



ZEMENAWI  
a contemporary  
Amharic typeface

by Emnet Affework



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## RESEARCH

### A brief history on the development of language & written communication methods in Ethiopia

**LANGUAGE** The Sabeian alphabet of Old Southern Arabia was brought to Ethiopia in approximately 500 BC. It has 29 letters, consists only of consonants (the one vowel being implied), and uses the boustrophedon style, which alternates from right-to-left and left-to-right. While the Ge'ez language of Ethiopia and Eritrea had been present since about 2000 BC,<sup>1</sup> it only established a written script, called the fidel, after 500 BC, adopting 24 letters from Sabeian (in both form and direction) and 2 letters from Greek. Then upon the nation's conversion to Christianity in the 4th century AD, 6 vowels were added and the direction was changed from left-to-right. Sometime after the 7th century AD, the Amharic language and script were born, taking 26 letters from Ge'ez and adding extra characters, making a total of 33 consonants and 7 vowels (231 characters in all). The Sabeian and Ge'ez languages are now extinct, the exception being Ge'ez as the liturgical language of Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Churches, and in Ethiopian synagogues. Other than Amharic, the Orominga, Tigrigna, Sebatbeit, Me'en, and Tigre, among other Ethiopian languages, also derive their written forms from the Ge'ez alphabet,<sup>2</sup> as the latter is used to write all of the former.

**WRITING METHODS & TYPOGRAPHY** During the pre-Christian and Christian eras in Ethiopia, people wrote on hard surfaces such as rock, clay, and various metals. The Bible was translated from Greek to Ge'ez, and at the end of the 5th century Christian missionaries brought parchment to Ethiopia. Other books in Greek, Arabic, and Hebrew were translated into Ge'ez as well. Scribes wrote with quill and ink on parchment, and branna (manuscripts) flourished throughout the country.<sup>3</sup>

With the advent of printing press, books in Ge'ez were printed in Europe. In 1513, about 100 years after Johannes Gutenberg's modification and popularization of movable type and the printing press in the West, a German typographer and Ethiopian monks printed a Book of Psalms in Ge'ez and the monks helped create type small enough for the presses. The first permanent printing press of Ethiopia (and of Eastern Africa as a whole) was introduced to the country in 1863; subsequently other missionary presses were established, and the government printing press was imported from Europe in 1906 at the request of the King. When private commercial presses arrived, various literature, books, and texts were disseminated; libraries were established and literacy and knowledge increased.<sup>4</sup> Given the physical constraints of the typewriter, attempts to modify it for the Ge'ez alphabet

were fruitless and it was skipped completely in the development of Ethiopian type.

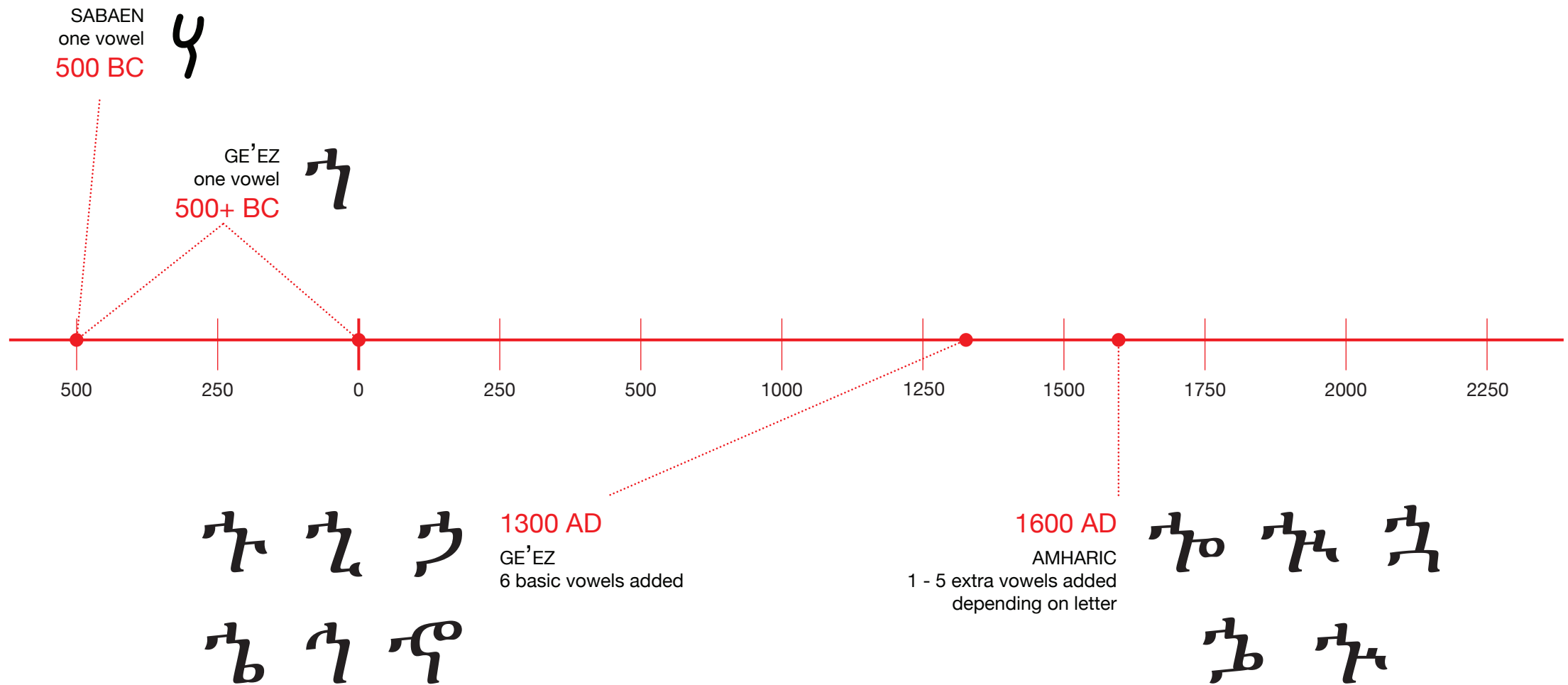
Eventually the computer age rolled around, and digital type replaced metal type. In the 1980s, once Unicode had expanded its possible characters set and computers had enough memory for the 231 Ge'ez letters, Dr. Aberra Molla digitized the Ethiopian alphabet. The result was released first in 1987 as ModEth, a Disk Operating System platform specifically for the language, and then it was transferred to EthioWord, an add-on to Microsoft Word for the Windows operating system.<sup>5</sup> Then in 2003, designers John Hudson and Geraldine Wade developed Nyala, an OpenType TrueType Ge'ez typeface for Windows Vista operating system and onward;<sup>6</sup> it is now available for Macs as well. At some point the Unicode typeface, GF Zemen, was created. But since its and Nyala's release, no professional Ge'ez typefaces have been developed.

### An increasingly globalized world: A call for creating non-Latin (and Ethiopian) typefaces

**THE WORLD AT LARGE** Advances in and the spread of technology and transportation have lead to an increasingly globalized world whose nations become more connected with and dependant on each other, those connections facilitated by various manners of exchange and communication. Although globalization has contributed to the widespread use of English, it also calls for greater cross-cultural understanding and thus greater knowledge of other languages, not just to advance the economy but to also preserve and keep the particular language relevant in modern times. Given that graphic design is a means of visual communication, it is important to ensure that people not merely have the availability of a typeface in their respective languages, but that they have a variety of them so they can convey their ideas properly. Furthermore, the increasing use of and advances in technology have made the world more visually oriented, so the call for a plethora of non-Latin typefaces becomes even more persistent to satisfy our need for variety.

When choosing which non-Latin languages to develop typefaces for, a good starting point (other than the obvious lack of typefaces for a particular language) is targeting the languages of countries with growing economies and/or a significant young population. A growing economy will lead to increased technological ability and consumption. And more often than not, the youth (who are usually more up-to-date with technology) are the driving force behind a growing economy. As such, they will want a variety of

## EVOLUTION OF AMHARIC SCRIPT



typefaces to participate in the trends of globalization and be on par with their international peers.

**THE CASE FOR ETHIOPIA** With one of Africa's fastest growing economies<sup>6</sup> and the 12th fastest growing population in the world as of 2012—over 64% of which are 24 years old or younger—Ethiopia is one of those countries to target. Close to 20% of its population is 15-24 years old,<sup>7</sup> so in the next couple of decades that age group will be in the position to spur advancements in design as the economy and connection with international peers grows. While Ethiopia's graphic design sector has yet to develop, as people become more aware of its role in the economy as a means of visual communication they will desire a variety of typefaces to suit their needs.

### Why a contemporary Amharic typeface?

As previously established, Ethiopia makes a powerful candidate for broadening its typographic horizons. In particular, there needs to be more contemporary Amharic typefaces for two reasons: 1) the nation's strong economic growth and 2) a sore lack of modern Amharic typefaces in the market, let alone Amharic type in general.

**ETHIOPIA'S GROWING ECONOMY** As mentioned before, Ethiopia has one of Africa's fastest growing economies. And, to expand upon the ideas presented previously, it needs new, modern typography to reflect the changes it's going through and serve as a precursor for the changes to come, embody the new generation, and allow other countries to see and connect with its growth. A growing economy means many goods being sold and companies started, both which require a distinct personality of the company/product to be formed, especially for unfamiliar consumers abroad. This is largely accomplished by visual communication, a variety of styles being key in order to do so, which Ethiopia does not have. Furthermore, as countries' economies are becoming increasingly interconnected due to globalization, relatable design (and thus modern Ethiopian typefaces) becomes important. In order for Ethiopia to be an effective and notable part of the world economy and participate in modern graphic design (which it is currently absent from), it needs to form backbone of visual communication: typography.

**CURRENT AMHARIC TYPE MARKET** As noted before, there are currently only two quality, professional Ethiopian fonts available commercially: GF Zemen and Nyala. Both Zemen and Nyala are calligraphically-based, with feet (which serve as the equivalent serifs in English type), severe stress, high-contrast strokes, and a rather dense weight. Although the two are well-designed for

the stylistic category they inhabit, they are now the Times New Roman of the Amharic type world: grossly over-used, and out-dated. New typefaces are sorely needed to inject variety and personality into the market.

**CALLING FOR A CONTEMPORARY AMHARIC TYPEFACE** Though a new serif face would be heartily welcome, a modern sans-serif one would be a radical breath of fresh air, the start of a type revolution, if you will, in the (practically non-existent) Amharic type world. Given the current state of the market, what is needed is a face that is clean, highly legible, and suitable for many commercial instances (print or web). And nothing says that like Helvetica! In particular, an Amharic font based on Neue Helvetica fits the bill. As such, Zemenawi has these qualities: no feet, Transitional in style, medium density, and minimal stroke contrast. (See p. 8 for comparison).

Arabic, which traditionally is based on calligraphic styles, has begun its journey into the modern age of design through its own version of Helvetica, among other contemporary typefaces. Amharic, too, would benefit from such an update. The task, then, would be to maintain the integrity of the Amharic characters while infusing elements of Neue Helvetica to construct a harmonious companion typeface.

So it is with these considerations in mind (concerning the state of the Amharic type market, Ethiopia, and the world at large) that the font of this book, Zemenawi, was born. Given that Zemenawi is still in development, only the 34 Amharic consonants and punctuation in one weight are shown. A full type family is being produced and will be available in the future.

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### END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.omniglot.com/writing/sabaeen.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ethiopians.com/bayeyima.html>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.ethiopic.com/ethiopic\\_alphabet.htm](http://www.ethiopic.com/ethiopic_alphabet.htm)

<sup>4</sup> "World Encyclopedia of Library and Information Services" by Robert Wedeworth, published by the American Library Association, pp. 285 – 288.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.microsoft.com/typography/fonts/family.aspx?FID=329>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.africaneconomicoutlook.org/en/countries/east-africa/ethiopia/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/et.html>

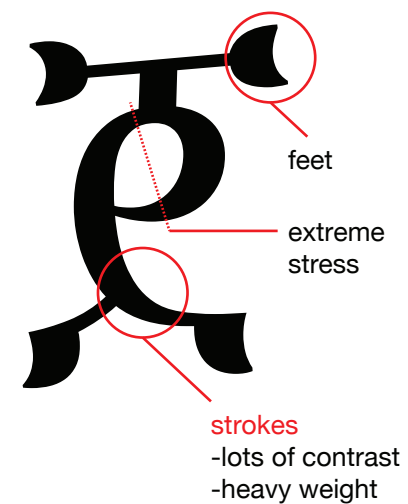
## CORE LETTERS

ከ ጠ ተ ያ ከ መ ዐ

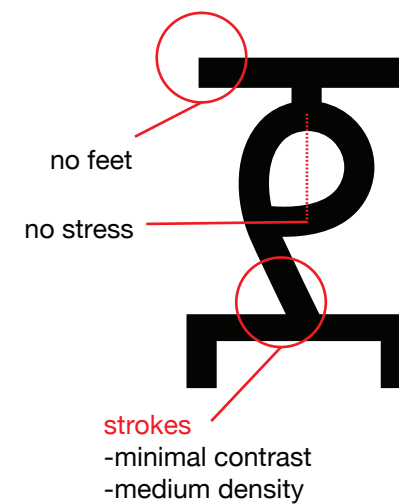
Nyala

## KEY CHARACTERISTICS

Nyala

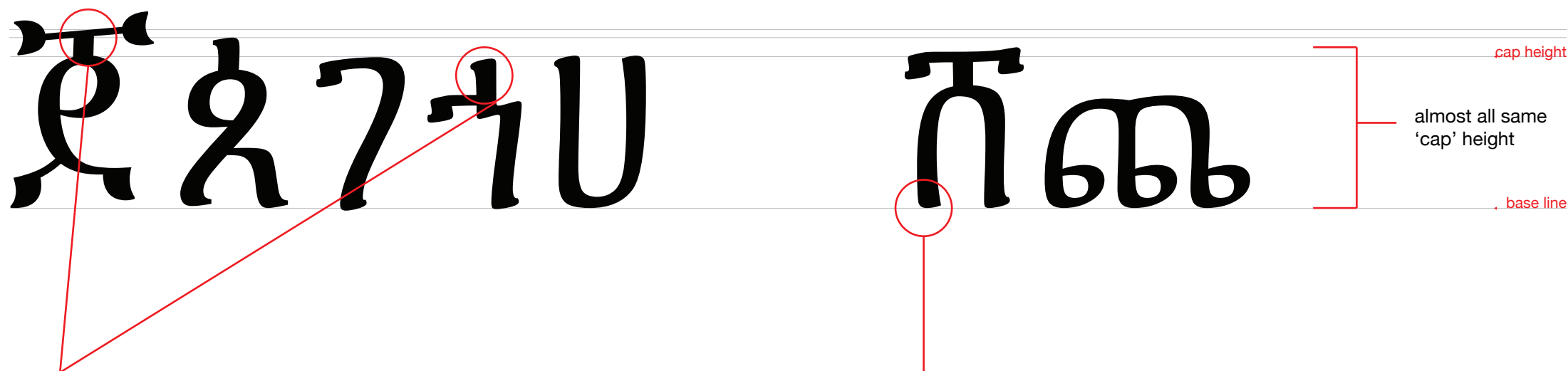
style  
calligraphic

Zemenawi

style  
Neo-grotesque

## GENERAL ANATOMY OF AMHARIC CHARACTERS

no capital letters



only some ascenders  
go above 'cap' height

-no descenders  
-nothing goes below  
base line

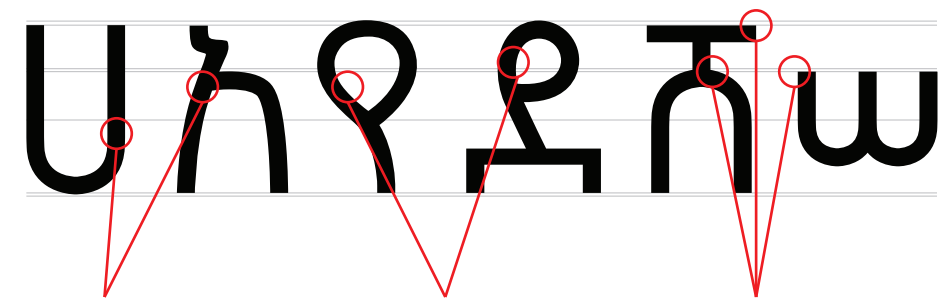
## TYPEFACE

ከሀበኸሐቨኸሠጠሐ  
 ጨከለዓዳጃጸጸተፑ  
 ፐዘዘነፕፖረፈመወ  
 ቀዐፀ ። ፤ ÷ ፑ ፡ ፡ ። ፥

a companion face to the  
 Helvetica & Helvetica Neue type families

## FEATURES

spacious letters for  
 clarity & legibility



strokes  
 -even width  
 -medium weight  
 -clean lines

counters & bowls  
 round & large for  
 quick & easy legibility

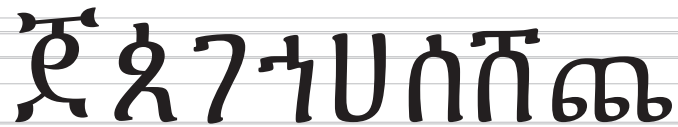
hieght  
 consistent, for  
 smooth visual flow

“[visually] clean...and unthreatening and easy to learn  
 even [for] someone who has had no prior exposure  
 to the language.”

-comment from a native Amharic reader & speaker



## DEVELOPMENT



ጀጅግነትሀሰሽጩ

## issue

varying heights causes letters  
to bounce around



HeOu ጀጅግነትሀሰሽጩ

## final solution

use Helvetica Neue height  
measurements as guideline

## reasoning

- better & easier visual flow via consistency
- compatible & cohesive with Helvetica inspiration

KEY  
 final solution ■  
 experimentation ■

**issue**

looks too much like a Christian cross,  
 might cause confusion

**experimentation**

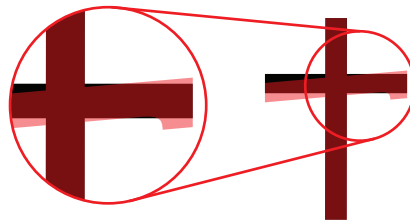
-slanted crossbar  
 -serif

**final solution**

-straight crossbar  
 -no serif

**reasoning**

-will almost always be read in the  
 context of Amharic words, so  
 confusion about/association with  
 Christian cross is slim  
 -readers more familiar with (&  
 therefore expect) a straight crossbar;  
 doing otherwise would be visually  
 distracting  
 -serifs eliminated to keep consistency  
 within typeface, maintain  
 compatibility with Helvetica type  
 varieties, and stay true to Helvetica

**issue**

straight crossbars make letters look  
 like English ones, may cause  
 confusion

**experimentation**

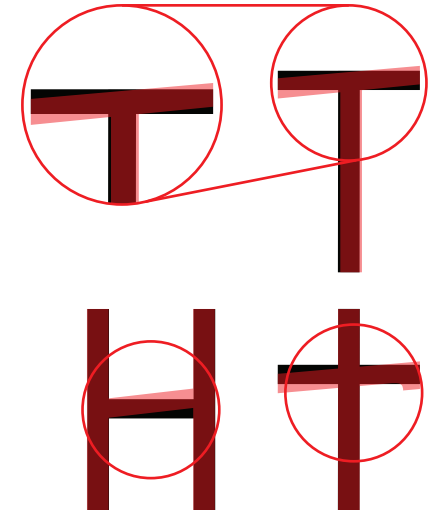
slanted crossbar

**final solution**

straight crossbars

**reasoning**

-will almost always be read in the  
 context of Amharic words, so  
 confusion about/association with  
 English letters is slim  
 -readers more familiar with (&  
 therefore expect) a straight crossbar;  
 doing otherwise would be visually  
 distracting  
 -regarding the letter that most  
 resembles the lower-case English "t"  
 , confusion is unlikely as most of them  
 have a tail at the end, while it's visual  
 Amharic counterpart does not



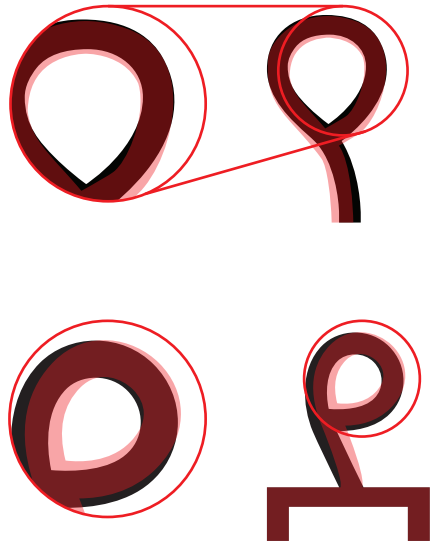
**issue**

creating rounded shapes consistent with feel of Name

**final solution**

- circular, teardrop-shaped bowls & counters
- smooth, even strokes

KEY  
final solution ■  
experimentation ■

**issue**

harshly-cut stroke terminal

**experimentation**

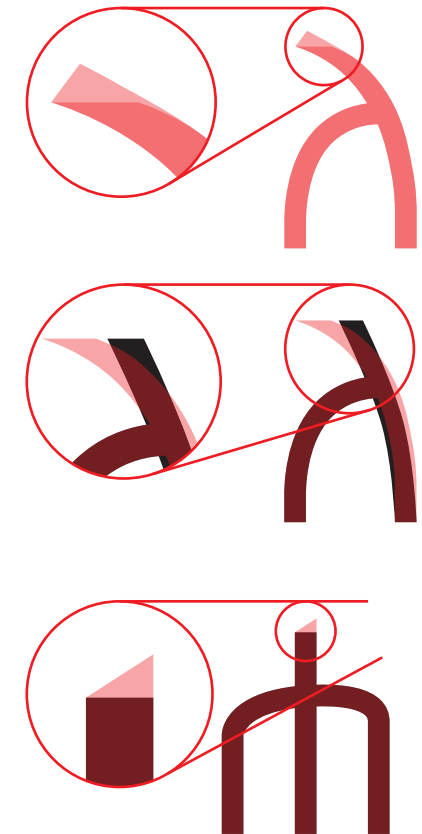
angled & extended terminal

**final solution**

- straight terminal
- altered curves of strokes

**reasoning**

ensures visual consistency & cohesion within typeface & with Helvetica inspiration



## LOREM IPSUM

Zemenawi  
36/38 pt.

ከሀጠዩ ጸዐመ ጎብ፥ ሐከቀተ  
 ፀቸሐመጳወ ደገቸከ። ወጪ  
 ጁዝጳ ዓመፀወብ ወቸለበጪ  
 ገጳከጸተ ዘሸዓወፀ ጠኸሐ።  
 ኸጂፈ ጪነሸለረ ፐዘ በገቀ  
 ለዘኸበ ሰፐተ፣ ጳቀከነሐ፥  
 ፐጎመደረ። Duis vel arc.  
 Lorem ipsum dolor  
 sit amet, consectetur  
 adipiscing elit nullam  
 cursu. Velit eu turpis.

Helvetica Neue  
36/38 pt

## TYPE SAMPLERS

Zemenawi  
26/28 pt

ከሀጠዩ ጸዐመ ጎብ፥ ሐከቀተ  
 ፀቸሐመጳወ ደገቸከ። ወጪ  
 ጁዝጳ ዓመፀወብ ወቸለበጪ  
 ገጳከጸተ ዘሸዓወፀ ጠኸሐ።

Zemenawi  
18/20 pt

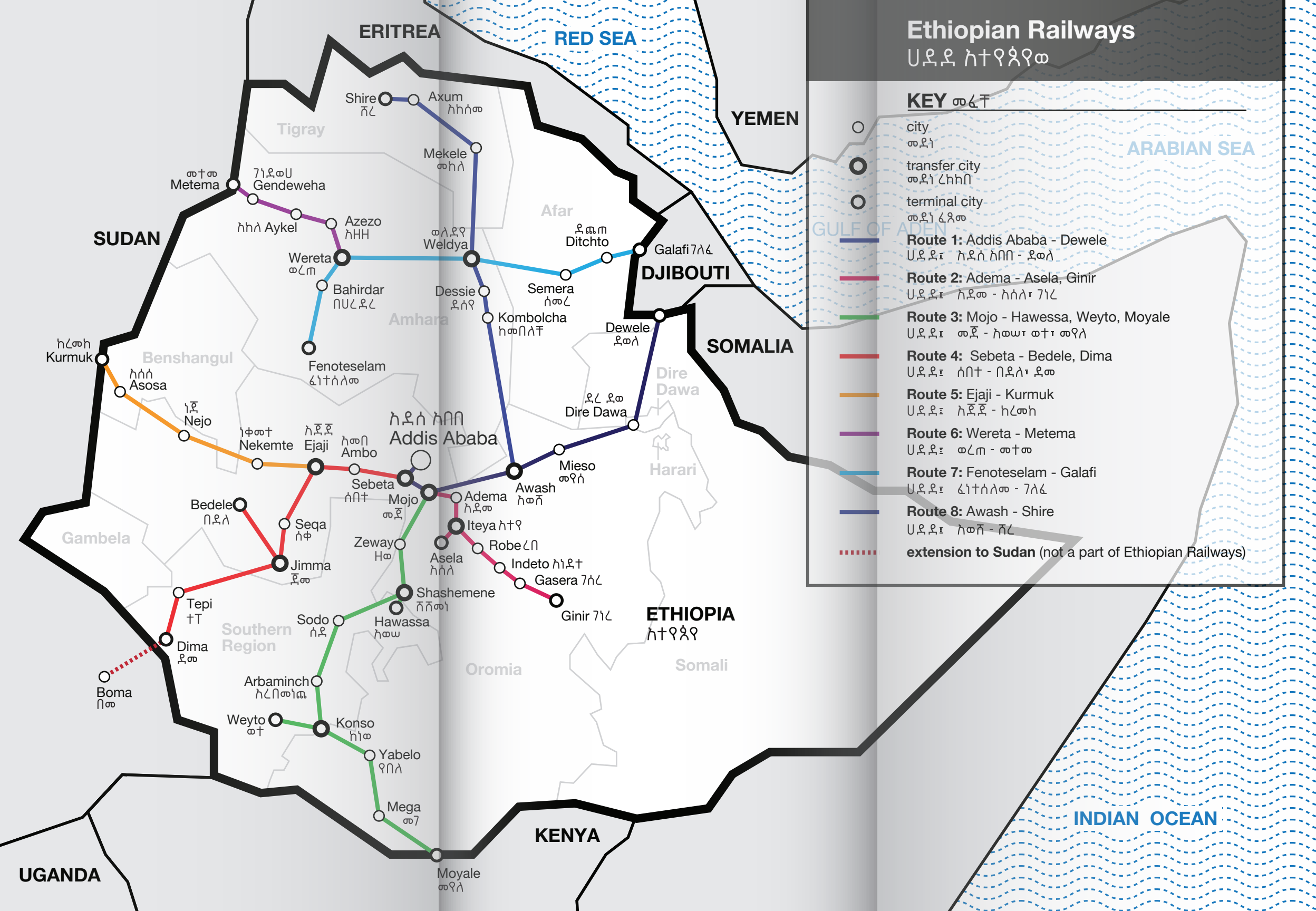
ከሀጠዩ ጸዐመ ጎብ፥ ሐከቀተ  
 ፀቸሐመጳወ ደገቸከ። ወጪ  
 ጁዝጳ ዓመፀወብ ወቸለበጪ  
 ገጳከጸተ ዘሸዓወፀ ጠኸሐ።

Zemenawi  
12/14 pt

ከሀጠዩ ጸዐመ ጎብ፥ ሐከቀተ  
 ፀቸሐመጳወ ደገቸከ። ወጪ  
 ጁዝጳ ዓመፀወብ ወቸለበጪ  
 ገጳከጸተ ዘሸዓወፀ ጠኸሐ።

Zemenawi  
10/12 pt

ከሀጠዩ ጸዐመ ጎብ፥ ሐከቀተ  
 ፀቸሐመጳወ ደገቸከ። ወጪ  
 ጁዝጳ ዓመፀወብ ወቸለበጪ  
 ገጳከጸተ ዘሸዓወፀ ጠኸሐ።



## NEW VS OLD

## Zemenawi Nyala

ከ ከ	ሀ ሀ	በ በ	ኸ ኸ
ሐ ሐ	ቨ ቨ	ኸ ኸ	ሠ ሠ
ጠ ጠ	ሐ ሐ	ጪ ጪ	ኸ ኸ
ለ ለ	ዓ ዓ	ደ ደ	፩ ፩
ደ ደ	ደ ደ	ተ ተ	ቸ ቸ
ፐ ፐ	ዘ ዘ	ዘ ዘ	ነ ነ
ኘ ኘ	ገ ገ	ገ ገ	ረ ረ
ፈ ፈ	መ መ	ወ ወ	ቀ ቀ
ዐ ዐ	ፀ ፀ		

## FULL AMHARIC SCRIPT

ሀ	ሁ	ሂ	ሃ	ሄ	ህ	ሆ	የ	ዩ	ዬ	ያ	ዩ	ይ	ዮ
ለ	ሉ	ሊ	ላ	ሌ	ል	ሎ	ደ	ዱ	ዲ	ዳ	ዴ	ድ	ዶ
ሐ	ሑ	ሒ	ሓ	ሔ	ሐ	ሐ	ጀ	ጁ	ጂ	ጃ	ጄ	ጅ	ጆ
መ	ሙ	ሚ	ማ	ሜ	ም	ሞ	ገ	ጉ	ጊ	ጋ	ጌ	ግ	ጎ
ሠ	ሡ	ሢ	ሣ	ሤ	ሥ	ሦ	ጠ	ጡ	ጢ	ጣ	ጤ	ጥ	ጦ
ረ	ሩ	ሪ	ራ	ሪ	ር	ሮ	ጨ	ጨ	ጨ	ጫ	ጫ	ጫ	ጫ
ሰ	ሱ	ሲ	ሳ	ሴ	ሰ	ሰ	ጸ	ጸ	ጸ	ጸ	ጸ	ጸ	ጸ
ሸ	ሹ	ሺ	ሻ	ሼ	ሸ	ሸ	ጸ	ጸ	ጸ	ጸ	ጸ	ጸ	ጸ
ቀ	ቁ	ቂ	ቃ	ቄ	ቅ	ቆ	ፀ	ፀ	ፈ	ፈ	ፈ	ፈ	ፈ
በ	ቡ	ቢ	ባ	ቤ	ብ	ቦ	ፈ	ፈ	ፈ	ፈ	ፈ	ፈ	ፈ
ሸ	ሹ	ሺ	ሻ	ሼ	ሸ	ሸ	ፕ	ፕ	ፕ	ፕ	ፕ	ፕ	ፕ
ተ	ቱ	ቲ	ታ	ቲ	ት	ቶ	SPECIAL CHARACTERS						
ቸ	ቹ	ቺ	ቻ	ቼ	ች	ቸ	ሊ	ሊ	ሚ	ሢ	ሪ	ሰ	ሸ
ኀ	ኁ	ኂ	ኃ	ኄ	ኅ	ኆ	ቈ	ቈ	ቈ	ቈ	ቈ	ቈ	ቈ
ነ	ኑ	ኒ	ና	ኔ	ን	ኆ	ቲ	ቲ	ኑ	ኑ	ኑ	ኑ	ኑ
ኘ	ኙ	ኚ	ኛ	ኜ	ኝ	ኞ	ኗ	ኗ	ኗ	ኗ	ኗ	ኗ	ኗ
አ	አ	አ	አ	አ	አ	አ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ
ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ
ኸ	ኸ	ኸ	ኸ	ኸ	ኸ	ኸ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ
ወ	ወ	ወ	ወ	ወ	ወ	ወ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ
ዐ	ዐ	ዐ	ዐ	ዐ	ዐ	ዐ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ
ዘ	ዘ	ዘ	ዘ	ዘ	ዘ	ዘ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ
ዠ	ዠ	ዠ	ዠ	ዠ	ዠ	ዠ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ	ከ

## REFERENCES

### p. 21 - 22: "Zemenawi takes a train ride!"

Jemere, Yehualaeshet, and Ethiopian Railways Corporation. "Addis Ababa Light Rail Transit Project." Unep.org. United Nations Environment Programme, July 2012. Web.  
<[http://www.unep.org/transport/pcf/PDF/icct\\_2012/LRT\\_Yehualaeshet\\_Jemere\\_ERC.pdf](http://www.unep.org/transport/pcf/PDF/icct_2012/LRT_Yehualaeshet_Jemere_ERC.pdf)>.

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