

Dictionary of **African Biography**

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Editors in Chief

VOLUME 4 : MAAL—ODHIA



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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2012

Michael Adonai In DAB

*Three great Eritrean personalities have been selected for **Dictionary of African biography** - comedian Alemayo Kahsay, writer and researcher Alemseged Tesfai & painter and writer Michael Adonai.*

Description

In the spirit of The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, American National Biography, and Africa American National Biography – all three published by Oxford University Press—Dictionary of African Biography is a major biographical dictionary covering the lives and legacies of notable African men and women from all eras and walks of life. This groundbreaking resource tells the full story of the African continent through the lives of its people.

The rich history of the African people has been unduly neglected in the scholarly literature, and reliable reference material is in short supply. This trend has begun to change, however, and in recent years many new historical discoveries have been made. Much of this research is designed as a corrective to the long tradition of inadequate treatment by scholars. Although scholarship on Africa is flourishing, very little of this research has yet filtered down into accessible reference works; well designed reference material is essential to promote further scholarly inquiry, and education, and to satisfy increasing interest among non specialist audiences.

Although there have some isolated instances of successful biography of Africans, there is no single resource that provides comprehensive coverage. Older reference works focus unevenly on the colonial period, European adventurers, and Egyptian dynasties. There is very little attention given to the full range of African lives, and rarely is the continent treated as a whole. As a result our picture of Africa's history and its people is incomplete. A comprehensive biographical dictionary will greatly increase our understanding of the African continent and have a transformative effect on education and research.

As the most wide-reaching reference project on Africa to date, DAB will be a means of codifying the explosion of new research. Entries will be written by contributing scholars from Africa studies departments the world over. Each entry has been reviewed by the editorial board to ensure only reliable, high-quality material is published.

DAB contains nearly 2 million words in nearly 2,100 entries, each with bibliography, ranging from 750 to 2,000 words. It will have a comprehensive six volumes and is published in a hardcover edition for specialists and libraries.

Library Journal Best Reference 2011

Features

- Extensive: over 2,100 articles on Africans from prehistory to the present and from all regions and countries of Africa.
- Scholarly: articles written by experts in the field of African history.

About the Author(s)

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Michael Adonai (1962-) Eritrean painter and writer, was born on 5 December 1962 in the Eritrean capital of Asmara. His father Adonai Haile was a government employee and his mother Ghimja Ghebremariam a housewife. Michael was the fifth of seven siblings, four boys and three girls.

From his early childhood, he was interested in drawing and painting, his most significant influence being his brother, Berhane Adonai, senior to Michael by ten years, a well-known artist and educator in his own right. At the age of 7, Michael joined Comboni School in Asmara, a primary and secondary school run by Italian Comboni Missionaries, where he received his first basic arts education. Michael grew up during Eritrea's thirty year liberation struggle against Ethiopia (1961-1991), which in 1975 forced the family to take refuge in Ala, south of Asmara. Here, Michael had his first contact with Eritrean people's liberation front (EPLF), one of the two armed liberation movements operating in Eritrea, which he joined in September 1977.

After a six-month military training for younger recruits Michael and several others were selected to study with the Division of Art in Fah, then Sahel province. Here, he was reunited with his brother Berhane, who, having joined the EPLF in 1974, served as the head of the Art Branch until de facto independence in 1991 and was one of its most formative teachers. From 1978 to 1981, Michael's group was instructed in various techniques and materials as well as selected aspects of art history, including concepts of art as "revolutionary culture." Above all, the art Branch produced applied art for the liberation struggle, such as posters and book illustrations. Works were realist or naturalist and often made use of socialist iconography (e.g., raised fists, Kalashnikovs, victorious fighters). Material was initially scarce, with students occasionally practicing on the back of milk powder wrappings; insects, plants, and expired medicine were often substituted for colors. Especially in the early years, art practice was often interrupted by war, with Michael occasionally wondering why he was being trained in the arts while others were called to the front line. Michael was eventually called to arms in 1979, which left a lasting impression on him and influenced his paintings.

Apart from emotive rural and ethnic representations, such as the 1980 Tigre portrait *Mother and Baby*, he began to concentrate on topics of war. During the 1978 strategic retreat of the EPLF, the Art Branch moved to Arag in Sahel, where it remained until de facto independence in 1991. Arag provided a more conducive environment for the

artists, with better infrastructure, such as an underground exhibition hall, and easier access to materials. Especially from the mid-1980s, art books, tools, and paints were sent in from the Eritrean diaspora, foreign artists started to visit from Sudan. Although Michael considered the 1980s as his training years, he was already gaining momentum as a painter: he also started to write fiction. In 1983 his novella *At the Bottom of the Rock* was published in Tigrinya, a story about a mother torn by the civil war between the two Eritrean liberation movements, the EPLF and the Eritrean liberation front (ELF). In 1985 one of his pencil drawings placed first in an art competition; in 1986 he again won first prize with his painting *New Eyes and Jubilee* when a much bigger competition was staged by the EPLF. His second novella, *The Verdict of Mount Array* (1985), another story about the civil war, finished second in the 1987 Third Literary Competition.

Thereafter, Michael and other artists went on a research tour in then Seraye Province. This trip was to have an enormous influence on him. For one, he collected material for his principal novel, *Windows of Mai Mene* (1998) (featuring his oil painting *Supplication for Rain*, 1996, on the cover), which dealt with political exploitation during the devastating 1984 drought. More importantly, he began to study Christian Orthodox Church art. Influenced by Byzantine and Coptic Church art from Egypt, Michael began to experiment with its formulaic, one-dimensional iconography. From the early 1990s onward, he began to develop his unique and renowned style, which merged a limited range of strong colors (often orange and blue) with stylization, cubistic elements, and traditional patterns from the Eritrean lowlands.

While he continued to draw on his experience as a liberation fighter and the plight of Eritreans in times of hardship and war, Michael also began to portray post independence daily life and occasionally returned to more naturalistic rural and ethnic scenes, especially for commissions. Two other awards followed post-independence; another first prize fore *Hope* at a national painting competition in 1993 and the Raymok prize in 2002, the highest national award, for his acrylic painting *The Trauma of Africa* (2001). After 1982 Michael had numerous group and solo exhibitions in Eritrea, Africa, Europe, the Middle and Far East, and the United States. Married to his second wife Lemlem Tecklehaimanot, in 1998, with whom he had three sons and a daughter (and a daughter from a previous marriage), he has lived and worked as a full-time professional artist in Asmara since independence.

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