo. I imagined the old and tired sofa, the embarrassing silence of the morning, the bathroom always slightly in disorder. Everything was fine, I was told. The money I sent to pay for a hotel was not used.

During this time we were trying just to get papers for the fugitive, now caught in a tangled bureaucratic Web. I wanted to bring him to France, shake his hand and put him in safety. Prisca, the young head of the Office of Assistance at Reporters without Borders, was battling tirelessly by phone calls and letters with government officials who were not so concerned. Meanwhile, the Japanese Government agency of immigration was doing all its best to get hold of Biniam. The Police was alerted. The Eritrean authorities were prowling. The French Embassy was difficult to deviate it from its legal position. Michel was using his connections, harassed his highly placed contacts, and hauled his new friend to administrative offices of diplomats. Straddled on a motorcycle, the two men zigzagged the streets of Tokyo, covered as polar explorers.

In Paris we were knocking on the doors of the Quai d'Orsay (*French foreign office*) for a safe-conduct for the former star of Eri - TV. On Christmas day, Michel invited Biniam to go with him to a party in the city. Solitary and smiling, the Eritrean spent an evening to watch the guests, hipsters (**hip-huggers**) and fashionistas, mouth closed. He took a little champagne, but barely. Michel told me later that Biniam had told him that he had been moved by the celebration of the Nativity. The next day, I received a photograph of him for the slides. Standing on a street of Tokyo, Biniam looks at me with a smile, a smiles we usually see in summer along the beach. Behind him, across the street, are shops with signs covered by neon ideograms. The buildings of glass spin to the cold sky. The windows reflected the orange sun. A pull over with round collar covers his broad chest. His clear eyes with heavy eyelids soften the mahogany figure covered with black freckles. His chin is highlighted by a very short beard. His square head and frizzy hair reveal the face of a young man of thirty years. The safety and pain floating around him, like two angels. We imagine the little boy that he was, the smile remained the same. I spent several minutes on his picture. I circulated it to all the people around me. Biniam is him.

After several weeks of paperwork and supplications, the Eritrean finally got a visa for France on a basis of asylum. When I announced the good news to Biniam by phone, he sighed, giggled and sighed again. Immense relief freed his heart from anxiety. He wanted to leave Japan, the country "populated by fools." Happy as a high school graduate, Michel decided to fly with him to Paris, where he pretended had things to do. We found an emergency fund for Biniam's ticket and temporary accommodation for his arrival. A last call, promises and a few laughs again. The two accomplices left Tokyo one evening in January and made stopovers in Seoul without having ceased to talk. The next day they landed at Roissy-Charles de Gaulle airport where I was expecting them, refrigerated, cursing cops, borders, crisps, despots and serious people. If he passes smoothly the customs office, the kidnapping would have worked.

Leaning on the iron railing bordering the arrivals, I looked at the automatic door open on anonymous faces and suitcases. The carousel of an aircraft. African families passing by. A crowd of Chinese climbing their buses. Tanned tourists find their parents. A businessman already phoning. Carts stacked with luggage sliding in all directions. Cardboard boxes held together with string and tape. I waited for almost an hour when I finally saw the curly haired Michel. With a view somewhat blurred, I stood up to

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welcome the newcomers. Michel waved me through the double electric door. Behind him, pulling a huge rolling suitcase, wearing a leather jacket, Biniam had sunken eyes but with a happy complexion, as if he came home.

In the taxi when I announced the arrival of Biniam in France to an Eritrean friend, a yoyos sound exploded in my phone. His wife, ecstatic, was celebrating the release of one more Eritrean. On the way to Paris, I pointed to the newcomer the sights along the highway, street lights, gigantic advertising boards, brick buildings in the northern suburbs, and the "Stade de France" (football stadium) which he discussed at length. We stopped in the 15th arrondissement of Paris, near the "House of Journalists", where the former Eritrean, now fugitive could live six months free. He put his luggage in his room and we went to swallow a plate of spaghetti in an Italian restaurant in the neighborhood. Walking in the street, in the frosty night of Paris, strolling casually, finally with relieved paces under the trees, Biniam whispered to me with a smile: "It's just like Asmara."

With Biniam we entered quickly in a war footing. After he was granted a status of political refugee in France, he started looking for a job. We offered him odd jobs here and there, in a printing company in manufacturing greeting cards. Cashier in a supermarket. But Biniam is a man of immense culture, refined in his nuances and approach to the dictatorship. His sense of humor, a little English, but impressive. Inhabited by the fear of a future civil war, he disdains politicians who are stubborn. For him Eritrea, even tortured is one and indivisible. The murderers of the prison system, the ideologues of the presidency, the greedy and illiterate generals all these executioners are his brothers. Deny this principle would be, in his eyes, justifying future murders. Enough Eritreans lives are lost he insisted softly, his eyes wet.

One summer evening, months later, we drank a beer in a bar in Paris. As always, I asked him what he thought should be done to his country. What he thought most useful. The thing that could bring about change is "inform people inside," he replied immediately. "Inform the Eritreans who are still out there on what is happening at home and abroad." His answer was obvious. During the years that followed, we have built a radio. Radio Erena, "Our Eritrea". Radio Biniam.

I visit now quite often the little station that broadcasts from the 13th arrondissement of Paris. Ambroise, my successor at the head of the Africa desk of Reporters Without Borders has lost precious hours of sleep to help Biniam find a place and install the studio. It is a modest red brick store, wedged between buildings in a deserted street. Children coming back home from school glance by the ground floor. They see a large sofa and a table, pictures of Asmara, posters, trinkets labeled in Tigrinya, postcards of the country, baroque objects braided and decorated with beads, coffee. Ashtrays are full, biscuits always at hand, the indefatigable snacker. Drafts of the news flashes are stacked on chairs. Behind the Iron Curtain, turning his heavy key, remains always locked, Biniam smiles and violently hits in his hand.

Since June 2009, he created nearly twenty-four hours of program through this narrow satellite beam of freedom that reaches the eager ears of his Eritrean brothers.

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And this little adventure is now having consequences. At Sawa, young recruits trick their commander to be able to listen. In town, families get together to follow Erena, its interviews, scoops, columns or the Sunday program of Yonathan Habte, ex singer in exile in Germany. Amanuel, a journalist who recently escaped the country, came to lend a hand after few months. The radio became increasingly popular.

Anonymous call threatens Biniam. They tell him that they have already signed the death warrant of the station and that there is still time for him to join the government. Auditors were briefly incarcerated down there. Biniam showed me their name on a sheet at the beginning and updates it regularly: Temesghen, Goitom, Simon Tekle ... They were all under thirty years. But he makes it a point of honor to be fair. He interviews the regime's supporters and opponents. This arouses much suspicion in the Diasporas. Unbearably honest and not fighting for a penny, he is alone.

The first time I visited the studio when the radio was finally installed, I especially remember his big 'squirrel' smile and his immense pride when he sat in front of the microphone. I took picture of him with the headphones on, and we spent two hours at the window in the spring breeze, listening to the birds singing on the trees and smoking cigarettes.

"This is a great project, he said.

-Two beers, two friends and an idea: it is just that, a project" I replied.

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