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By
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Respected guests,
Dear Brothers & Sisters,

Before starting the main topic of my speech, which is *The Registration of Blin in the Unicode Standard*, I would like to give some general information about education in Eritrea, and how Eritrean languages in general were treated, during the colonial and occupation period. I will also try to explain the developments of Blin writing and literature, before its registration into the Unicode Standard.

When we talk about Blin writing, it does not mean that the Blin people have been analphabetic up to now. The Blin people have been reading and writing like other Eritreans, since education was introduced in Eritrea in the 1940s, but not in their own language, the Blin language.

Eritrea was an Italian colony from 1890 up to 1941. During this Italian colonial period, there was generally speaking, no educational opportunity for all native Eritreans. Only very few Eritreans were allowed to learn; and they were those who were supposed to serve the Italian colonial administration. The education given to such Eritreans was only up to the 4th grade, and was in the Italian language.

When Italy was defeated by the allied forces, led by Great Britain in 1941, Eritrea remained under British administration for about 10 years; from 1941 until 1952. It was during this British administration period, that all native Eritreans were for the first time exposed to educational opportunities. Before that time, reading and writing was limited to very few religious leaders.

During the British administration, the languages of instruction in primary schools were *Tigrigna* and *Arabic*. This system continued until Eritrea was occupied by Ethiopia in 1962. The Ethiopians had soon replaced Tigrigna and Arabic, with Amharic, as a language of instruction in primary schools.

The above mentioned facts tell us, how all the Eritrean languages were generally suppressed, during the Italian and Ethiopian occupation period. Especially, the minority languages, like Blin, lacked the due attention they deserved, to develop into written languages.

The Blin people, and especially the young educated generation, were very much concerned about the fate of their language, which remained only an oral language, for such a long time close to the end of the 20th century.

Starting from the early 1970s there was a growing interest, among the young Blin generation, especially university students, to write their theses projects or other articles in the English language, about the Blin people's history, language and culture.

From such works, I would like to mention some, like, "*The Blin of Bogos*", by the late *Michael Ghaber*, which was originally written as a thesis project submitted to the then Haile Selassie I University of Addis Ababa in 1971. Yet another important document is , "*The Blin Language: A long Struggle for survival 1984*". This was a paper presented in the International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, at Addis Ababa University, By *Abba Kiflemariam Fadega*. And still another important document among the others is, "*The Origin and development of Blin 1986*", by *Kiflemariam Hamde*. This was a Blin language project sponsored by the Asmara University Institute of African Studies.

The Blin people in the Diaspora have played a leading roll, in the writing of Blin, especially in subjects directly related to the use of language. The few books in Blin until now; such as a Blin to Blin dictionary, phonetics and grammar, mathematics for beginners, and others, were all published in the diaspora.

The Blin people in diaspora, especially the first refugees in Europe, who lived in the Scandinavian countries, like Sweden and Norway, have also played an active roll for the preservation and development of the Blin language and culture. This was done by being organized in Blin Language and Culture Associations, arranging Blin cultural evenings, and teaching Blin children in their mother language.

Such Blin associations and forums were later further extended into other European countries, as we are today gathered, her in the UK, in the first Conference on Blin Language and Culture, arranged by the Blin Debanma Forum.

After the independence of Eritrea in 1991, the provisional government of Eritrea had soon declared, that primary education should be given for all Eritreans, in their mother language. Thus, the long awaited mother tongue education for Blin children started in 1997.

The issue of what kind of alphabet should the Blin language adapt, was some what complicated from the outset. In Eritrea, after the declaration of mother tongue education, primary education books were first translated from Tigrigna to Blin in Ge'ez alphabet, by Blin academicians. Later on it was decided, probably by the education authorities, that Blin should be written in Latin alphabet. Thus, primary education for Blin children is now given in the Latin alphabet.

The Blin Diaspora communities in Scandinavia, and indeed, the biggest majority of those, who were organized in Blin language and culture associations, had a clear view on the issue of Blin alphabet. We thought that the Ge'ez alphabet, which is used for writing other Semitic languages of Eritrea, like Tigrigna and Tigre, was the best choice for our Blin Language. We had even expressed our views by writing a letter to the Ministry of Education in Eritrea in the early 1990s.

We had, and still have ample reasons for our choice of Ge'ez alphabet. Arguments which support our reasons can be summarized like these:-

1. Blin is a Cushitic language, belonging to the Agau language branch, which is called Central Cushitic. Both Cushitic languages like Blin, and Semitic languages like Tigre and Tigrigna belong to the bigger language family, called the Afroasiatic. Thus, both the Semitic and Cushitic languages of Eritrea are genetically related and share many linguistic characteristics. The phonemes or the language sounds of Blin, Tigre and Tigrigna are almost the same. These languages all have the ejectives, (t',c',k',q -ጠ፡ጨ፡ፑ፡ቐ), pharyngeal consonants, (h', 'e-ሐ፡ዑ) and velars,(x-ኸ). Some of these languages also share the labialized forms , like (k'w,qw,xw,ngw-ቁ፡ቆ፡ኸ፡ኹ፡) etc. As the Ge'ez alphabet has well developed letters for such sounds, it is easier to write Blin with Ge'ez, than with the Latin alphabet.

The relationship of these languages is not only limited to language sounds, but also words. These are languages which have co-existed together for many centuries or millenniums, and have many shared words.

2. As the official languages or working languages of Eritrea are Tigrigna and Arabic, it is very helpful for Blin children to start their primary education with an alphabet which is also used for the writing of one of the official languages, Tigrigna. This is like killing two birds with the same stone.

3. Blin children are learning to write and read in Latin, in their small villages. When they come to the towns, it is not the Blin language or the Latin alphabet which is used. It is the Tigrigna language and the Ge'ez alphabet by which all the administrative works are running. A Blin child after spending five years, in primary school, he/she can't even read a letter written in one of the official languages of Eritrea.

There are many arguments like this, against the use of Latin alphabet for Blin. However, the Blin people should not be divided in such issues at this point and time. Our country has been passing through difficult times even after independence. Let us postpone such arguments to the future, where the Blin people in diaspora and at home can have the chance of discussing such issues in a peaceful atmosphere.

In this juncture I would like to mention that almost all the Blin people who wrote some thing in their language Blin, have used the Ge'ez syllabary to write Blin, and it was pertinent to develop a standard for writing Blin in Ge'ez.

Thus, a meeting of Blin authors was called with the aim of standardizing the writing of the Blin language in Ge'ez. That meeting was held on the 25th and 26th of June 1994, in Stockholm, Sweden.

The Blin authors who attended on the above mentioned meeting were: I myself, Kiflemariam Hamde and Fessehazion Zemicael, and we have agreed upon on the following points:-

1. The number of Ge'ez letters needed for writing Blin.
2. The correct shape of two Ge'ez letter groups, the velar nasal stop, “ገ-nge” (7 letters) and its labialized form “ገ-ngwe” (5 letters). These two letter groups were dropped from the list of Ge'ez letters after 1882, and many Blin writers were unfamiliar on how they were written.
3. The choice of some Blin grammatical and other terms.

A detailed outcome of the above mentioned recommended standardization agreement is now available in a small pamphlet, called, “ጠፍሐት ብሊና ክታብ ቱገ” or “Some Standardization of Blin Writing”. (We were unable to distribute this paper earlier, because, the above mentioned two Blin letter groups were not introduced in Ge'ez software programmes.)

After standardization, one of the most important works to be done, in relation to the Blin language and its writing system, was its registration into the Unicode Standard System.

The Unicode Standard is a character coding system designed to support the worldwide interchange, processing and display of the written texts of diverse languages and technical disciplines of the modern world.

The Blin language, as effective from March 31, 2005 has gained a recognition in the international Unicode Standard. In addition, its writing system has also gained full recognition.

I have already written an article, with the details about the registration of Blin in the Unicode Standard. As copies of the same article are available for every body here, I don't want to take your time repeating the same details.

But, as I have experienced with some of my friends, it is not easy for every body to understand, the meaning of Blin, and its writing system, being recognized in the international Unicode Standard.

In simple words, if a language has a unique alphabet, or let us call it letters, it will be impossible for the users of this language, to communicate in the

internet, or website, using these unique letters, until the letters are encoded in the international Unicode Standard.

Twelve letters, with a distinct Blin sounds, are now recognized in the name of the Blin language, and are encoded in the Unicode Standard, among the already existing Ge'ez letters. The Ge'ez letters are also called Tigrigna or Amharic letters, by adding some sounds of these languages. We can now call the Ge'ez letters, Blin letters, because they have also accommodated all the sounds of the Blin language.

For a language to be recognized in the international Unicode Standard it must present a history of documents in that language. This was not an easy demand for the Blin language, which was only an oral language until the very recent years.

In this connection, as it is stated in my article, I would like to thank all the people who contributed immensely on the growth of Blin literature from the time of **Prof. Leo Reinisch** in 1882 until 2001, where a list of 51 Blin documents were presented to the Unicode authorities.

Prof. Leo Reinisch was a distinguished Austrian Scholar of his time. He was the dean of the Philosophy Faculty, and later on the director of The Vienna University in Austria. This man travelled to many areas, from Egypt to Somalia, and studied many languages of this region.

As his attention was more focused on the Cushitic languages, he is now called the father of the Cushitic languages.

Leo Reinisch's contribution to the Blin language was an outstanding contribution. He visited the Blin land, which was called the **Bogos Land**, before the colonial era. He stayed for several months at a time among the Blin people, starting from October 1875. He studied the Blin language, and wrote four books, including a Blin dictionary, grammar, and a collection of Blin stories and animal fables. Leo Reinisch mentions in the introduction of his Blin dictionary, that he brought with him to Vienna a young Blin man, called **Yohannes Musa**. He says that the young Blin man stayed with him, for two years, and it was from this young Blin man that he was able to learn the Blin language very deeply. I am still wondering if that young Blin man had safely returned to his Blin land, Bogos.

At last I would like to mention the name of another very important person, who has contributed outstandingly, for the registration of Blin into the *Unicode Standard*, and he is my respected friend *Mr. Daniel Yacob*, who is luckily present among us here in this conference. Mr. Daniel works in a charitable organization, called the Ge'ez Frontier foundation in the USA.

The process of the registration of Blin into Unicode could have been very difficult, had it not been for the hard work of Mr. Daniel. It all started in 2001, when Mr. Daniel contacted Kiflemariam Hamde, showing his interest to contribute some thing for the Blin language.

Kiflemariam, introduced him to me, and we have been working together for the last 4 years to register the Bin language in the Unicode Standard. Actually, Mr. Daniel did almost all the difficult works of computer designing the Blin letters. We have then co-authored the application for the registration of Blin in to the Unicode Standard, which was submitted by all the three persons who were engaged in this work, me , Kiflemariam and Mr. Daniel.

The Blin language is now fully registered in the Unicode Standard, and a new Blin Ge'ez software is now developed to write Blin or other languages, like Tigrigna, Tigre or Amharic.

Mr. Daniel has brought with him the first CD, of the Blin Ge'ez software, which will be distributed freely among the participants of this conference. As the number of this CD is very limited, I would appreciate very much, if people who are really interested to write in the Ge'ez alphabet, take a copy of this CD, at least for the time being.

I thank you very much for your attention.