

# Studies on the Biography of *Blatta* Hayle Maryam Redda (1909-1995)

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## Abstract

*This article discusses the political career of Blatta Hayle Maryam Redda who played a crucial role in the Weyyane uprising. Hayle Maryam claimed descent from a prominent noble lineage of eastern Tigray and as a young man became known for his regular engagement in the gaz campaigns against the 'Afar. Months before the advent of the Italian occupation, he commenced his shifta career for debatable reasons. During the Italian intervention he wore two hats: 1) initially a patriot resisting the Italians; and 2) later their collaborator securing him the title Blatta and a Chiqa shum position which he maintained until 1941 (though this view is challenged by some). In the post-liberation period, Hayle Maryam resumed his shiftennet and became one of the popular, feared, and respected shifta. He would use his popularity and experience as a shifta in initiating, organizing and leading the famous 1943 Weyyane uprising. Hayle Maryam was one of the leaders of the uprising whose excellent leadership was a major factor for the brief successes that were achieved. When the revolt was crushed in October 1943, Hayle Maryam, the ardent opponent of the central government, maintained resistance until the last quarter of 1946 in eastern Tigray and in the lowlands of 'Afar. After his peaceful submission, he was sentenced to lifetime imprisonment by the Emperor and consequently would live in "solitary confinement" for about twenty-eight years (1946-1974) in the then Illubabor and Gamo Gofa Provinces. From 1975 to 1978 he served as head of the Derg militia in Tigray; a position he later lost, as he was suspected of having relations with the insurgency group (TPLF) fighting the Derg. His remaining years under the Derg were spent in conditions similar to house arrest, mainly in Megele and Jinka. From the time the EPRDF took state power to his death in 1995, Hayle Maryam retrospectively reflected upon his political career in different medias. Therein he associated his politics with, and portrayed his life as spent for the cause of Tigrayan nationalism (if there was any). The data for this study was collected through interviews made between summer 1993 E.C. and 2003 E.C. and from archives and publications focusing on the issue.*

**Keywords:** Tigray – Weyyane – *abo gereb* – *blatta* - *chiqa shum* – *gaz* – banditry – *shifta* – *shiftennet* – *gereb* – oral poetry

## Introduction

There is a great interest in historiography for outstanding personalities who made contributions in political, economical, social and cultural aspects of a given society and for those who shaped societies for the better or the worse

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through their deeds. Hayle Maryam is one of those individuals who shaped the society of Tigray initially as *shifita* and later as leader of the 1943 peasant rebellion, which threatened the emperor's power. But in great contrast to his importance for Tigrayan society, the impact of his contributions, and the controversies surrounding him, there are only very few publications discussing his historical role, with the exception of a few publications we have which discuss his involvement in the 1943 'Weyyane' rebellion in Tigray.

This article examines the life and times of *Blatta* Hayle Maryam Redda by focusing on his political career. His formative years and family background will be discussed in part two. In part three Hayle Maryam's initial *shftennet* activity and the motive behind these engagements will be dealt with. Then, his activities during the Italian occupation period will be examined in part four. This is followed, in part five, by a discussion on his second involvement in *shftenat* until the outbreak of the *Weyyane* uprising. The brief discussion on the *Weyyane* uprising and his role therein precedes the subsequent discussion on his continued resistance from 1943-46. Part eight examines the life of the *Blatta* in 'exile' (1946-74) and his life in the post-revolutionary Ethiopia until his death (examined in part nine). The paper has some concluding remarks on his personality in its last part. The data for this study was collected through interviews and from archives and literature focusing on the issue. The interviews were conducted between summer 1993 E.C and mid-2003 E.C.

The researcher feels that oral sources (of course not forgetting their limitations) play paramount role in studying biographical history. After critical examination, employing oral history (if possible, supported by documents) allows us to be one step ahead in the endeavour of studying biographical history or, for that matter, local history.

## Family Background and Formative Years

### *Family Background*

*Blatta* Hayle Maryam Redda was born on 5 July 1909 in Dandéra (about seventeen kilometers southeast of Megele), in the former Inderta *anrajja*<sup>2</sup>. Hayle Maryam's father, Redda Gebru, came from a peasant family even though Gebru Aska (his grand-father) served as *chiqa shum* (village chief) of Dandéra<sup>3</sup>. Redda was a peasant<sup>4</sup> until he started to give service to Kasa Mirch'a (later Emperor Yohannes IV of Ethiopia). Redda, although from a peasant

<sup>2</sup> Mekuria Meshesha, "gereb `arena", *Tagadlo: Haqeenña Tarikat Qalsi* Vol. 1 p. 30

<sup>3</sup> Azmera Ebuy; Priest Welde Abraha Gidey, interviewed in Dandéra, 13/04/2003 E.C.

<sup>4</sup> I could not find data showing a complete picture of his life apart from the scanty information stated above. Questions like why he did not assume the position of his father, his situation until he joined Kasa Mirch'a, when and how he joined Kasa Mirch'a, details of his services to Emperor Yohannes, Ras Mengesha Yohannes etc. are important ones but answering them seems difficult at this time as the researcher was not in a position to find information that enable him to answer the questions.

background, grew to be a member of the ruling circles of Emperor Yohannes. As a reward for his service, Redda received the title *Grazmach* and served as administrator in Eastern Tigray<sup>5</sup>. After the death of the Emperor at the battle of Mattama in 1889 – in which he also participated - Redda continued to serve *Ras* Mengesha Yohannes (nephew and heir of the Emperor). He took on different administrative posts ranging from provincial to district level in different areas of Tigray until his death in late 1935<sup>6</sup>.

Hayle Maryam's mother, Bisrat Weldye, was the daughter of *Dejjach* Weldye, who belonged to the *mekwannent* (nobility) of Tigray<sup>7</sup> and 'claimed descend from Sabagadis, chief of Agame warlords in the nineteenth century'<sup>8</sup>. Bisrat was a woman of strong and calm character, cheerful and affable. Like her husband, she was a devoted Orthodox Christian and often read the Psalms of David<sup>9</sup>. *Grazmach* Redda's family had eight children: four daughters and four sons. They were: Dinqinesh, Amsalu, Fitsum Birhan, Nigisti, Nega, Gerenchi'al, Zagaya, and Hayle Maryam. Hayle Maryam was the last born<sup>10</sup>.

### *Childhood*

As a child, Hayle Maryam received a traditional church education, and he was reportedly an agile student. He studied *Fidel Hawaryat* (Apostles), *Gibre Hawaryat* (the Acts of the Apostles), *Dawit* (Psalms of David) and *Kal Timbert* (oral lesson)<sup>11</sup>. Throughout his lifetime he was known for frequently reading *Dawit*. The following poem of his locals elaborates this idea:

ብላታ ሃይለማርያም ዳዊት ዘርጋሒያ  
ደስታ ዕቡይ ብሚዘር ገናሒያ

*Blatta Hayle Maryam Dawit Zergabiye*  
*Desta Ebuy Bimizer Genabiye*

*Blatta Hayle Maryam the Psalms Reader*  
*Desta Ebuy the rifle punisher*<sup>12</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Ato Kasa Haylemariam, interviewed in Addis Ababa, 16/6/1994 E.C.; Ato Desta Ebuy, interviewed in Quiha, 1993 E.C.; *Emmahoy* Azmera Ebuy, interviewed in Dandera, 13/04/2003 E.C.

<sup>6</sup> Desta Ebuy - who is the same man mentioned in the following poem - was the nephew of *Blatta* and a trusted follower in the *Weyyane* uprising, and while he was a 'fugitive' between 1943-46.

<sup>7</sup> *W/ro* Asemash Lilay, interviewed in Mekelle, 4/11/1993; Azmera Ebuy

<sup>8</sup> Gebru Tareke, *Ethiopia: Power and Protest: Peasant Revolts in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 100.

<sup>9</sup> Asemash Lilay; Desta Ebuy; Azmera Ebuy

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Mulu Desta; Azmera Ebuy; Welde Abraha Gidey

It was probably this background that shaped his arch-conservatism, both in religious and cultural matters. Later as one of the leaders of the rebellion, he showed hatred towards foreigners (xenophobia) and declared ‘war’ against the adherents of Protestantism and Catholicism (see the decree declared to the residents of Meqele in part six of this paper). He accused Catholics and Protestants as *tsire Maryam* (‘anti St. Mary’) and criticised urban dwellers who smoked and wore long pants as indifferent to the culture and honour of their society<sup>13</sup>.

Since childhood, Hayle Maryam was friendly to people, but to those who acted unfriendly, he could be harsh and went to the extent of using guns<sup>14</sup>. He matured into an independent minded person with excellent military quality and became a natural leader and good orator<sup>15</sup>. Later he would use these qualities to organize various peoples of different backgrounds with different intentions and objectives to rise against Hayle Sillase’s regime in 1943.

#### *His Involvement in Gaz*

Hayle Maryam’s adulthood is obscure until he started banditry activity in the months prior to the intervention of the Italian colonialists. The only information we have of him in this period is his active engagement in the *Gaz*<sup>16</sup> campaigns against the ‘Afar. It is necessary to note that he had lost an elder brother (Nega) in one of these campaigns. As vengeance to the death of his elder brother, we are told, he was frequently ravaging the ‘Afar in the name of *Gaz*.

#### **Late 1934- September 1935: Hayle Maryam in *Shiftennet***<sup>17</sup>

In the months before the Italian invasion then, Hayle Maryam became *shifita*. Why? We have two (for that matter three) conflicting ideas. According to Gebru, Hayle Maryam became *shifita* because he had been deprived of administrative position and possibly the title of his father by *Ras Siyyum*

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Mekuria, p. 30; Desta Ebuy

<sup>15</sup> Desta Ebuy; Azmera Ebuy

<sup>16</sup> *Gaz* is a raiding campaign, which was practiced in southern Tigray and in the Afar area. For a detail discussion see Tarekegn Gebreyesus, “Gaz”, in Siegbert Uhlig (ed): *Encyclopedia Aethiopia*, vol.2, (D-H), Wiesbaden, 2005.

<sup>17</sup> *Shiftennet* in Amharic and in Tigrigna embraces two concepts: rebellion and banditry. Thus *shifita* could mean bandit or rebel (Ferryhough, *Serfs, Slaves and Shifita: Modes of Production and Resistance in Pre-Revolutionary Ethiopia*, A.A.: Shama Books, 2010, p. 230). Because of its perplexing definition, and as it is difficult to definitely ascertain whether Hayle Mariam was a rebel or a bandit, I will use the Amharic and Tigrigna term *shifita* in this paper. For detail discussion on this concept see also Donald Crummey (ed.), *Banditry, Rebellion and Social Protest in Africa*, London – Portsmouth, N.H., 1986; Dirk Bustorf, “Šəfta”, in Siegbert Uhlig (ed.): *Encyclopedia Aethiopia*, Wiesbaden 2010.

Mengesha<sup>18</sup>. Another view, though related to Gebru's, is that Hayle Maryam who, like his grandfather, served as *chiqa shum* of Dandéra was challenged in his position by some *balabbats* (nobility) from his locality (specifically from May Senti). They opposed his chieftainship and disputed his entitlement to serve as *chiqa shum*, and some even claimed their very own right to the position. Consequently, *balabbats* organized the local population of May Senti to rise against him. It is after this incident that he became a *shifita*<sup>19</sup>.

Third, and opposite to the two views mentioned above, is the view of the subject and his family; His family and Hayle Maryam himself claim that he joined *Shiftennet* by declining the offer by *Ras Siyyum* to take-over the position of his late father<sup>20</sup>. According to them, Hayle Maryam became *shifita* because he despised the ruling family of Tigray, including *Ras Siyyum*, for their exploitative administration and 'submission' to the Shawans. He was also sympathetic to the peasants and their exploitation by the nobilities of Tigray and later by Shewa<sup>21</sup> (was he thus the Robin Hood of Tigray, as Gebru Tareke portrays him?). As he later claimed, he also became a *shifita* because he was opposed to the centralization policy of Emperor Hayle Sillasé and the overall policies that the Emperor was enforcing on Tigray. He accused the Shoan nobility, especially the Emperor, for dividing the Tigray people among two rival leaders, namely *Ras Siyyum Mengesha* and *Dajjazmach* Hayle Sillasé Gugsa; the former ruling the districts of Adwa, Shire and Tembien and the latter governing Kilitte Awla'lo, Inderta and Rayya. This, according to Hayle Maryam, was a deliberate move of the Shoans to divide and weaken the Tigray people so as to make Tigray vulnerable to foreign invaders<sup>22</sup>.

Fernyhough argues that in sporadic circumstances *shiftas* may play an important role in addressing their locality's grievances:

*On rare occasion they [shiftas] went further, addressing the concerns of their communities in ways which transcended pressing grievances and the immediate rural context; indeed, at times they exhibited an almost worldly political awareness, not merely dissent but potentially insurrectionary. In practice this encompassed at least a*

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<sup>18</sup> Gebru Tareke, "Peasant Resistance in Ethiopia: The Case of Weyane", *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (1984), p. 88.

<sup>19</sup> Desta Alemayehu, interviewed in Dandéra, 13/04/2003 E.C.; Azmera Ebuy; Welde Abraha Giday. If this is true, it seems that the governors of Inderta and the Tigray province were in favor of those who opposed his position as we have no evidence showing that he got any support or at least any sympathy from them.

<sup>20</sup> There are unverified sources which claim that the *Blatta* lived in Bizet (his father's administrative area) as administrator of the area, appointed by *Ras Seyyum* before the invasion of the Italians. This claim completely opposes the written and oral sources at the disposal of the researcher, thus verification of the sources is recommended.

<sup>21</sup> Kasa Hayle Mariam

<sup>22</sup> Haylemariam Redda, "qedamay Weyyane", (Part I) *Wegahta* [Tigrigna monthly magazine], June 1994 E.C. pp. 6-7. If we accept what he claimed, then Hayle Mariam was rather a „rebel” not a „bandit” as some put it.

*hostility to local overlords, at most a role in rebellion against local or central government, or resistance to foreign invaders*<sup>23</sup>.

Could the above quote perfectly explain what Hayle Maryam was doing in this particular period of time? Though his claim may have some grain of truth, taking into consideration the evidence we have, Gebru's idea seems more plausible here. To elaborate Gebru's point further, let us quote him at length:

*We must not assume that many of the bandits, even leaders like Hayle Maryam, were committed to the peasant cause. It is even hard to endorse Gilkes's limited claim that while Yekuno Amlak's ideas were more often concerned with his own advancement, Blatta Hayle Maryam was most interested in the province of Tigre [Tigray]. For Haile [Hayle] Maryam, banditry was a means of expressing personal grievances and advancing his interests; he was primarily interested not in destroying or even in reforming the status quo but in finding a comfortable place for himself within it*<sup>24</sup>.

Whatever the cause might be, once Hayle Maryam became a *shifita* he was well accepted by the local communities and had a number of followers. Even the local population through various means was urging the able ones to join him. The poems stated below are illustrations of this:

አይትከይደንድ ምስ ብላታ ኩሉልየ  
ጎበዘድ ፀጊሙኒ ይብልየ

*Aytkeydindo mis blatta kuhulye  
Gobezdo tsegimunni yibhye*

Join the handsome *Blatta*  
Should the youth be puzzled now?

አይትከይደንድ ምስ ብላታ ኩሉልየ  
መዓሰድዮ ስሬካ ዝረአየ

*Aytkeydindo mis blatta kuhulye  
Mi`as diyyu sireka`<sup>25</sup> zire`aye*

Join the handsome *Blatta*  
If not, when do you show your courage?<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Fernyhough, p. 242

<sup>24</sup> Gebru Tareke, "Peasant Resistance in Ethiopia", p. 90.

<sup>25</sup> The literal meaning of *Sire* in Tigrign is trousers, but here it is put to refer to courage or heroism

<sup>26</sup> Mulu Desta; Azmera Ebuy; Welde Abraha Gidey

## Studies on the Biography of *Blatta* Hayle Maryam Redda (1909-1995)

As a *shifita* he occasionally seemed inconsistent in his approach to the peasants. He was often persuasive but sometimes took harsh measures against peasants who failed to cooperate with him. According to one informant, he once killed two peasants and injured two others who refused to give him food and money<sup>27</sup>. The following wonderfully explains the relation *Blatta* had with the local community:

*To get a little closer to the relationship between peasants and shifita requires an understanding of how and why individual bandits turned to outlary in the first place. Clearly local communities would not have persistently tolerated shifita who operated from their villages or who returned to them for succour from time to time unless they had good reason. While intimidation and reprisals could always force farmers and herders to cooperate and pay tribute, these could never be more than short-term strategies. If Herman Norden believed in the late 1920s, most peasants numbered friends and relatives among local shifita, and often fed and aided them, then more commonly they had little to fear from banditry. ... outlaw-peasant relations were intimate and enduring, a recurrent feature of the northern Ethiopian social landscape<sup>28</sup>.*

Regardless of what is said, he was at the height of his popularity when the invasion of the Italians came. This development would considerably change his position in society and his future career.

### September 1935 - 1941: Hayle Maryam During the Italian Occupation

From their colony in the *Mereb Mellash* the Italians were able to swiftly occupy Tigray in 1935. *Blatta* Hayle Maryam blamed Hayle Sillasé for his failure to assist the Tigrayans in their heroic resistance against the aggressors. According to him, from September 1935 to April 1936 there was a fierce resistance against the Italians in Tigray. During these eight months of resistance Hayle Maryam accused Hayle Sillasé's government for its failure to assist the anti-colonial resistance in Tigray. To quote his words:

*For eight months, eight months! We [the Tigray people] had fought the Italians alone without any assistance and leadership from the [Hayle Sillasé's] government. The government being stationed in Amba Aradom, Maichew and Korem was a mere observer to the cause ...<sup>29</sup>*

The important question is, if the above assertion is simply an allegation or if, indeed, it has some grain of truth. Here, the author refrains from providing a

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<sup>27</sup> *Fitanrari* Eyasu Atsbha, interviewed in Meqele, 10/12/1993 E.C.

<sup>28</sup> Fernyhough, pp. 244-45

<sup>29</sup> Haylemariam, "qedamay Weyyane" (Part I), p. 8

detailed discussion in support or in opposition of the assertion (or both). This is beyond the scope of the paper, but is worth future debate among scholars.

After eight months of defiance, to refer to Hayle Maryam's own words, Emperor Hayle Sillasé faced the Italian forces in Maych'ew. The battle was not able to deter the advancement of the latter. On the contrary, the Emperor fled to London. For the patriots, the defeat at the battle of Maych'ew and the flight of the Emperor did not make them stop their resistance; rather they gave the Italians a hard time by engaging in guerrilla warfare. Like their Ethiopian brothers and sisters, the Tigrayans relentlessly resumed their resistance<sup>30</sup>. And one of these was Hayle Maryam.

The Italian invasion transformed Hayle Maryam from a *shifita* to a patriot. Hayle Maryam and his associates turned their weapons against the invading force. Hayle Maryam as a patriot fiercely resisted the Italians. To put it in Gebru's words: "... he [Hayle Maryam] proved elusive and troublesome to the Italians"<sup>31</sup>.

In the course of his patriotic resistance, Hayle Maryam killed four Italian soldiers in a place near Quiha<sup>32</sup>. This according to Gebru made the Italians approach Hayle Maryam. Consequently, they were able to convince him to be chief man of Dandera, his local village (with the title *Blatta*) – a position he maintained until the Italians vanquished in 1941<sup>33</sup>. Here, Gebru's point is refuted by Hayle Maryam's family. According to them, the Italians, unsuccessfully, tried to win over Hayle Maryam in order to stop his resistance and bring him to their side, by offering him the title *Blatta* and the position of administrator in his village. His family claims, that he rejected the offer and continued resistance<sup>34</sup>.

Here, Gebru's point seems more sound. If we do not assume that Hayle Maryam and the people of his locality were using the title that the Italians gave him (though he rejected to join them), then answering the question when and by whom the title *Blatta* was offered to Hayle Maryam remains unanswerable. We do not find evidence, which asserts that the title was acquired before the

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<sup>30</sup> Some scholars try to depict the Tigray people either as defectors or as 'less patriotic' than the other Ethiopians, taking the defection of *Dejjach* Hayle Silasé Gugsu as an indication for this. Let us take Maki as an example here: "During the Italian invasion, some of the region [Tigray] fought against the Italians with the armies of Ras Seyum and the Ethiopian Empire government; others, however, defected to the Italian side. During the Italian occupation, except for Ethiopian patriots, the Tigray people did not rise against the Italian administration" (Momoka Maki, "The 1943 Wajirat Incident in Tigray", in Steffen Wenig – Wolbert Smidt (eds.), *One Hundred Years German Aksum Expedition (DAE), Proceedings of the Second International Littmann Conference at Aksum*, Wiesbaden 2012). The writer feels that this would need concrete evidences, before this can be stated in this generalized way.

<sup>31</sup> Gebru, "Peasant Resistance in Ethiopia", p. 88; Gebru, *Ethiopia: Power and Protest*, p. 116; Mekuria, p. 30

<sup>32</sup> Kasa Hayle Mariam

<sup>33</sup> Gebru, *Ibid.*; Lap'iso G. Dilebo, *Ye Ityop'ya Ye Gabar Sirat inna Jimir Kabitalizim*. 1990-1996 E.C., A.A.: Commercial Printing Press, 1993 E.C., p. 141

<sup>34</sup> Kasa Hayle Maryam



coming of the Italians or after 1941, when the Italians left Ethiopia. And their argument that since that time the people continue using the title *Blatta* (which the Italians offered him but he declined to accept) to us seems unpersuasive.

### Late 1941 - September 1943: Hayle Maryam Again Becomes a *Shifta*

In the post-liberation period, Hayle Maryam returned to his *shiftennet* activity. Why? We have two views. The first view is that Hayle Maryam resumed banditry because he was opposed to Emperor Hayle Sillasé's appointees to Tigray (who were mostly Shoa Amhara) and he also opposed the restoration of the oppressive and exploitative local nobilities into their previous positions<sup>35</sup>. However, this point is rejected by Gebru. According to him, Hayle Maryam became *Shifta* for the second time due to the fact that *Ras* Siyyum Mengesha deprived Hayle Maryam of the chieftainship position, which he previously held until 1941. Albeit Hayle Maryam applied to the governors in Meqele and Addis Ababa respectively, all appeals for position fell on deaf ears. Thus, he took-up *shiftennet* as a last resort<sup>36</sup>. This view is also supported by Haggai Erlich: "... [Hayle Maryam] had been advanced by Italians to the position of a *chikka shom*, or village chief, but reduced by Seyum. In late 1941 he went to Addis Ababa hoping to obtain a prominent position in Tigre's [Tigray's] new administration, but he was rejected"<sup>37</sup>. Whatever the case, Hayle Maryam became one of the popular, feared, and respected *shiftas* of that time. Possibly as a result of the subsequent defeats he scored on the militia and the protection he provided to the peasants from the oppressive local administrators, as *shifta*, Hayle Maryam was well accepted by the people. Consequently, within a few months, Hayle Maryam led an armed group of five hundred men. "By the middle of 1943 he [Hayle Maryam] was certainly the *premus inter pares* of the bandits of eastern Tigray"<sup>38</sup>. The people had begun to sing songs praising Hayle Maryam:

ሃይለማርያም ንኡስየ  
ሎሚ ሸፍታ ንዓመታ ንጉስየ

*Hayle Maryam ni'usiye*  
*Lomi shifta ni`ameta nigusiye*

*You, the youthful Hayle Maryam*  
*Today you are a bandit*  
*But, next year, a king*<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Haylemariam, "qedamay Weyyane" (Part I), p. 8

<sup>36</sup> Gebru, "Peasant Resistance in Ethiopia", p. 88; Gebru, *Ethiopia: Power and Protest*, p. 116; Lapiso, p. 145

<sup>37</sup> Haggai Erlich, "Tigrean Nationalism, British Involvement and Haile-Sellasse's Emerging Absolutism-Northern Ethiopia, 1941-1943", in: *Asian and African Studies* 15 (1981), p. 220

<sup>38</sup> Gebru, *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Asemash Lilay; Desta Ebuy; Azmera Ebuy; Belay Gidey, *Ityop'ya Hageré inna Tiztayé*, A.A.: Commercial Printing Press, 1990 E.C. p. 232

Here it is worth to mention that there were about five thousand armed *shifitas* which were active in north-eastern Tigray. These bandits were from diverse backgrounds and became *shifita* for various social, economic, and political reasons, including quest for power.<sup>40</sup> The time was a transitional period, the government lacked all the necessary means to enforce law and order; one way of ensuring it was stopping banditry activity by taking measure with the bandits. The inability of the government to control banditry might have been taken by some as a green light to pursue *shifita* banditry. According to Fernyhough, *shifitas* may, to some extent, work beyond their immediate personal interest:

*“At their most sophisticated, individual peasant shifita furthered not only their own interests, but those also of their class. Those points in their varied careers argued for peasants rights against oppressive overlords, challenged the authorities or shared their gains with local communities edged closer to genuinely reformist demands and behaviour”*<sup>41</sup>.

Could not this be what Hayle Maryam was doing? Here, Gebru looks parsimonious to reduce Hayle Maryam to a simple *shifita* working to fulfil his personal power interests. Whatever the case, as *shifita*, Hayle Maryam began to organize the peoples of eastern Tigray to rise against the local nobilities and appointees of the central government. This is what he and other *shifitas* were doing: “Peasant bandits were among the principal agitators preceding the revolt, and many joined it on its outbreak in 1943”<sup>42</sup>.

As a prelude to the 1943 peasant rebellion, *Blatta* Hayle Maryam and others began to instigate the people to rise against the ‘corrupt, inefficient and ill-disciplined’ appointees of the government. On 21 November 1941 a conference was held in *Dalgena* which was unique and the first of its kind. According to Hayle Maryam, about three thousand representatives from almost all parts of Tigray attended the conference. The participants called for the unity of the people and the rise against the oppressive and corrupt administrators. They urged the organization of local assemblies (*gerebs*) by the representatives to enable close discussion with the people. In addition to the local assemblies, it was decided that, district assemblies were to be established, composing the representatives of the *gerebs* and the elected representatives of the district assemblies (*gerebs*) would meet at *Werfi* on monthly basis<sup>43</sup>.

The other outcome of the conference was the election of *Abbo gerebs* (head of assembly). *Blatta* Hayle Maryam was elected as one of the *Abbo gerebs*. Patriotic resistance against the Italians, mass popularity, loyalty, and political

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<sup>40</sup> Lapiso, 145

<sup>41</sup> Fernyhough, p. 249

<sup>42</sup> Gebru, Ethiopia: *Power and Protest*, p. 101

<sup>43</sup> Haylemariam, “qedamay Weyyane” (Part I), p. 8

knowledge/awareness were the criteria for election.<sup>44</sup> Hayle Maryam worked enthusiastically to meet this end. From the above discussions, it seems that the role of Hayle Maryam in organizing and starting the uprising is clear as mud.

### Hayle Maryam and the Weyyane rebellion

#### *The Weyyane rebellion: an Overview*

Cause: The Weyyane rebellion was undoubtedly one of the most important events in the history of Ethiopia in the few years after the restoration of independence from Italian occupation. This was owed to the fact that it was the first peasant uprising in the period and as it had wider effect on the peasant uprising to be seen in the different parts of the country. Moreover, it made a far reaching socio-economic, psychological and political impact, not only on Tigray but also throughout the entire country. The uprising was organized by the Tigray people at a time when the popular belief was '*nigus aykises semay aybires*' (literally meaning 'the king couldn't be prosecuted and the sky couldn't be tilled').

The basic causes for the uprising are found in the diverse nature and motives of its participants<sup>45</sup>. The peasants – the major dissenters – were exempted from paying tax, except for the *asrat* (tithe) during the Italian occupation period (1936-1941). But soon after the restoration of independence, Hayle Selassé's government issued a new land decree, which forced the peasants to pay tax in cash, effectively ending the tributary system that existed for millennia. To worsen things, the peasants were also required to pay-up taxes from the Italian period<sup>46</sup>. On top of this, the implementation of the new land decree of 1942 had manifold flaws/problems: 1) the officials implementing it were not only corrupt but were also intimidating the peasants, 2) the tax failed to take into consideration the condition/paying capacity of the peasants, 3) the peasants were forced to feed and quarter the '*gibir sebsabivoch and temanoch*', 4) frequently the government stationed militias in the rural areas until tax was collected and the militia were completely dependent on the peasants etc. The militia stationed in the areas, where this uprising erupted were ill-disciplined, aggressive and low paid. They were known for theft, rape, intimidation etc. The officials sent by the central government were corrupt and inflicted traumatic damages on the peasants in these areas. Consequently, the peasants would say that 'the emperor sent us hyenas'<sup>47</sup>. The majority of the Tigray nobility was disappointed by the centralization policy of Emperor Hayle Sillasé, which challenged their autonomous position including their customary

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Gebru, p. 90

<sup>46</sup> ETV Archives: LRR-5807A, LRR-5788B; Gebru, "Peasant Resistance in Ethiopia", p. 91; Lاپسو, p. 138

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

rights over tributes and the free service of the peasants. The centralization policy forced the nobility to make their living from the salary paid to them by the government. The nobility were made *inderasé* of the emperor and lost their autonomous status<sup>48</sup>. Thus, the nobility wanted to repulse their autonomous status if they could.

The peoples of Wejjerat and Raya-<sup>c</sup>Azebo had the wish to preserve their communal, internal autonomy. Thus, they opposed governmental intervention and focused on destroying these<sup>49</sup>. Banditry was another cause for the uprising. Bandits like *Blatta* Hayle Maryam, as we will see later, were instrumental in organizing the peasants for the uprising. But at the same time they were a cause of banditry, as they aggravated the poor conditions of the peasants: "...the most common problems were activity of the *shifita* and the lack of governance for establishing order. The *shifita* attacked villages stealing food and livestock. The peasants had to defend themselves with no help from the central government"<sup>50</sup>.

Therefore, from June to October 1943, a group of dissent nobilities and bandits, who had their own grievances with the government, were able to take advantage of the rebellious conditions of the pastoral and farming communities of the Raya-<sup>c</sup>Azebo and Wejjerat. Under the leadership of *Blatta* Hayle Maryam and other prominent figures, the dissents had instigated the peasants of Inderta, Tembén, Kilitte Awla<sup>c</sup>lo, and Raya-<sup>c</sup>Azebo to revolt against the government of Emperor Hayle Sellasé<sup>51</sup>. But we should bear in mind that, the peasants of <sup>c</sup>Adwa, <sup>c</sup>Agame, Aksum and Shire were not involved in the conflict. Some chiefs from the mentioned areas were even fighting the dissents and siding with the central government. Given the fact that Meqele was under control of the rebels and considering, that the defeat of the nobilities supporting the central government by the rebels, it is difficult to say that the central government had a strong hold on the provinces not involved in the uprising. Nonetheless, communication barriers, lack of strong leadership to lead the entire Tigray region, and lack of experience prevented many from involvement in the uprising. But there are some indications that the remaining provinces eventually joined the uprising in the course of time<sup>52</sup>.

### *Course*

The origin of the rebellion was the Wejjerat uprising of May 1943. The Wejjerat people had refused the newly appointed government representative.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid. ; Gebru, "Peasant Resistance In Ethiopia", pp. 92-94

<sup>49</sup> Gebru, Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> and Momoka Maki, "The Wayyane in Tigray and the reconstruction of the Ethiopian government in the 1940's", in Svein Ege, Harald Aspen, Birhanu Teferra and Shiferaw Bekele (eds) *Proceedings of the 16th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, Trondheim 2009, p.660.

<sup>51</sup> Lapiso, p. 145

<sup>52</sup> Belay, p. 237

Consequently<sup>53</sup>, a government force commanded by *Dajjach* Abbay Kahsay<sup>54</sup> was sent to punish the Wejjerat. In the skirmish that followed the Wajjarat were victorious. Various government officials including *Dajjach* Abbay were captured and “the prisoners were kept until the end of July of the same year”. Later, however, they were released with the mediation of *Dajjach* Mengesha Seyyum<sup>55</sup>.

The Wejjerat victory was a great shock for the government and at the same time for the nobilities who were serving it. On the opposite side, the victory boosted the morale of the peasants to rise against the government. To quote Gebru’s informant: “After Wajjarat dissent spread like fire”<sup>56</sup>. Peasants of Wejjerat, *Hint’alo*, Inderta, Darga Ajen, *Haramat*, Abergelle, Samre, Serewa, and Ger<sup>c</sup>alta met at a place called May-Derhu, *Hint’alo*. In this meeting, the peasants took an oath to unite and protect their *gereb* (land) against government appointees. In the meeting, a general assembly was formed and *Abbo Gerebs* elected<sup>57</sup>.

The peasants elected *Abbo Gerebs* such as *Blatta* Hayle Maryam from Inderta, *Bashay* Gugsu from *Hint’alo*, and, Belay Woldya and *Fitawrari* Ya’ebiyu Wolday from Kilitte Awla<sup>o</sup> to lead the uprising under the general assembly<sup>58</sup>; the *Abbo Gerebs* in turn elected Hayle Maryam as their head<sup>59</sup>. Some say the *Blatta* did not attend the meeting in May-Derhu and only joined the rebels later. Thus, the writer feels that the role of *Blatta* in the uprising, before the actual fighting between the dissidents and the government forces started, needs

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<sup>53</sup> Some take the Wejjerat incident as a contributing factor for the Weyyane uprising, but not as the first phase of the uprising as Gebru put it. See Momoka Maki, “Wäyyanä”, in: Siegbert Uhlig (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Aethiopia*, Wiesbaden, 2010, p. 1164, and Momoka Maki, “The Wayyane in Tigray and the reconstruction of the Ethiopian government in the 1940’s”, p. 658.

<sup>54</sup> Momoka Maki’s assertion that *Dajjach* “Abay was sent in 1943 to directly govern Wejjerat. However, the people of Wejjerat fought against his administration and captured him” (Momoka Maki, „The 1943 Wajjirat Incident in Tigray”, in Steffen Wenig – Wolbert Smidt, eds.) should be seen with caution. We have no evidence showing that *Dajjach* Abbay was appointed as governor of Wejjerat and the people revolted against his administration. As she herself admits in one of her articles, “There are no known documents on the appointment of the local administrator in Tigray or Dej. Abay”. She did not provide oral accounts on his appointment as governor of that particular area. In her other article she mentions that he was administrator of Southern Tigray under *Ras* Siyyum (Momoka Maki, “The Wayyane in Tigray and the reconstruction of the Ethiopian government in the 1940’s”, p. 657.). Thus, we should take the fact that he went there to “punish the Wajjirat who had allegedly taken cattle and other booty from the Afar, refused to accept a governmental appointee, continually harassed travellers and attacked convoys using the main road, and killed one and wounded two British officers” (Gebru, *Ethiopia: Power and Protest*, pp. 106- 107) but not as governor of Wejjerat.

<sup>55</sup> Hiluf Berhe, *The 1943 Woyane Uprising in Tigray: A Study of the Wajjarat*, BA Thesis, Bahir Dar University, Department of History, 2001, p. 28

<sup>56</sup> Gebru, *Ethiopia: Power and Protest*, p. 107

<sup>57</sup> *Wayin Magazine*, No. 5, *Meskerem* 2001

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Hiluf, p. 28

thorough study. In the meeting, the participants raised the slogan “there is no government; lets organize and govern ourselves”<sup>60</sup>.

On 13 August 1943 the rebels under the leadership of Hayle Maryam launched an attack on Wugro and after a fierce fighting the town fell under the rebels on the same day. The next target, Kwiha – a heavily fortified town a few kilometers south of Megele – was captured on September 18. During the fighting a government general by the name of Isayas was captured by the rebels. Two days later the rebels entered Megele triumphantly. On the same day rebels in southern Tigray had also launched an attack on government forces entrenched at Amba Alage. In the fighting the commander of the British forces in the area – colonel F.H. Black and other British soldiers – were killed by the dissents<sup>61</sup>. Here, the balance of power was in the favor of the rebels until reinforcement forces of the government headed by colonel Garring Johnson reached Amba Alage. Thanks to this reinforcement the government forces were saved from complete destruction and were then able to take control of Amba Alage on 23 September<sup>62</sup>.

After two days of recess, the fighting once again resumed and continued until September 30. During the course of the conflict, the dissents attacked government forces in “Human waves”. This resulted in huge numbers of casualties on the side of the rebels. Thus, they were forced to retreat so as to make necessary rearrangement for another attack<sup>63</sup>.

The last and decisive engagement that doomed the fate of the rebels took place on October 6. Between eight to ten thousand peasants, headed by Hayle Maryam, were engaged in the fighting. The government forces bombarded the rebels with artillery and mortars. The bombardment inflicted heavy casualties on the rebels’ side. The serious blow to the rebels came with an aerial-bombardment by the British Royal Air Force. The RAF dropped a total of 116 bombs on rebel-controlled areas. This put the rebels in a precarious position and there upon, they began to disintegrate to different directions. To quote Hayle Maryam from Mekuria’s article: “If it were not for the mortars, the artillery and the aircraft, we would have overwhelmingly won over the government”<sup>64</sup>.

In addition to this, the weaponry imbalance between the rebels and the government; the latter holding the upper position, the withdrawal of the Wajjarat from the conflict on September 27, the leadership crises amongst the rebels especially in the last phase of the rebellion - particularly between Hayle Maryam and Yekunno Amalak – had further weakened the rebels<sup>65</sup>. “...their

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<sup>60</sup> Gebru, Ethiopia: *Power and Protest*, p. 107

<sup>61</sup> Haylemariam, “qedamay Weyyane” (Part IV), *Wegabta* (Tigrigna monthly magazine), 1985, p. 11

<sup>62</sup> Mekuria, p. 27

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Hiluf, pp. 33-34

decision to fight frontal battles with a better-equipped army in retrospect was ill designed and disastrous<sup>66</sup>. The biggest problem of the rebels was that even if they were to defeat the Emperor, they lacked any coherent plan for establishing a new government. Additionally, the rebels had no intention of abolishing feudalism as a system<sup>67</sup>. Fernyhough's idea below explains the above weakness:

*“...shifita who played leading roles in Weyane and successive rebellions in Gojjam might be best described in Hobsbawm's apt phrase as “revolutionary traditionalists”. In their lack of class strategy, a consistent social ideology, and an integrated political organization, they harked back to pure banditry and the jacquerie. In their leadership within rebellions and in their commitment, however episodic and underdeveloped, to improve the condition of the peasantry, bandits were incipient social revolutionaries<sup>68</sup>.”*

### *Megele Under the Rebels*

For twenty one days – from September 20 to October 11, 1943 – Megele fell into the hands of the rebels and was served as their strategic centre. Soon after their entry in to the town, the rebels made the May Derhu decree public which was to serve as governing law:

*Hear Ye, Hear Ye,  
This is Hayle Maryam the voice of the People.  
Our governor is Jesus Christ, Our Shepard Hayle Maryam.  
We shall administer ourselves through Abo garabs.  
Our Justice is the Twelve garabs;  
the garab decree is the decree of the Tigrai People  
Our flag that of Ethiopia.  
And our religion that of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church,  
Catholics and Protestants leave our country.  
There shall be no distinction between poor and rich.  
We shall not accept the government appointees;  
And we shall not pay tax to Hayle Sillasé's government.  
We shall eliminate robbers.  
People of Tigrai follow the motto of the Weyyane  
and accept the peoples government<sup>69</sup>.*

In addition, the residents of the town were given the opportunity to elect their administrators, specifically *Neggadras* Gebru Gebre Mesqel, *Qenazmach* Kahsay

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<sup>66</sup> Gebru Tareke, “Preliminary History of Resistance in Tigray (Ethiopia)”, p. 208

<sup>67</sup> Mekuria, p. 34; Gebru, *Ethiopia: Power and Protest*, p. 118

<sup>68</sup> Timothy, p. 251

<sup>69</sup> Mekuria, p. 34; Gebru, *Ethiopia: Power and Protest*, p. 109; Belay, p. 236

Gebre Medhin and *Qenazmach* Gebre Maryam. From the rebels *Ato* Berhe Gebre Igzi'abhér and *Ato* Abadi Lemma were assigned as head of security in the town<sup>70</sup>. The town's men expressed their satisfaction on how the rebels were administering the town through the following poem:

አየ ፍርድ አየ አሰራርዓየ  
ናብ ብላታ ተሰለግኮካ ንዓ

*Aye firdi aye asara'ye*  
*Nab blatta tesalimika n'a*

What a justice, what a fairness  
Enjoy *Blatta's* [Hayle Maryam]<sup>71</sup> evenhandedness

After securing the situation in the town, the rebels led by Hayle Maryam marched to Amba Alage for a last and decisive armed confrontation. Twenty one quiet and peaceful days passed until British RAF war planes launched a sudden attack on the town. The bombardment started on October 6 and continued for three consecutive days. The casualties reached about five hundred deaths and left other hundreds maimed, thereby killing the morale of both the people and the rebels. Six days later, on October 14, government forces under the leadership of *Ras* Abbebe Aregay entered the town<sup>72</sup>.

#### *The Aftermath of the Rebellion*

Immediately after its entry to Meqele town, the central government sent out militias to collect the arms of peasants and to hunt former leaders of the uprising, who hid as fugitives in the countryside. While doing so, they burned houses and crops, looted properties and inflicted physical harassment to the people. What was more damaging though was the fact that each peasant was forced to shelter and feed three to five soldiers per house<sup>73</sup>. According to Hayle Maryam the number of soldiers hosted in each house ranged from ten to twenty. According to him this situation continued for eight months<sup>74</sup>. These soldiers raped young girls, married women and insulted elders. In addition, the government thought that peasants of the rebelled areas possessed arms; it required each peasant hand-in a gun or to pay one hundred Maria Theresa Thalers (even if a particular peasant did not necessarily possess a weapon)<sup>75</sup>.

The uprising forced the government to reverse its 1942 land decree. Consequently, the peasants of Tigray, Gojjam and Begemidr were forced to

<sup>70</sup> Haylemariam, "qedamay Weyyane" (Part IV), p. 11

<sup>71</sup> Asemash Lilay; Azmera Ebuy

<sup>72</sup> Mekuria, p. 28

<sup>73</sup> Hiluf, p. 35

<sup>74</sup> LRR-5788B



pay taxes in kind, not in cash; hence the old tributary system was restored in these areas<sup>76</sup>. Contrary to this, the people of Rayya-<sup>c</sup>Azebo were coerced into landlessness. The government confiscated their land to punish them for the repeated revolts against and clashes with the central government in 1929 and 1942-43, as well as for their collaboration with the Italians during the 1935-36 war<sup>77</sup>. In addition, the people of Wejjerat and Rayya-<sup>c</sup>Azebo lost their autonomous political status. Indeed, they were then administered by the appointees of the central government<sup>78</sup>.

“Although it is difficult to determine just how much the Wayyane uprising affected political reform in Tigray, it certainly played a part. The central government initiated reform with logistical support from the military. The Wayyane influenced the way the central government re-established order in the region in that it implemented policies with the goal of preventing similar uprisings in the future. As a result of political reforms after Wayyane, Tigray lost its autonomy and fell under administration by the central government”<sup>79</sup>.

#### *Hayle Maryam's Role in the Uprising*

The leadership of the revolt was resumed by intermediate Tigrayan chiefs among who *Blatta* Haila-Maryam Redda was a prominent figure<sup>80</sup>. Initially there was a conflict of leadership between the nobility and the bandits on one side and the peasants on the other side, in that the former wanted to dominate the latter. The former thought that they possessed better leadership and warfare skills and “superior organizational knowledge”. They wanted the peasants to participate in the fighting but not assume leadership. However, the peasants had no wish to be dominated by the nobility and urged to act as equals; at least they wanted to preserve their traditional mode of administration<sup>81</sup>. Good examples for this were the pastoralist and farmers' communities in Rayya-<sup>c</sup>Azebo and Wejjerat.

There were also contradictions between the nobility and the bandits, which mainly emanated from personal ambition and rivalry<sup>82</sup>. Hayle Maryam personified a compromise between the different parties. As an independent minded, gifted organizer and orator he was able to assume leadership with ease<sup>83</sup>. In addition to such qualities, his social background, and military experience put him in an important position. He was astute enough to create a

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<sup>76</sup> Lapiso, p. 156

<sup>77</sup> Hiluf, pp. 35-36; Gebru, *Ethiopia: Power and Protest*, p. 120

<sup>78</sup> Hiluf, p. 37

<sup>79</sup> Momoka Maki, “The Wayyane in Tigray and the reconstruction of the Ethiopian government in the 1940's”, pp. 662-663.

<sup>80</sup> Haggai Erlich, p. 220

<sup>81</sup> Gebru, *Ethiopia: Power and Protest*, p. 113

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Iyasu Atsbha

united leadership by manipulating the traditional systems of organization and by handling distinctively the personal rivalry and ambition of the individuals, according to their class background. He was able to satisfy the mass of the peasantry in their struggle for leadership by establishing a general assembly (which was to become the centre of the resistance) of eighty four elected men, representing the twelve local *garabs*. By doing so, he managed to maintain the unity of the rebels until their final defeat in October<sup>84</sup>.

Even though this was the case, it is worthy to mention that, there was nonetheless a leadership problem in which lay, according to some scholars, one reason for their defeat<sup>85</sup>. This leadership problem became more evident at the battle of Amba Alage where the rivalry between Hayle Maryam and Fitwari Yekuno Amlak was felt strongly. According to Gebru, the rivalry emanated from the former's deeds: "His megalomaniacal inclinations were a source of friction... As a gifted military leader, Hayle Maryam first succeeded in inspiring cooperation by accepting the principle of power sharing and delegation of authority; as an ambitious person he undermined the organization by violating that principle". The general assembly was reduced to a nominal position and Hayle Maryam himself was not accountable to that organ<sup>86</sup>. Whatever the case, we cannot deny the fact that "a major factor for their success was the remarkable leadership provided by Blatta Hayle Maryam Radda who couched the popular grievances in millenarian phraseology", to use Bahru's words.<sup>87</sup>

Maki puts the significant role of *Blatta* in the uprising and the controversies surrounding his career as follows:

*Blatta Hayle Maryam was different from the other leaders. Most participants viewed his leadership as valid. Someone thought of him as a great military leader; others deemed him "shifta" because of a confrontation he had with another local noble, which resulted in that noble's death and Blatta Hayle Maryam escaped from Enderta with some of his followers. However, even in exile, he still had influence in Enderta, Kilde-Analalo and Wukero, because of his family connections and his father's occupation.*<sup>88</sup>

### October 1943 – June 1946: The 'Fugitive' Hayle Maryam Continues Resistance

The morale of the rebels was worn-out by the aerial bombardment of the British air force, from sixth to seventh October 1943 in Amba Alage and other rebel positions. Thereupon, they began to retreat and scatter to their localities in a disorganized manner. Thus, organized resistance against the government

<sup>84</sup> Gebru, *Ethiopia: Power and Protest*, p. 113-14

<sup>85</sup> Hiluf, p. 32

<sup>86</sup> Gebru, *Ethiopia: Power and Protest*, p. 115

<sup>87</sup> Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855-1991*, Addis Ababa, 1991, p.215

<sup>88</sup> Momoka Maki, *The Wayyane in Tigray and the reconstruction of the Ethiopian government in the 1940's*, p. 660

became impossible<sup>89</sup>. After this incident, Hayle Maryam and his army retreated to Megele on ninth October. Here, he amassed his supporters / followers<sup>90</sup>. This would enable continued resistance for another three years. As the power and strength of the rebels further weakened, they abandoned the cities and the main roads and retreated to 'Afar. 'Afar would continue to be the base of the rebels<sup>91</sup>.

Despite the fact that the rebellion was in a state of uncertainty, some of the leading personalities in the uprising continued resistance in some villages of eastern Tigray and in the Danakli lowlands<sup>92</sup>. To mention some: 1) Ar'aya Dagala – the figure behind the resistance of the Rayya 'Azebo people continued resistance in the lowlands of 'Afar until he was killed by government forces in 1945<sup>93</sup>; 2) Fasil Teferi - another important personality in the leadership of the uprising kept on resisting until 1945, though he submitted peacefully to the central government when he learned of the fate of Araya Dagala<sup>94</sup>. The other leading figures in the uprising, including Kifletsion Gugsu, *Bashay* Gugsu Mengesha, and *Dejjach* Mengesha Siyyum, were 'captured' and sent to Addis Ababa as prisoners, where they stayed between two and two and a half years<sup>95</sup>. Amidst these developments, Hayle Maryam, the ardent opponent of the central government, persisted in resistance. He maintained resistance until the last quarter of 1946.

Hayle Maryam became adamant to uphold resistance for the simple reason that Tigray was at stake. Hayle Maryam, along his five hundred supporters retreated to qalqal in eastern Tigray ('Afar lowlands). Mazbay was chosen as base centre for the following reasons: 1) because of its physical feature (as a mountain chain) it was suitable for the rebels to wage guerrilla attacks on the government and allow swift retreats; 2) it was inaccessible to government forces; and 3) Hayle Maryam was able to cultivate the support of the 'Afar people. He gained the trust of the 'Afar people and many became his ardent supporters. This is because under him and his colleagues, the uprising had effectively persuaded the highland population of southern Tigray to abandon the *Gaz* tradition. The campaign ended not only the misery of the 'Afar people but also that of the highlanders. Here we should note also, that Hayle Maryam himself was highly engaged in this campaign, motivated to revenge the death of his older brother. From their base at Mazbay, Hayle Maryam and his followers inflicted heavy damage to the government forces stationed in the low lands of 'Afar, eastern Tigray, and Inderta. They were even in a position to attack

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<sup>89</sup> Gebru, *Ethiopia: Power and Protest*, p. 112

<sup>90</sup> A.A. to F.O, 15<sup>th</sup> Oct. 1943

<sup>91</sup> Haylemariam, "qedamay Weyyane" (Part III), P.34.

<sup>92</sup> Gebru, *Ethiopia: Power and Protest*, p.113

<sup>93</sup> Mekuria, p.28

<sup>94</sup> Gebru, *Ethiopia: Power and Protest*, p.113

<sup>95</sup> Belay, p. ?

government forces in Megele<sup>96</sup>. Indeed, from their base the rebels attacked government forces entrenched in different areas including Megele. This was a serious blow to the government especially to the governor of the province, *Ras* Abbebe Aregay, the former war minister and governor of Tigray. The 'Afar people from 'Alla to Berahlé not only supported the rebels logistically but also directly involved themselves in the fighting against the central government. Fierce clashes took place in Dessa where three district governors were killed<sup>97</sup>.

Thereupon *Ras* Abbebe sent militia to crush the rebels, in the hope to capture the 'fugitive' Hayle Maryam. This, however, proved difficult due the fact that he had '... to the east the whole of the Dankalia desert to retreat into if pressed...'. And thus, the British Administration concluded, that '... his capture would bring difficulties'<sup>98</sup>. In their attempt to capture Hayle Maryam and halt the opposition, government militia roamed throughout eastern Tigray and the 'Afar low lands. As it proved difficult to capture Hayle Maryam and stop the opposition, the government forces and the militia were given the permission to 'roam around Tigray and Danakil' to search for him. In due course, they ravaged villages, which were thought to supply food to the<sup>99</sup>. Hayle Maryam's family, especially his sisters, were victimized<sup>100</sup>. As the government failed to crush the rebels by itself, it began to pressurize the peasants and Hayle Maryam's family in order to persuade him to give up resistance and submit peacefully. When the initial appeals proved fruitless, the atrocities against the peasants and Hayle Maryam's family members were intensified. The government gave them two clear options: either, ask Hayle Maryam to submit, or continue to suffer<sup>101</sup>. Here we have a contradiction. Even though the government had proclaimed a general amnesty to the actors of the rebellion, the government forces in Tigray under *Ras* Abbebe Aregay continued to cause trouble. As Gebru put it "all the atrocities were made in spite of the general amnesty proclaimed for all participants as a part of a pacification program"<sup>102</sup>. When the atrocities on the peasants continued, Hayle Maryam began to negotiate with the government officials in Megele. According to a report of the British Delegation in Addis Ababa, in early 1944 he negotiated, with the government, the '... terms of his surrender...'<sup>103</sup>. The report does not specify the terms of his surrender and the response of the officials. Informants affirm this and allude that Hayle Maryam's sister served as messenger between the two parties<sup>104</sup>. However, this seems less plausible for at

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<sup>96</sup> Mekuria, p. 29

<sup>97</sup> Belay Mersha, interviewed in *Hint'alo*, 7/11/1993 E.C.

<sup>98</sup> B.L. A.A., 18 Jan, 1944

<sup>99</sup> A.A. 11<sup>th</sup> Jan, 1944

<sup>100</sup> Azmera Ebuy; Welde Abraha Giday; Hailu Taddese

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid*; Belay Mersha

<sup>102</sup> Gebru, P.118

<sup>103</sup> B.L. A.A., 18 Jan, 1944

<sup>104</sup> Eyasu Atsbha; Azmera Ebuy

least two reasons: 1) at the time he had sufficient followers and backing from the peasants to resume resistance; and 2) if he had the intention of surrendering, why did he wait until June 1946? To me, this was a tactic from his side with the intention to lessen, if not to end, the governments' atrocities.

As government atrocities aggravated, the peasants decided to beg Hayle Maryam for his submission. Apparently, the peasants of Inderta, Kilitte Awla'lo, and 'Agame discussed the issue and elected elders as their representatives to meet Hayle Maryam. The elders met him in Mazbay in June 1946 and pleaded for his surrender. It is said, that they stressed, that it would be brave if Hayle Maryam were to die a martyr's death for their sake, instead of continuing a resistance which indirectly aggravated their suffering. They reportedly argued, 'we know you are brave but it won't do any harm if you surrender and suffer for our peace and save us from the atrocities'<sup>105</sup>. He agreed to surrender by saying: 'I shall die; I shall scarify myself to ease your misery'. It is said, that he asked for the following conditions: 'I will surrender if the government authorities take an oath not to harm me'. The elders passed the news on to the governor and he then swore in the name of his child that he would not touch 'the fugitive'<sup>106</sup>.

Was the pledge of the elders the only reason that made Hayle Maryam relinquish resistance? No! The number of his followers decreased, for one, due to the huge casualties they suffered in the three years of fighting against the government forces. For another, his followers started to desert him because of the increasing number of casualties in the prolonged period of resistance and the shortage of means they faced to sustain resistance<sup>107</sup>. According to some informants, at the time, his followers were limited mainly to his relatives, especially his nephews<sup>108</sup>. In short, after his long stay in the lowlands of 'Afar, Hayle Maryam was clearly ready to compromise. Taking these conditions into consideration, we can safely say, that at this particular time, Hayle Maryam could do little himself to continue the resistance. Submission, it seems, was his last resort.

Whatever the cause may have been, Hayle Maryam peacefully submitted in June 1946. *Ras* Abbeba indeed fulfilled his oath: he treated him with dignity during his stay in Megele for about a month. And on his way to the imperial capital he was accompanied by dignified nobilities who were close to Hayle Maryam<sup>109</sup>.

### **July 1946 - 1974: Trial, Imprisonment and Life in 'Exile'**

After his peaceful submission Hayle Maryam stayed in Megele for a month before he was sent to Addis Abeba for trial. There, he was sentenced for a life-

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<sup>105</sup> Mekuria, p. 30

<sup>106</sup> Asemash Lilay; Belay Mersha

<sup>107</sup> Mekuria, p.

<sup>108</sup> Azmera Ebuy; Hailu Desta

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

time in prison by the Emperor. The then governor of Tigray, *Ras* Abbebe Aregay supposedly opposed this verdict as it betrayed the promise he had previously given the elders regarding Hayle Maryam's future. The Emperor however defended his verdict by saying: 'We catch hen by giving it corn and an enemy through oath'<sup>110</sup>. All the leaders of the peasant uprising who either surrendered or who peacefully submitted were deported to different areas in Shawa and after two or two and a half years of 'imprisonment' they were freed. After their release some of them were able to retain their previous posts. Here, Hayle Maryam appeared to be an exception. He was the only leading personality of the uprising who was sentenced to life-time imprisonment.

Hayle Maryam's twenty eight years of imprisonment and exile started in Gore, Illubabor. He spent two years in Gore in prison. Life was hard for him in this prison: his legs and hands were chained; he was given one cup of water per day and other necessities that could keep him alive. On August 1, 1949 he was released from the prison in Gore to be exiled to the deep south. Although his legs and hands were chained, he was forced to make an eighty six day journey to the final destination, Hamer Bako, Gamu Gofa. As it was expected, the journey proved to be strenuous, through swampy areas and with wild animals along the way. An indication of the strenuous nature of the journey was that one of the four policemen (who were supposed to guard Hayle Maryam) deserted after fifty-four days of travelling, saying: 'Let alone you [Hayle Maryam], we [the guards] have suffered a lot; may the lord you believe in save you from this agony'. Finally, Hayle Maryam reached Bako on 24 October 1949<sup>111</sup>. In Hamer Bako, Hayle Maryam had to survive with the fifty Birr which was allocated to him by the government. He lived under these for eight years, from October 1949 to August 1957. During this time, he was prohibited from having any outside-contacts except with his guards. After ten years of separation he was finally reunited with his family<sup>112</sup>.

In December 1960, Hayle Maryam was allotted a small plot of land for cultivation. Using this small plot of land, he managed to become a pioneer farmer in the area. This was facilitated by the fact that introduced the Ari'i (indigenous inhabitants of the area) pastoralists to oxen-drawn cultivation. He paid a rent for the land he acquired from the indigenous people and rejected the request from the local inhabitants to be his servants. Instead, he encouraged them to possess their own property and cultivate their own land. He is known for saying to the locals that 'no one will take what you produced. Cultivate your own plot and improve your life'. In addition, Hayle Maryam built the first church in the area. Through his good deeds, he was able to gain the respect and love of the Ari'i, to the extent, that the people of the area were referred to him as 'our father'<sup>113</sup>.

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<sup>110</sup> Asemash Lilay; Belay Mersha

<sup>111</sup> Mekuria, p. 34

<sup>112</sup> Ibid; Asemash ;Lilay

<sup>113</sup> Asemash Lilay; Belay Mersha; Kassa Haylemariam

## Studies on the Biography of *Blatta* Hayle Maryam Redda (1909-1995)

In 1962 Hayle Maryam was transferred to Jinka and was concomitantly granted the freedom of movement. Moreover, he received a large tract of land to cultivate and to live on. Consequently, he accumulated a great fortune as he was able to reap the profits of the large agricultural land, which he sold a year after the 1974 Ethiopian revolution<sup>114</sup>.

### **1974-1995: Hayle Maryam as a Free Man**

#### *1974: Free Man at Last*

On the eve of the 1974 revolution, Hayle Maryam at last received his complete freedom. Surprisingly, the Imperial government had allocated one hundred and fifty birr of pension to the same person<sup>115</sup> who was once its fierce enemy. The Derg, which took power after the toppling of Hayle Sillase's regime from power, began to treat Hayle Maryam with great respect (albeit only for a short period of time) as he was considered as an ardent opponent of the toppled regime. Soon after the revolution, Hayle Maryam was invited to Addis Ababa University (AAU) as speaker to give a talk on the 1943 peasant uprising in Tigray. The major focus of his talk was on the unity of the Tigray people in the uprising. Most of the University students who started the armed struggle in Tigray against the *Derg* attended the lecture<sup>116</sup>.

#### *1975-1978: Head of Militia in Tigray*

In 1975 Hayle Maryam abandoned Jinka and returned to the town which he had once administered – Megele<sup>117</sup>. The next we hear of him in this period is he was appointed as the head of the militia in Tigray, whose major responsibility was maintaining the peace and security of the province. Gebru also attests the fact that he was the head of the militia in Tigray<sup>118</sup>. As head of the militia, Hayle Maryam roamed the province to carry out his tasks - until the incident that changed his providence. While in Agaro, Berahlé-<sup>c</sup>Afar, Hayle Maryam and his militia faced TPLF fighters. There was a minor skirmish between the two groups. Finally, Hayle Maryam and his men were captured by the latter and held under their custody for days (when the Derg learned this development, it send militia to free them from the insurgents – but in vain). When the TPLF fighters learned of whom they had captured, they showed their respect towards him and his men and briefed them about who they were, why they were fighting the Derg, the nature and the supposed aims of the

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Mekuria, p. 32

<sup>116</sup> Kassa Hayle Mariam. Some unverified sources say he gave a similar lecture at Hatse Yohannes High School in Megele.

<sup>117</sup> Mekuria, p. 32

<sup>118</sup> Gebru, Peasant Resistance in Ethiopia, p. 80 (foot note)

TPLF's armed struggle etc. After a short period of custody, Hayle Maryam along his men was set free with their armaments<sup>119</sup>. The fact that TPLF allowed Hayle Maryam and his men to go free unharmed and with their armaments made the Derg suspicious. Consequently, the latter took harsh measures against the former: he was deposed from his position, deprived of his right to pension and was put under strict surveillance. This condition would continue until the Derg was ousted from power. The years after this incident were difficult for Hayle Maryam. As life in Meqele (for that matter in Tigray) became unbearable for him, he returned to Jinka to resume his farming activity. There he stayed until the EPRDF overthrew the *Derg* and took state power<sup>120</sup>.

#### *Hayle Maryam in EPRDF's Ethiopia*

After the entry of the EPRDF into Addis Ababa in May 1991 until his death on March 1, 1995, Hayle Maryam actively gave interviews and wrote articles about the 1943 Woyyane rebellion. In 1984-85 E.C. he had written a series of articles in the monthly Tigrinya Magazine *Wegabta*. The role of the Tigrayans in resisting the Italians, how Emperor Hayle Sillasé and his government betrayed the Tigray people in their endeavour to resist the Italians, the objectives, strategies and measures of the Emperor in dividing the Tigray people, the causes and course of the Weyyane uprising, the place of Tigrayans in Ethiopian history, the relation of the Tigrayans and the Shewans, and the need to properly write the history of the Tigrayans make-up the major focus of his articles. In his writings, he blames all the problems of Tigray on the Shoa Amhara. What inspired such anti-Shewa feeling/agitation in his writings? To me, he seems to overlook the century long competition between Tigray and Shoa nobility for the throne; he only blames the latter, thereby externalizing the internal problem. Did he develop such a consciousness given his insignificant political position? Or did he consciously attempt to claim a political vision which in reality he did not have at that time, in order to get recognition by the EPRDF government and be appointed to a significant position which he did not acquire at that time? Was he trying to place himself at the center of struggle of the Tigrayans against the Shewa Amhara?

#### **Conclusion**

This study concludes that Hayle Maryam was a *shifita* not solely for personal reasons. It seems that the combination of two factors – his appetite for position and the multifaceted problems of the peasants – made him engage in outlawry. If we ask which factor weights more, it is difficult to say. But this does not overlook his strong ambition for position: serving as *ch'iqu shum*

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<sup>119</sup> Taddese Hayle; Mulu Desta

<sup>120</sup> Taddese Hailu; Welde Abraha Gidey; Belay Mersha



during the Italian occupation, his tendency to dominate the leadership during the *Weyyane* uprising, and the fact that he served as head of the militia in Tigray under the *Derg* are clear indications for his zeal for power.

There is no doubt that *Blatta* Hayle Maryam was the spirit behind the *Weyyane* uprising. He played an instrumental role in organizing and ‘fostering and sustaining’ it and is credited for the victories which the rebels scored. He appears to have been strong in his opposition to Hayle Sillasé. Even though he clearly knew that he couldn’t win, he insisted on continuing resistance against the regime even after the uprising was crushed by the Emperor. He seems successful in this regard to the extent that he was able to continue despite all odds. Hayle Maryam’s career, particularly his banditry activities, his role and motive in the *Weyyane* uprising, his relation with the diverse participants in the uprising, mainly with the nobility, and his position as head of the Tigrayan militia under the *Derg* is surrounded with controversies.

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