

Reminiscence: Walelign Mekonnen

By Hailu Issaias

Walelign Mekonnen, who came from Woizero Sehin Secondary School in Dessie, Wolo region, joined the then Haile-Selassie University. Neither his friends nor himself were to know that this little known Wolloye was to leave an imprint in the annals of the Ethiopian Students Movement. So great was the impact that he passed to posterity. I had the opportunity of “knowing” Walelign by sight, as they say. He was in the graduating class when I was a mere freshman. From a distance, any perspective proximity, Walelign was a tall, handsome young man in his early 20’s with an aquiline nose, and dignified gait. I had, on a number of occasions, heard him making impromptu speeches and forwarding suggestions or amending motion at the student rallies, sit-down strikes, general assemblies and other at the Ras Mekonnen Hall when prominent figures visited the University. He seized on every given opportunity to enlighten them on the prevalent realities in Ethiopia.

To my novice understanding, Walelign then had a profound understanding of Marxist literature. One recurrent theme that preoccupied his mind was the destiny of nations and nationalities, and this was at a time when most university students were not even acquainted with names of leading Marxists, much less versed with their literature. What made him essentially different from most of the then student leaders who parroted such clichés as, “the decadent Hale-Selassie regime”, a rotten government on the verge of collapse, and “the down-trodden masses” was his insistence on the realization of the tenets of self determination. This was an issue that the university student leaders entirely shunned or, if at all,

mentioned in passing. To Walelign, however, this was not an issue to be avoided but, rather addressed directly to the people who had then taken up arms and gone into the bushes in Eritrea, Gojam and Bale. His ideas of nations/nationalities determining their own destinies were to pass to ensuing generations in his articles that then appeared in *Struggle*, the organ of the University Students Union of Addis Ababa (USUAA), which are all available in the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, at the Addis Ababa University (AAU) for reference purpose.

Walelign was one of the students who earnestly struggled for the formatting of Marxist literature of USUAA. Prior to that, each college had its own students union, which however, was more concerned with welfare of students than with national issues. He was instrumental in organizing the “revolutionary group within USUAA which called itself “Crocodiles” or “the Cross” for short.

Even so, Walelign was not without his shortcomings, to my then limited observation. Like most students leaders of the time (Walelign was not a member of the USUAA Congress when I knew him but worked behind the scenes). I recall his speeches were often charged with emotion though his arguments were logical. There were occasions when the former overrode the latter. At times, I reckon, he was even impulsive. His emotional overtone was vividly manifested in his leaflet where he claimed that the late Emperor abandoned the Genete Leul Palace (the present Main Campus of Addis Ababa University) for the jubilee palace because he was apprehensive of being haunted by the ghosts of officials killed in the Ras Mekonnen Hall during the 1960 aborted coup d'état led by the Newai brothers and their accomplices. This was in response to the Monarch's

radio address to the Ethiopian people in which he said: “We have opted our residence for the use of university education.”

Despite his acclaimed Marxist outlook about equality of women, I recall reading Walelign’s rather highly provocative article in struggle attacking the university girl students for being passive on lookers of the plight of the Ethiopian broad mass, particularly the fair sex. While there is little that is fundamentally wrong in such assumption, one is nevertheless left with uncomfortable feeling of a university girl students as being inherently inferior.

Walelign Mekonnen’s strong anti-monarchial views and his unquestionable devotion to the cause of the “down-trodden” (to use the popular phrase of those days) as well as the peasantry that constitute bulk of the population were little known to majority of the people for whom he sacrificed his life. The struggle that he waged along with his compatriots, for the formation of USUAA and later against what was then termed “Restorers” or “Campus Unionist”, is even less realized nowadays. He is remembered by the majority of the people; more specifically those are acquainted with his name, for the airplane hijacking that cost his life and that of Marta Mebratu, Yohannes Fekadu, Tesfu Birega. In all certainly what actually cost him his life was the cause of the Ethiopian people for which lofty ideal he unflinchingly and unswervingly stood to the very end. He convinced that addressing the national question in Ethiopia and finding a just solution on the basis of self-determination held a key to its continued survival. This was indeed his single most important contribution to political struggle of the Ethiopian people.