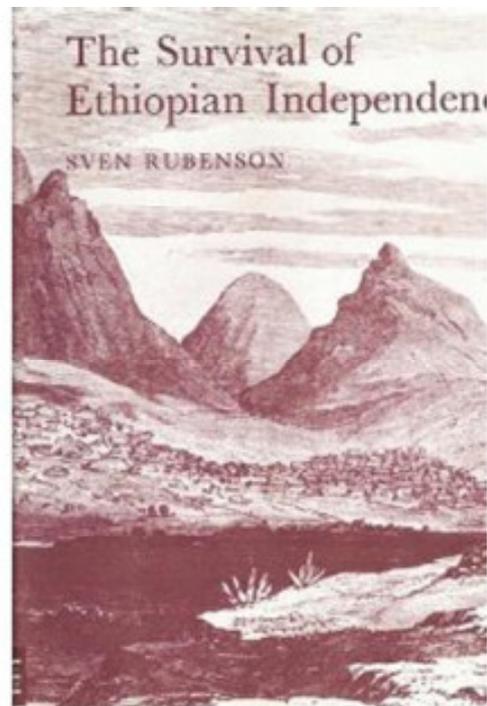
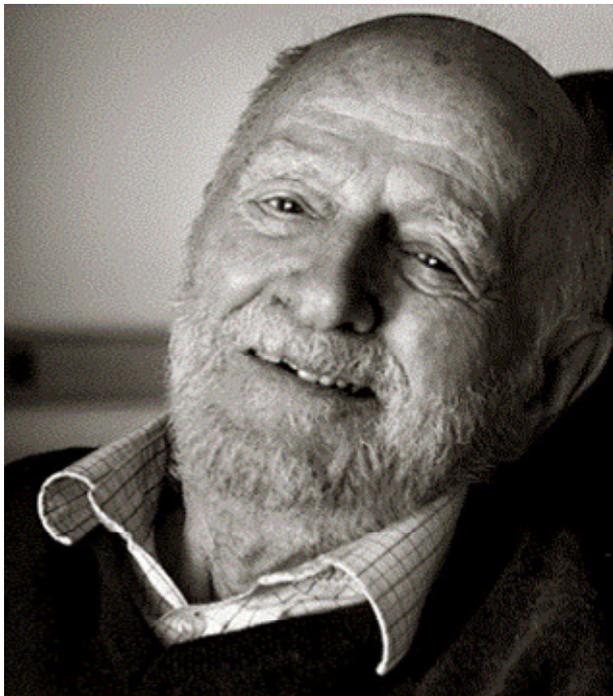


Professor Sven Rubenson and the Construction of Ethiopian Collective Identity

By Tsegaye Tegenu, PhD

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I am very sorry to hear about the death of Professor emeritus Sven Rubenson and Ethiopian loss of its greatest son. He passed away on October 27, 2013 at the age of 92. We will miss him as his works have left an imprint upon our hearts and thinking. Professor Sven Rubenson studied the social carrier and the symbolic codes of Ethiopians unflinching defense of freedom. His book "The Survival of Ethiopian Independence" is a monumental work testifying to his theoretical and empirical contribution to the foundation of the collective identity of the Ethiopian people.



Sven Rubenson was born in 1921 in Sweden. His parents emigrated to Jamestown in North Dakota, USA, when he was just eight months. In 1930 the family returned back to Sweden as a result of the 1929 Depression. At the age of 14 he became interested in history and developed a strong sense of justice. When he heard about the Italian occupation of Ethiopia he got angry shaking his fists at the sky. His father said to him, "you do not need to do that, act after your conviction".

It took him some more years to start his lifetime engagement in Ethiopia. He had to finish his high school and university preparatory courses in Sweden. In 1947, he flew to Ethiopia to work as a missionary and teacher. In Ethiopia he started a school where both boys and girls were taught and the school was visited by Emperor Haile Selassie. In 1954 he submitted his L.Phil. dissertation on Ethiopian history at the University of Lund.

Sven Rubenson lived thirty years in Ethiopia and was appointed professor at the University of Addis Ababa. He has published a number of books and articles on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Ethiopian history. His famous book "Survival" (which he used to call it), took him 20 years to finish. He had to travel all over the world in search for documents to account for the active foreign policy of the Ethiopian Emperors in defending the sovereignty of their country. His reading of domestic sources went as far as knowing the ear wearing of princes (on which side of the ear that the jewelry was hanging) and the number of buttons their coat had.

"Survival" was the outcome of his understanding of the cultural and civic symbols of Ethiopia. Sven Rubenson analyzed the social carrier of the freedom symbol (the princes and kings), and the implicit rule of conduct and social routines that define the collectivity identity of the group. Survival is a book about the construction of the collective identity of Ethiopians at period of modern state formation. I feel that Ethiopians who have not yet read the book may miss an important part of their life, a sense of their belongingness to a freedom loving social groups of past centuries.

Two years ago, asked about his thirty years stay in Ethiopia, Professor Sven Rubenson, said that he "misses the country" and the "common sense" he felt that many Ethiopians had. The good sense that the Ethiopians share and their sensitivity for other humans and the community is currently illustrated by their ability to collectively perceive the uncivilized characteristics of Saudi Arabians. It was this basic ability of judgment which Professor Svenson missed while living at his retirement home Ribbingska in Lund, Sweden. Brought up with a strong sense of justice, it was never difficult for him to perceive, write about, build and

miss the Ethiopian common sense. I am being honored to know him and am very grateful for his scholarly advice.

Tsegaye Tegenu

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