

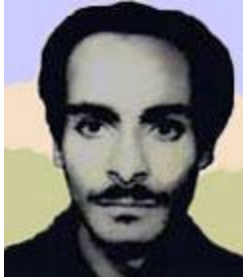
## FORUM

### "The last hours of Walelign Mekonnen"

#### In Response to Prof. Aleme Eshete & Dr. Fikre Tolosa

By Zewge Fanta | October 16, 2008

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Editor's note - Many misconceptions have been floating around for a long time about the life of **Walelign Mekonnen**, a student activist who was killed during a failed hijack attempt in December 1972. Invited by two noted Ethiopians, **Zewge Fanta**, a close friend of Walelign, has come up with a superb article. We hope Zewge's first-hand account would clear the fog that had shrouded the life of the student activist who rose to national prominence during the turbulent final years of the reign of Emperor Haile-Selassie.

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Walelign  
Mekonen (Photo  
© Zewge Fanta)

In an article published here on **Ethiomeia** under the above title, Dr. Fikre Tolosa and Prof. Aleme Eshete asked me to help them understand the exact meaning of a Wolloye word used in the infamous article of Wallelign Mekonnen, "*Ye-awaju awaj*." The word in

question is *'nedemu*. If "nedemu" is a word at all, the researchers would have better sought help from deep Amara Sayint. However, the subject matter is Wallelign, and for that reason alone, I oblige.

In the past, I had defended Wallelign on many occasions believing that a dead friend deserved. Other times, I condemned Wallelign believing that Ethiopia deserved protection from his partitioning scenario: "*Nations and Nationalities*." I will do both here now, and try to explain the term in question, and I hope to bring this matter to rest once for all. However, there will be many new accounts to the history of Wallelign, and his name will linger for a long time especially in the home-away-from-home, EEDN, where I reside. Tadelech will not be able to bring all the imaginations of people about Wallelign to an end. Frankly speaking, the person who knew about Wallelign better than any one was not Martha, Tadelech or his students in the TPLF, but Wallelign himself. One fact stands clear: Wallelign misunderstood his country and its people as much as the people misunderstood him. I have read many articles and heard many rumors about Wallelign. Before his death, I related to the stories about him well. However, after his death, I thought that my memories about him would quickly evaporate and become forgotten. To the contrary, Wallelign has become the constant reminder of life in Ethiopia. The present conditions in Ethiopia and the glory of his disciples in power have kept Wallelign's name very much alive. His name had become taboo more so now than before as his misconceived and misunderstood concept became practical and applicable. If Einstein had regretted his invention, Wallelign would be regretting his own birth.

Wallelign was very popular in Dessie. He had acted as Kassa twice in the Drama about Atse Tewodros, and his portrayal of the unifying king was spectacular. Wallelign had begun acting like Tewodros in real life too, and we used to tease him about it. He loved the action of revolt of Kassa and disliked Ethiopia of "Zemene Mesafint". I am not sure when and what changed him to be fascinated with the concept of the King of Kings of Ethiopia. He must rise from his grave and see "Nations and Nationalities", the era of "Mesafint" in progress.

Towards the end of his life, Wallelign had made bold and unwise moves. In the end, all the pursuits

of progress through partition and again reconstructions had turned into piles of ashes, and the big hoax had ended happily. Walleign died before he discovered and understood the complex nation and its contradicting people: modern and traditional societies. He had become a crying baby in the womb, and that was all he had been. Walleign, the political scientist had also become a name calling street man. His slander and demeaning remarks against the king and the officials out shined the essence of his other ideas. He became not a political scientist engaged in the pursuit of solutions to the regional and national economic problems of Ethiopia , but a villain of the first order.

In one of his name calling episodes, Walleign wrote the infamous article titled “ye-awaju awaj” in which he ridiculed the Emperor. Walleign used a term, ‘nedemu’ uncommon in Amharic language. The word confused the layman and the scholar alike. A joke that viciously demeaned the Emperor spread around the city and became a good pass time. The idea that the Emperor was the first who found out who wrote the article was utterly false. First, the joke emerged long after students, professors and university officials knew that Walleign wrote the article. When I first read it, I knew he wrote it, and never questioned he wrote it. The massive search by secret services to locate the duplicating machine that might have been used by Walleign began and ended without a catch. They were looking for students or any one carrying large quantities of copies and distributing. Every one had his/her copy and the search ended without a catch. The article had contained the above incorrect word. The right word was "legemu", which is a common Amharic word used in Wollo and in some corners of Addis Ababa . Therefore, Walleign or some one had made a serious typing error of the highest order. The story that the Emperor discovered first that a Wolloye wrote the article was simply a hoax and a sensational joke fabricated by ‘Arada’ or ‘Arat Kilo’ guys whose pass time was degrading the Emperor. There were rumors floating around the hot spots of Addis Ababa that Poet Mengistu Lema was helping and or writing some of the bombastic poems/articles critical to the Emperor. The rumors were basically false because poet Mengistu had better things to do than write insults.

While in High School, we used to tease Walleign about some of the Amharic terms and words he used in his speech. He did not like it when we joked and laughed at him. However, to avoid some of his funny pronunciation of some of the Amharic words, he began speaking and talking to us in English. Some did not understand why he was speaking in English out of class rooms on the streets. Some thought that he was a big show off. But, Walleign was saving himself from being laughed at by carrying out his conversation in English, a thing he continued to do ever since. In the process, he greatly improved his English skills, but at the cost of his Amharic vocabulary!

It was clear that the security apparatus did not know what Walleign and the others were up to in spite of the fact that they constantly followed Walleign where ever he went. The idea that they knew about the hijack plan and waited until the hijackers boarded the plane fails to convince a reasonable mind. However, the government had ordered to place two or more anti hijackers on each plane, and the practice began long before the failed hijack of Walleign and his group. Ethiopian Airlines was facing serious criticisms about the possible illegal roles of the anti hijackers. However, Ethiopia had cleverly avoided the negative news and bad image it was about to be tainted with by capitalizing on the marvel of Captain Ketsela who landed the bullets riddled plane safely.

Emperor Haileselassie was smart enough to pursue a policy that would not trigger turmoil. For instance, people might have expected that the dead bodies of the hijackers to be hanged at one

public square. The Emperor did not want to punish the relatives of the dead by hanging the bodies of the loved ones. The Emperor was also smart enough not to open the scars of old wounds with Wolloyewoch. The Emperor knew that his enemies would use the opportunity to rise against him. Wallelign was not an ordinary person in the eyes of some Wolloyewoch. There were many who considered him the voice of the oppressed. So, the Emperor skillfully let their anger die quietly. So, many people were surprised when the government released the bodies to their parents. There was also a big surprise seeing government officials and “balabatoch” present at the services of Wallelign funeral. There were rumors that there were many unknown persons present at the funeral and in town. Some thought that they were friends of Wallelign; others believed they were under cover agents who were there to maintain peace.

The idea that Wallelign was a CIA agent was far fetched to me. If he were a foreign agent, he would have a better way out of the country. He would have done many things differently. He had conversations with me on several occasions about how he could obtain a scholarship or a connection with people abroad. Regarding his association with elements of the struggle in the North, it can be explained a bit differently. Wallelign was not from poor family as stated in the article. His dad was a moderate farmer and on top of that he had won a lottery worth \$10,000. That wealth and his acting as Tewodros had changed his image and Wallelign had become a celebrity known as Kassa.

The idea that he was driving around in the city in a government car and coordinating the plan of the hijack the night before the hijack does not sit well with me. First, security agents followed Wallelign every where day and night. I had a couple encounters while with him. Wallelign was too conspicuous. Surprisingly, Wallelign seemed at ease with the undercover agents around him. When he sensed their presence around him, he would over act and became excited. I thought he was trying to hide his fear by acting fearless. Even though he reduced his unkind remarks against the Emperor, he could not divorce himself from the elements that made him the national figure. There was fear that other enemies might kill Wallelign to put the blame on the security agents of the government thereby implicating the Emperor to the crime with intention to start unrest and riot. If the government had such fear, its actions had proved it true.

Looking back to the days before the hijack, Wallelign did not show any sign that suggested a plan for a big bang was underway. I did not believe that all the hijackers met at any one place together to plan the hijack. I believe they acted and planned it in group of two and communicated via one person, probably Martha. Martha accompanied Wallelign many times when he came to my home. Martha was a beautiful woman, but extremely uptight. She was the only person I could not break into laughter. If Wallelign walked to the bathroom or to the kitchen, she would stand and look. The first day I saw her with Wallelign, I asked him if she were his girl friend. He smiled and said: “Ziga.”

### **About the Author:**

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