

HISTORICAL SW&S PORTRAITS

GLOBAL LEADERS FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION: THE IASSW PRESIDENTS 1928-2008

# Prof. Abye Tasse (Ethiopia), President 2004-2008

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#### Introduction

It seems strange to be writing a biography of a man who is still very much alive and to be attempting some evaluation of his role in relation to IASSW when he does not formally conclude his Presidency until July 2008.

However, apart from my own acquaintance with Abye Tasse through work in the European region for over a decade, and more recent contact with him and his family in Ethiopia, it has also been possible to interview him very recently; to draw on information from his CV; and to seek out views from colleagues who have also



had the opportunity of working with him in various capacities in the more recent past.

For some, the most striking feature about Abye might be the fact that he is Ethiopian by birth and has recently returned to that country. Many westerners either have no knowledge of Ethiopia or have an image of a poverty stricken country wracked by drought and political instability – in a continent that has more than its fair share of economic and social problems. But there is very much more to Ethiopia than this stereotype might suggest: it has a long history and deep culture and is currently playing a leading role in the African Union. These roots and current developments have been significant in the formation of Abye's identity, personal biography and professional status.

But it was also events in Ethiopia in the 1970s, resulting in his experience as an asylum seeker and refugee, which led to the fact that another country has also played an important role in Abye's education and career development, namely France. Before his involvement with IASSW he was already playing an important role in Europe, transcending, as he did, linguistic boundaries (from the Francophone countries to those where communication through English was more common), professional boundaries (not least between the different occupational groups broadly encompassed in the social professions in France) and racial differences. It is certainly the case that Abye is the first Black African to have been elected to the post of President of IASSW, although he would also be the first to expect that his election had more to do with his other qualities and abilities than his racial or national identity.

#### **Biography**

Abye Tasse was born in Addis Ababa, the third child – and the first boy – in what he describes as a 'traditional family'. His paternal grandfather had been in the army but he and two of his six brothers were killed in the Italian War<sup>1</sup>. Abye's father and brothers were also sent to military school although he left the army before his son's birth (also 'buying out' his brothers from military service) and became a sports teacher. His maternal grandfather, meanwhile, was a lawyer and his mother was one of three children. His family lived as a nuclear household but in close proximity to relatives and various cousins were used to playing together.

From the age of three Abye was sent to the *Lycée Guebre Mariam* (French School), where his father taught, and thus started adding the French language to his mother tongue, Amharic. Abye's father died when he was four years old due to illness and his mother subsequently remarried and had two more sons and another daughter. Meanwhile, however, she also took on some work as a teacher at Singer Costume School and also ran a business, both out of necessity and in transition to a more modern lifestyle. Thus, the 1960s seemed like a period of relative stability for Abye, growing up in a family of six children (his oldest sister lived with his maternal grandparents) and attending school in Addis Ababa.

However, the country was in fact in transition. Under the Emperor, Haile Selassie, who had resumed his throne after the Italians left, there had been very little development from a largely feudal system of power and inequalities; and there were periodic and (mainly) localised revolts through the 1960s and into the 1970s. In Sept. 1974 after months of strikes, demonstrations and military mutinies, the eighty year old Emperor was deposed (in fact killed) by a military coup and a new regime, the Dergue (a socialist inspired Military Coordinating Committee) came to power (Ottaway 1978). From a relatively a-political youngster, Abye became involved in a student movement which was spawning a variety of left-leaning action groups in a climate in which both the national government and the opposition claimed to be 'Marxist'. This period in Ethiopia, described by Abye as a 'crazy time', coincided with the height of the Cold War and to some extent the country was also caught up in the ideological battles between 'the capitalist West' and the communist Soviet Union. As a high school student, Abye's reading extended to Marx and Hegel and he started to distribute pamphlets for The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party. However, he viewed his activism as 'not exceptional', just 'part of the scene at the time'.

But the military regime was starting to crack down on various organisations and in this time of unrest (mid 1970s) the schools were closed. Abye maintained his political links and started to work in the local district. However, the situation became more dangerous: it was characterised as a time when not only was free speech out of the question, but people had 'no right to think'. People were imprisoned without trial or just killed if suspected of 'subversion'. School friends of Abye's were being killed and it became clear to him that it was time to leave Addis Ababa. He did so one night but this did not prevent a military raid on his home and the imprisonment of his mother and sisters.

Abye's story of his flight and eventual arrival in France is a story which in some ways mirrors the challenges, occasional opportunities, personal tenacity and resourcefulness which

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Ethiopia was not subject to the European colonisation experienced by so many other countries from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the mid 20<sup>th</sup> centuries but it was occupied for a relatively short time (1936-41) by the Italians (Bahru Zewde 2001).

characterise the stories of other refugees. He was lucky to have an uncle living in Eritrea (which at the time was still part of Ethiopia) but the Eritrean Liberation Army was becoming active and this was not a safe place to stay either. He therefore moved on again with two friends, walking by night and getting occasional lifts from passing trucks, arriving in the Sudan without money or papers. Here he obtained casual work and also started visiting a local library where he was befriended by a French couple who, after some time, obtained a visa for him to move to Egypt. (The Sudanese and Ethiopian governments were on good terms and the Sudan was becoming increasingly unsafe for Ethiopian refugees). In May 1979, Abye Tasse arrived in Paris where he declared himself to be a stateless person and sought asylum. He was granted refugee status in a relatively short time and, 20 years later, he became a French citizen.

In the late 1970s, France was running a special scheme to enable refugees to go to University. Abye sat an examination in June 1979 – 'just to see what it would be like' and was delighted that he passed! He was offered a scholarship (on the same basis as a French citizen) and started at the University of Toulouse in September 1979, obtaining a General University Studies Diploma (DEUG) in Economic and Social Administration. This was followed over the years by additional qualifications awarded by the Universities of Montpellier, Le Havre, and Rouen. Relatively more recently, over a ten your period of part-time study, he obtained three more awards from the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales de Paris*, the highest being a PhD. It is perhaps not surprising that the topic of his research was an analysis of Ethiopian migration in France and the USA: his thesis achieved the highest commendation possible in the French system (*très honorable avec félicitation du jury à l'unanimité*) and formed the basis of a book (Abye 2003).

In between times and along the way, Abye was also establishing a career, although his entry to the social professional field<sup>2</sup> was almost accidental and has not been exclusive. For example, he worked on a Magazine as a journalist and researcher for a couple of years in the late 1980s and was a Lecturer in Social Research in the early 1990s: there have also been later periods of management responsibility, initially for programmes and then at institutional level. However, his entry into the social professional field can be dated to 1983 and from 1989 on he became active in European and international activities in the social professional field, as will be discussed in the following sections.

But before proceeding, we can also note that the military regime remained in power in Ethiopia until 1991 and it was not possible for Abye to resume contact with his family of origin until the 1980s. In 1989 his mother came to France to live with him for a year before spending time in the US with other relations and then returning to Ethiopia. It was on visits to their respective brothers living in Canada, that Abye met his wife to be, Tigist. They were married in France in 1997 and established a home there. Their first two children were born in France, as was a third baby in 2007. However, Abye took up a post in Ethiopia from 2004 (see later) and the family has been mainly settled there since 2005.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Use of this term was initiated in the context of the plethora of social work and similar occupational roles and professional awards identified in European networks and projects in the 1990s (see, for instance, Otto and Lorenz 1998).

# **Social Work in France and Europe**

Abye traces his entry into social work to 1983 when he took up a post as an *animateur*<sup>3</sup> on a summer scheme aimed at keeping youngsters out of trouble. He was by this time studying at the School for International Affairs in Le Havre and, having tired of the artificial environment of campus life, had moved out to his own accommodation in a low rent part of town. He continued with his *animateur* work on Wednesdays and Saturdays while completing his studies and in 1985 became the Director of a Cultural Centre aimed at tackling youth problems. For a four year period he gained experience in this segregated part of the city where many migrants lived, in outreach and street work, as well as through home visits and activities in the Centre, with young people, who were often unemployed, involved with drugs and petty crime.

In the late 1980s the French government introduced a new programme aimed at giving youngsters without formal educational qualifications a 'Second Chance' and in 1989 Abye took up a local authority post in Le Havre with responsibility for Training Centres and Youth, marking his formal association with the education and training activities which were to become the focus of much of his later work. Abye made good use of his networks to develop this programme and a year later he gained employment at a social work school and became involved in the training of social professionals in Normandy. With colleagues he was responsible for the introduction of the first professional training in the area (then at subdegree level) for *animateurs*.

Following lecturing appointments in Rouen at the Regional Institute for Social work Education (*Institut Régional du Travail Social*, later renamed the Institute of Social Development) between 1991 and 1995, Abye moved to the position of Director of the International Institute of Social Development. This was a period when, with financial assistance from the European Union, there were significant developments occurring in relation to European exchange programmes, multi-lateral seminars, staff mobility and curriculum developments. With the support of the Head of the Institute, Abye took the opportunity to meet people already engaged in networks concerned with advancing social professional theory and practice in Europe<sup>4</sup>, such as Friedrich Seibel (Germany) and Walter Lorenz (then in Ireland) and began to participate in some of the activities of a large and well established network (European Centre for Community Education, ECCE) (Seibel 1995). Through this he arranged student exchange programmes with a Swedish school and undertook some teaching there; and then became involved in developing the ECXPRESS network, which (under the leadership of Seibel and Lorenz) evaluated the impact of ERASMUS programmes on the social professions between 1985 and 1995 (Lorenz 1996).

Later on Abye took up a new position of Vice Director in Charge of Academic Affairs at the institute of Social Work Education in Grenoble in the South of France, a post he held for two years here before returning to the Institute of Social Development as accredited Director General (Head of the School). He remained here until he returned to Ethiopia and was the first and (up to the time of writing) the only Black person who held the position of Director General among the fourteen Regional Institutes for Social Work Education in France. As the only immigrant and black academic working in the Institute, Abye had also become interested

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Animateurs in France have roles and responsibilities similar to youth or community workers in some English speaking countries.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Abye's entry to the 'European social professional scene' was eased by the fact that he had learned some English at school in Ethiopia and was later able to develop his language skills informally.

in the work to promote anti-racist policies and practices then being undertaken in British social work schools: he thus met up with people in the UK including Naina Patel (then working for the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work) and Lena Dominelli. He also met others in the ECCE and ECSPRESS networks who were themselves directly involved in presenting black perspectives in teaching programmes in the UK and Netherlands and became part of a small group concerned with support and development of black perspectives, although he was also engaged in putting flesh on the bones of the more European concept of 'intercultural learning'. Meanwhile, the possibility that European initiatives in relation to ERASMUS projects might detract from anti-racist efforts nationally and at European level had already been noted (Williams 1996).

It was around this time (the mid 1990s) that Abye made a successful application to the European Union for funding under another scheme aimed at the alleviation of the specific problems encountered by immigrants and refugees: the proposal was aimed partly at curriculum and staff development in relation to teaching about social work practice with immigrants and refugees. Importantly, however, the application also included the opportunity for a time limited 'affirmative action' programme concerning the recruitment of minority ethnic students to a course which would lead to professional qualification; as well as scope for comparative work and exchanges with projects and institutions with similar concerns in five other countries (Finland, Greece, Italy, Sweden and UK). Although working in a country where, in theory, citizenship once established, disregarded ethnicity in universal policies and provisions (Rogers 1992), Abye and others recognised that the reality for many immigrants and refugees was a profound sense of marginalisation and even social exclusion. Being only too familiar with the consequences of inequalities and discrimination for some young people, Abye was concerned to operate a scheme which would promote integration at the level of qualification and employment prospects – and which would, in turn, inform social projects and interventions with disaffected youth in minority communities. The opportunities and challenges experienced by the project (as well as the context within which it was conceived and operated) were discussed in various papers and publications by Abye (see for instance, Abve 2001).

However, this was not the only European Project in which Abye took a leadership role. A previous project (PACTE 1994/5) with colleagues from the UK and Ireland exchanged experiences in relation to tackling drug abuse. Other projects focused on designing and implementing information systems for professionals working to increase employment opportunities for people with mental or physical disabilities (with colleagues in Austria and Portugal); and designing research and policies to maximise women's employment (with partners in Belgium, Italy, Spain and UK). During this period (the 1990s) Abye was significantly involved in developing national policies relating to employment of various minority groups in France as well as leading new initiatives in the field of social work education and developing his expertise in relation to research. It was on the basis of experience in social work education that he contributing to the professional education developments in Romania in the mid 1990s through an EU funded programme concerned with improvements in child care policies and practices. Less than a decade later his research expertise was more to the fore in his role as the national (French) Research Director on a ten country wide EU funded project concerned with the health and social care situation of ethnic minority older people.

# **Engaging in International Social Work**

Abye's experience and expertise in relation to both migration and social work education has been recognised internationally as well as nationally and regionally (that is, at European level). In 1989 he was contracted by a French NGO (*Enfants Réfugies du Monde*) to undertake a 3 month assessment and evaluation mission on the educational system for Mozambican refugees in Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Much later (2001) his expertise in the migration field was recognised by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) carrying out consultations on the 1951 Convention (on 2001). More recently (2003-4), drawing on the management experience gained at the Institute of Social Development, Abye advised the Cameroon government on the restructuring of the National School of Social Work, as well as contributing to the reform and restructuring of the University of Addis Ababa in Ethiopia, including drawing up plans for a new social work education programme.

As the result of this latter work Abye was formally invited to return to Ethiopia and take up a senior role at the University of Addis Ababa. His French employers had already been supportive in terms of establishing a collaborative programme with the Ethiopian University and agreed to a period of 'overlap' in terms of transition to his new role. In early 2005, Abye formally returned to Ethiopia and took up his current post at the University of Addis Ababa fulltime as Associate Vice President for International Affairs and Dean of the School of Social Work. This title covers a range of roles including strategic planning and capacity building and entails linking with other countries and international bodies (including through the French co-operation programme, for which he is the Technical Advisor). He has also put his international contacts to good use in re-establishing social work education in his home country. In fact, Ethiopia had previously had a social work education programme (leading to award of a Bachelor's degree) at the University of Addis Ababa from 1956 but this was closed down under the military regime in 1975 on the grounds that social workers were seen as subversive, but also that (in line with communist doctrines in other countries) the country no longer had need of them as social problems would disappear. People who were qualified as social workers or social work educators either left the country (sometimes taking up posts in international non-governmental organisations) or adapted to the situation, taking on new roles and tasks (personal communication).

As in many other countries, not least those of Central and Eastern Europe, where social work was being re-established in the 1990s after a long period when its value was denied, Ethiopia, under Abye's direction, has chosen to introduce social work education initially at masters level. Thus, the first students (recruited in 2004) were drawn from people who not only held first degrees but who, in many cases, were also qualified in other professions and were already employed in government departments or voluntary agencies concerned with social welfare. Significantly, a majority of these students and those in the most recent cohorts are men. Clearly, this is at variance with the gender balance on social work programmes around the globe but perhaps reflects the ongoing position of women in Ethiopia, where, despite public advertisements promoting education for girls, boys have been given priority in a society which still has strong patriarchal overtones. Inequalities evident at the secondary schooling and higher education stages are exacerbated in the world of work. Viewed from a western perspective, this creates a challenge to current and future educators and managers of social work in terms of the recruitment and promotion of women in this occupational sphere, as well as raising questions about whether and how social work as a profession should be contributing to culture change and promoting equal opportunities within the wider society.

It was to these students and more recent cohorts that Abye invited a range of people working in social work education in other countries to deliver lectures and workshops on a range of topics through a series of intensive (usually one week) courses. (see for instance, Askeland and Bradley 2007). His recognition of the need to develop the capacity and resources of the profession within the country is also evident in more recent initiatives with regard to a national doctoral programme: this is seen as preferable to (and more cost effective than) individuals undertaking doctoral studies abroad, whether through individual initiatives or formal partnerships, although the principle of inviting foreign experts to contribute teaching and supervision skills is also being extended to this programme. In 2009, Abye plans to establish social work education at undergraduate level but the short term need, to develop the country's own personnel with regard to teaching, research and management capacity – and the belief in the importance of indigenous or locality specific education and practice are evident in the initial strategy.

Meanwhile, prior to Abye's engagement with social work development in his home country and alongside his increasing activity at the European level, Abye began his involvement with social work networks and professional associations internationally. He attended his first IASSW conference (in Hong Kong) in 1996 and was subsequently invited to join the Board as a co-opted member. Following his attendance at the Board meeting in Jerusalem in 1998, he volunteered France as the location for an International Congress in 2002 when a previous invitation form another country had to be withdrawn. This was a bold move as it required him to bring together diverse occupational groups and associations within France in order to establish a national organising committee. This would undertake the day-to-day work of negotiating a site and venue for the conference in consultation with the IASSW Board and then take major responsibilities for mounting and running the Congress alongside the input from the Scientific Committee in selecting speakers and papers for presentation.

It was partly in preparation for this role that Abye was invited to join the Scientific Committee of the IASSW Congress in Montreal (2000), as well as undertaking significant work with personnel within the social professional field in France and with other bodies which might be called on to support the initiative. In the event, the Montpellier Congress was judged to be a major success (in terms of the professional and cultural programme) by those who attended. It also demonstrated exemplary financial management, resulting in a healthy profit which the Association was able to use to subsidise attendance of educators from less affluent countries at the following conference (Adelaide 2004). In recognition of his work on this project nationally, Abye was awarded the Medal of Citizen of Honour (Médaille du citoyen d'honneur) by the City of Montpellier, an honour indeed for someone whose first contact with that city had been as a student in 1981 and given the city's proximity to a part of France where racist views were then predominant in politics. It is likely that Abye's undoubted success in co-ordinating the various bodies associated with the Montpellier Congress demonstrated his leadership talents to an international audience and established his reputation as a potential candidate for the role of President of IASSW.

Abye attributes his success in the elections held in 2004 also to the efforts of the previous President, Lena Dominelli. A priority of her leadership had been to shift the focus and membership of the IASSW from a predominantly northern/western association, still reflecting its European origins and the current economic strength and other advantages of American and other English speaking members, to an association which was more truly representative of

social work schools internationally<sup>5</sup>. Abye therefore 'inherited' an association in which 'change' had already been initiated and this was perhaps evident – to Abye and others – in tensions within the Board in the early stages of his Presidency.

Abye's aims – to continue with promoting diversity within the association and to hold together (and where necessary assist in strengthening) the regional bodies representing schools – were indeed a challenge and have been the focus of much of his effort since 2004, with some indications of success. Regional bodies have been revived or re-established in Africa and Asia; and work is in progress, following the Congress in Santiago de Chile (2006), on re-establishing a representative regional association in South America. Meanwhile, the earlier risk of a split from the International Association by the European Association of Schools of Social Work has been averted, and the North American region remains strong. Particular task groups (for example, concerned with language diversity and with mutual learning through student placements abroad and staff exchanges) seek to address power imbalances and normative assumptions in relation to use of language and partnership arrangements. Additionally, a continuing healthy balance in the funds of the association enables it to provide seed-corn funding (on a competitive basis) to new networks and initiatives which promote international learning through a range of projects.

The association has also demonstrated its support for colleagues in the continent of Africa by holding its 34th Congress in South Africa in 2008. However, the future direction of the association remains uncertain. Might it continue with a broadly 'political agenda' aimed at redressing past imbalances and inequalities in the profession internationally, for instance, through promoting particularly the participation of social work schools and colleagues from less developed countries? Or should it emphasise the service role of the Association, for instance, through fund raising activities and expanding its role in consultancy work? (This was a previous feature of the Association's work under some Presidents and when funding was available to employ a General Secretary). Perhaps these two goals are not in fact incompatible, although they may take different personalities leading on different activities to achieve them.

#### Conclusion

The life and career of Abye Tasse to this point has been many faceted. As a migrant he has drawn on his experience of two cultures to transcend many divisions and to promote developments which address the inequalities and disadvantages frequently experienced by migrants and also other minority groups. He has backed up his practice based knowledge in the social professional field with theoretical precepts and research data and, as an academic, has contributed to the creation and dissemination of knowledge, including through his many guest lectures and conference presentations, his reports and publications (see below) and through consultancy work. He has built on experience gained at local level to extend his activities to national, regional and international levels and has used his analytical and interpersonal skills and linguistic abilities to 'understand' situations, propose and implement strategies for change and negotiate with people who hold the political power and financial resources needed to effect change.

With regard to his role in relation to IASSW, while there may be question marks around its future direction, it seems fair to say that the period of Abye's Presidency of IASSW has been

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> This was notwithstanding the efforts of an earlier President, Dame Eileen Younghusband to make the association 'truly international' in a very different historical context, in the 1960s.

one of transition for the organisation and that he has managed inherent conflicts and rivalries at Board level with tact and skill, while keeping in focus the main aims of the Association. Under his Presidency the number of Schools of Social Work in Membership has increased, not least through his efforts in welcoming the Chinese schools, established in large numbers over the past decade, into membership (Abye, 2008). Additionally, Asia, a vast and diverse region, which encompasses the largest and fastest growing countries in the world (in terms of population size and economies, China and India) that has not as yet featured greatly in the membership and activities of the Association is becoming more evident in terms of its contribution to the Association and to the development of social work education, more generally.

Perhaps one of Abye's most significant achievements has been in shifting internal and external perceptions of 'who can lead': he has demonstrated that 'people other than white Europeans' have the experience, skills and expertise to 'manage' a major professional association (currently run on a voluntary basis with only very limited administrative assistance to the president) and to represent the interests and mission of social workers globally to others inside and outside social work education. He has also continued the work started by the previous President in re-establishing collaborative work with the officers of the organisations that share a common origin, the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), to strengthen the voice of social professionals in international arenas and on global concerns.

Abye also sees the potential for developments in a number of areas, for instance, to extend collaborative activities to the International Consortium for Social Development (ICSD) and to (re)establish more active relationships with various UN bodies. However, the range of other activities in which he is involved, not least related to the challenges of progressing developments in Ethiopia, have led Abye to the decision not to stand for a second term of office as President of IASSW. This may be a lost opportunity for the Association but is probably the right decision for this man of many talents.

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