

## Dual Problems: The story of a drunk and a smoker

Written by Natnael Yebio W.

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When Haile, a pathological drinker, went to the village clinic for a blood test, the doctor simply told him that after a meticulous search, he could, to his profound dismay, find some traces of blood in his almost shriveled veins.

“I don’t understand,” mumbled Haile. “You mean there are traces of alcohol in my otherwise pure and dignified blood?”

“No” said the doctor. “There are traces of blood in your otherwise tainted and wretched alcohol.”

Haile lived for another two years and expired. The Good Lord had been kind to him.

“Poor Haile,” sighed his friends. “He died at the prime age of 60.” He could have drunk for another 40 years.

“I know Hailino is not dead,” sniffed one of his close friends during the funeral services. “He simply switched bars; from earthly bars to heavenly bars.”

“What was the cause of Haile’s death?” asked acquaintances. Liver poisoning! What else. He drank much faster than the liver could purge the toxin inherent in alcoholic drinks such as gin or areki. The liver’s detoxifying process malfunctioned and Haile had to go.

Another village and another season, this time it is Tesfai, a pathological smoker who always carried two patches of cigarettes in case he forgot one in the last bar he visited. Tesfai experienced pain in the chest and had some problems breathing, so he went to the village doctor for lung x-ray.

When the nurses brought the x-ray plate to the doctor, he simply couldn’t believe his eyes. The lungs looked more like a fish’s gills than anything else; they became worn out.

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“What’s up doc?” yelled Tesfai. Anything wrong with my dignified lungs?”

“This is a miracle!” exclaimed the doctor. “I must report this to Nature Magazine?”

“What miracle?” asked Tesfai, perplexed.

“You must be an amphibian to have lungs of this shape and texture,” sighed the doctor and told Tesfai the bad news.

Tesfai lived another two years and succumbed to cancer. He smoked his last cigarette on his death bed. Some people admired his resilience and tenacity in the face of impending death. He never gave up smoking. He died for his principles.

Haile and Tesfai are both married with children who carried the burden of their father’s sins.

While Haile’s house reeked of alcohol and gave off rancid smell in the morning, Tesfai’s house looked like a small iron smelting factory without a chimney.

Genet, Haile’s wife tells her story.

“When I married Haile, it was through thick and thin, till death do us part, and all that stuff. Then he began to drink for no obvious reason. All my life I fought day and night to make him stop, in vain. According to him, only sickly people avoided drinks. The real people drank and never reeled or staggered going back home.

“Getting home past midnight or in the small hours of the morning, my husband saw his children

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only in bed fast asleep after waiting for him in vain. Sometimes he would wake them up and challenge them to a fist fight. He would lunge on them with a clenched fist, miss his mark and fall flat on the ground. The children would cry.

“One day I asked him for divorce. He had never had such a laugh in his life. In a moment of total drunkenness he told me he had a mistress. It was then that I told him to stay away from me. He understood.”

Stega, Tesfai’s wife, looks back at her miserable life.

“When I married Tesfai it never occurred to me that I had to deal with a human locomotive. To be frank, I married a smoke or maybe an incense burner. One day I remember getting up at three in the morning choking and gasping for air. He was beside me, sitting up on the bed and smoking. I told him the ashes he was tossing on the floor could be his own. He coughed blood. His eyes shriveled. His fingers took the shape of a bird’s claws. He smoked to the end of his earthly life, inhaling deeply till his lungs looked like smoked salmon. He never regretted his mistakes.”

In our culture, the tobacco plant is said to have sprouted from the feces of Judas Iscariot. The story had to be invented to explain in vivid term just how unclean and unholy smoking was and still is.

It is said that in the past a certain Abyssinian king was preparing to do battle with a spiteful enemy when all of a sudden he noticed that some of his foot-soldiers kept falling exhausted on the ground. The king enquired about the strange happening and was told that since the soldiers were addicted to snuff (powdered tobacco) they were unable to make it to the battle ground on foot without the stuff. The king flew into range and decreed that henceforth any soldier found taking snuff would have his lips torn off. And in order to lend divine character to the decree, the church came up with the Judas hypothesis, ignorant of the fact that the tobacco plant was native to the Americans and had been discovered only in the 16th century.

This doesn’t mean, however, alcohol and cigarettes are impure by themselves. In the past, tobacco was used to ease pain or to fight certain ailments related to sinusitis. Similarly, alcohol was used and is still used (mostly in mixtures) to cure infection or nasal or pectoral congestion or even to ease kidney-related pain. But it is the doctor who should do the prescribing. We should never be our own doctors.

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In our tradition the drunkard is considered the most wretched of mortals. That's why we say that drinking first makes you a roaring lion and finally turns you into a yelping dog. And some downtown wits add that one can drink up to five pegs of areki with no problem but afterwards it is the areki that begins to 'drink' the 'drinker'.

But the strange thing about the dual problems is that while both drinking and smoking are equally hazardous to health, the former seems to have more followers than the latter in the present world.

For example, an Eritrean wife with sound mind would prefer a husband who drinks to one who smokes. Why? The Judas factor is still there.

When we were young, my friends would have sewa to drink the whole week following Easter or Christmas and with impunity, but just talk about cigarettes and you are labeled the son of perdition worthy of eternal punishment.

My friend Michael tells me that he had his first smoke in a cinema hall. He was ten years old. It was the year 2000.

"I went to the cinema to try my fist cigarette," he says. In the darkness of the cinema hall, he takes his seat and whips out a cigarette from his pocket, turns around and asks the shadow sitting right behind him to light his cigarette. The shadow obliges. The film goes on. Michael puffs away very happily. He coughs only once. He passes his first test. The lights come back at the intermission, Michael turns around as if by instinct and what does he see?

The shadow now assumes flesh and blood and happens to be his uncle.

Michael wets his pants. He failed his second test.

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As for the production of future drunkards, the holiday sewa which was consumed by both the old and the young members of the family stood as sure guarantee causing many married lives, which could otherwise have gone smoothly, to take the wrong turn and perish.