

## **Aleqa Tayye G. Maryam: Trials and Tribulations**

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### ***Abstract***

*Aleqa Tayye Gebre Maryam was one of the few Ethiopian intellectuals of the early twentieth century. His long stay with the Swedish Evangelical missionaries at Menkullu near Massawa and his sojourn in Germany for several years seemed to have prompted him to critically look into the teachings of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. But he soon became a victim of religious intolerance. He was accused of being Tsere Maryam (enemy of Mary) and thrown to jail. Although little is known about Aleqa Tayye's reformist ideas, he had urged emperor Menilek to issue a national currency, set up a printing press, open a modern school, and ban the use of scornful language against craftsmen. Eventhough most of his works remained unpublished, Aleqa Tayye was also a prolific writer. After his death, some of his manuscripts were acquired by Blattengeta Hiruy Wolde Sellase who published them as his own works.*

*Using the scanty available literature, this paper attempts to investigate the life of Aleqa Taye Gebre Maryam.*

Key words: Aleqa, Yifag, missionaries, modernization, reform.

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## Introduction

*Aleqa* Taye Gebre Maryam was one of Ethiopia's intellectuals in the early twentieth century. He studied church education in his native land and moved to the northern part of Ethiopia in search of his uncle. On his way to Massawa, he came into contact with the Swedish Evangelical Missionaries who had already established a mission station at Menkullu. He stayed with them for many years and he published his first book on Amharic grammar in 1897.

In 1905, when the German mission requested emperor Menileik to assign an Ethiopian scholar to teach Ethiopian languages at Berlin University, the ideal candidate was *Aleqa* Tayye. Melilek instructed him to accompany the Germany mission and teach Amharic and Geez at the School of Oriental Studies, Berlin University. *Aleqa* Tayye accomplished his mission very well and he was instrumental in the return of Ethiopian manuscripts from Europe.

But soon after his return to his native land, he was accused of being *Tsere Maryam* (enemy of Mary) by the local clergy and officials. He was brought before *Abune* Matewos and thrown to jail. Despite his miserable life after his return from Europe, he produced a number of manuscripts. With the exception of his book on the History of the Ethiopian People and Amharic grammar, his other works remained as manuscripts until *Blatengetta* Hiruy W. Sellase published some of them as his own.

## Research Objectives

The **general objective** of this research is to investigate the life of *Aleqa* Tayye whose biography is very little known.

The research has also the following **specific objectives**:

- to look into the life of *Aleqa* Tayye and appreciate the trials and tribulations he endured;
- to point out the reformist ideas of *Aleqa* Tayye and evaluate his influence on Emperor Menilek;
- to investigate his literary achievements; and
- to assess his contribution to the development of Ethiopian historiography.

## His Early Life

Tayye G. Maryam was born on 29 November 1860 in Harfetay, a small village very close to Yifag, a well known market situated on the east of Lake Tana. As a young boy, he was sent to a nearby church, Sendo Giorgis to attend church education (Informants: Tayachew Teshome, and Tamrat Mengistu).

When Tayye was about 15 years old, an unidentified epidemic that ravaged his native land claimed the lives of many people including his mother and several of his close relatives. His father had already left for Shewa and then proceeded to Harar. At the age of 19, Tayye set out from his village and trekked to north Ethiopia looking for his uncle. While in Tigray, he was

told that his uncle had already left for Bombay, India. Learning that Tayye decided to go on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and went down to Massawa to catch a ship or join other pilgrims. But he changed his mind and ended up at Menkullu, a mission station near Massawa ran by the Swedish Evangelical Missionaries (Bahru 2002: 67; Aleme 1971-1972: 14). He stayed at the mission station for many years working as a teacher and translator. During his stay at Menkullu, he prepared and published a book on Amharic grammar entitled *Metsehafe Sewasew* (Book of Grammar) in 1897 (Aleme, 14).

Tayye then returned to Begemidir to pursue his *Qene* (Ge'ez poetry) studies and later added to his name the respected title of *aleqa* (leader or scholar). Subsequently, *Aleqa* Tayye won the respect of many people and his fame went beyond his village. One of the individuals who was very much impressed with *Aleqa* Tayye's wisdom was *Ras Mengesha Atikem*, governor of Damot and Agew Midir. *Ras Mengesha* is reported to have encouraged him to go to Addis Ababa to win the favour of Emperor Menilek. *Aleqa* Tayye accepted his advice and met Emperor Menilek at his palace in November 1898. Tayye had the pleasure to present his book to the emperor. Delighted by the gift and impressed with his knowledge, Menilek sent him back to Begemidir with an imperial letter declaring: “አለቃ ታዩ ገ. ማሪያም የሚባል ምጽዋ የነበረ ሃይማኖቱን እኛ መርምረነዋልና ማንም አንዳች አይበለው በሃይማኖት ነገር፡፡” “*Aleqa* Tayye G, Maryam who was in Massawa, we have examined his faith, no one should dispute him on the affairs of religion” (Bahru, 68). Menilek seems to have sensed that the local clergy might bring charges against *Aleqa* Tayye because of his long stay with Protestant missionaries, and the letter was believed to protect him from such troubles.

## Tayye's Stay in Europe

In 1905, the German mission headed by Felix Rosen arrived in Ethiopia, and requested Emperor Menilek to assign an Ethiopian scholar who could teach Amharic and Ge'ez languages at the School of Oriental Studies, Berlin University. For Menilek, *Aleqa* Tayye was the ideal candidate for the job. The emperor then sent him the following letter:

ይድረስ ካለቃ ታዩ እንዴት ሰንብተህል፡፡ ... ከጀርመን መንግሥት ተልከው የመጡ ሰዎች በምጥዋ በኩል ወደ አገራቸው ለመሄድ ይኸው በጎጃም በኩል መጥተዋል፡፡ ... ከኢትዮጵያ የሄደ ባገራችን ብዙ የጥንት መጽሀፍ አለ፡፡ ያነን የሚያውቅ ብልህ ሰው ይሂድና እንዲያይ ይሁን ብለውኛል፡፡ አንተ የዚያን አገር ባህል ለምድኸዋልና እናንተ ዘንድ በደረሱ ጊዜ አንተም ከነሱ ጋር አብረህ እንድትሄድ ይሁን፡፡ (Aleme, 15)

Let this reach *Aleqa* Tayye. How have you been doing? Men sent by the German government are on their way back to their country via Massawa and are passing through Gojjam. They told me that there are many antique books in their country taken from Ethiopia. They also asked me for an Ethiopian scholar to travel there and examine them. Since you are accustomed to the culture of that country, accompany them to Germany when they arrive where you are.

As instructed by the emperor, Tayye joined the German mission and after a long sea voyage arrived in Berlin. During his stay in Berlin he was befriended by Dr. Eugen Mittwoch, a well

known scholar with profound interest in Ethiopian studies (Bahru, 68; Bahru 1991: 106). It was also during his sojourn in Germany that *Aleqa* Tayye managed to compile a list of many Ethiopian manuscripts taken to Germany at different times. In one of his letters to Emperor Menilek, he reminds:

አውሮፓውያን በቤተመፃሕፍቶቻቸው የብራና ዕቃዎችን  
ዘርግተው ሲያስገቡኝ ልቤ ተቃጠለ፡፡ ... ጃንሆይ በጀርመን  
የተሰረቁትን የኢትዮጵያ መፃሕፍት ዝርዝር ልኬአለሁና  
ለሀገራችን እንዲመለሱ ያድርጉ፡፡ ዳግማዊ ምኒልክ የአድዋ  
ጀግና ብቻ ሳይሆኑ የቅርስና የታሪክ ሰብሳቢ ጀግና ናቸው ብሎ  
መጪው ትውልድ እንዲኮራብዎ፡፡ (Addis Zemen, 14/10/76  
E.C, p.3)

I was burning [with envy] when Europeans displayed their manuscripts in their libraries for visitors. Your majesty, I am sending you a list of Ethiopian manuscripts stolen and taken to Germany so that you can get them returned. So that the coming generation would be proud of you not only as a hero of Adwa, but also as a hero of collecting and preserving heritage and history.

When *Aleqa* Tayye returned to Ethiopia in January 1908, he managed to bring with him not less than 133 Ethiopian manuscripts. Tayye won awards from the German, Italian and Greek governments for his scholarly contribution. Upon his return, Menilek also “decorated him for the successful accomplishment of the mission he had been entrusted with; granted him *gult* in his native area and commissioned him to write the history of Ethiopia (Bahru, 68; Archival Collection Overview, 5-7).

## Troubles at Home

Soon after his return to his village, *Aleqa* Tayye began to face various charges of apostasy including being *tserie Maryam* (enemy of Mary). The local opposition against him was led by the local governor named Meshesha Worqe who asked Tayye to bow for the picture of Virgin Mary just to test his belief in Orthodox Christianity. Tayye refused to do so arguing that the Holy Bible instructs believers not to bow for pictures and representations. That became an excuse for Meshesha Worqe and the local clergy to accuse Tayye of being an enemy of Virgin Mary. Having heard about *Aleqa* Tayye’s religious beliefs, *Ras* Wolde Giorgis, the then governor of Begemidir, wrote him the following warning: “ዝም ብለህ ተቀመጥ ስንልህ እንደዚህ ያለ ትምህርት ከየት ያመጣኸው ነው፡፡ በኋላ ለምን ተጣላኝ እንዳትል፡፡” (Aleme, 17). “We told you to refrain from this . From where did you bring this teaching? Don’t say why he has quarreled with me.”

*Aleqa* Tayye was then charged with heresy before *Ras* Wolde Giorgis who detained him and insisted that his case should be taken to Addis Ababa. Accordingly Tayye was taken to the capital as a prisoner and was brought before the Egyptian patriarch, *Abune* Matewos who ridiculed and insulted him saying: “What the hell is your religion you donkey!” Tayye controlled his emotions but remarked pointedly: “No wonder we are called donkeys because we have been stupid enough to accept you as our archbishop” (Bahru, 69) Tayye was referring to the dependence of the Ethiopian Orthodox church on Egyptian patriarchs for centuries. Among other things, Tayye rejected the role of saints in one’s salvation, refused to

bow for saints including St. Mary, and disapproved commemorative feasts such as *tezkar*. He also insisted that fasting should be accompanied with “abstinence from sinful acts” (*Ibid*).

Although Tayye strongly defended his position quoting pertinent statements from the Holy Bible, his arguments fell on deaf ears. As the patriarch himself had already positioned himself against Tayye, one could not expect a fair trial. Tayye was eventually thrown to jail and kept there for several weeks (*Ibid*).

However, imprisonment made him more determined. The poems he composed while he was still in prison proved his determination (Tiruneh 2005: 49).

ይከራከሩኛል እየተጋዝዙ፤  
በከንቱ ላይረቱኝ አምላክን ሳይዙ፡፡  
የኔ ወህኒ ቤት መግባት በጣም ደስ ብሎኛል፤  
አምላኬ በኔ ስም ተመስግኖልኛል፤  
ለወንጌሉ ስብከት ጊዜ አጋጥሞኛል፡፡  
እንኳን በግር ብረት ቢያገቡኝ በግንድ፤  
መጨመር ነው እንጅ በእሳት ላይ ባሩድ፤  
በጣም እንዲቃጠል አጥብቆ እንዲነድ፤  
የተሰወረውም እንዲሆን ገሰድ፤  
እኔ ላምላክ እንጂ ለስዕልም አልሰግድ፡፡ (Aleme, 20)

They argue against me in turn  
Though they could not defeat me without having the Lord  
I am glad to be in jail  
Thanks would be given to God in my name  
I have now time to preach the gospel  
Leave alone shackles, let then tie me at the stake  
That will mean to add gunpowder on fire  
To make the fire more powerful  
To reveal what has been hidden  
I will worship God but will not bow for pictures

Upon his release, he was put under house arrest in Addis Ababa for about six years, untill he was set free in 1916. He then resumed his project of writing up the history of Ethiopia. *Ras* Teferi, who was sympathetic to educated people, made him a member of the advisory council in 1920. Finally, Tayye died on 21 August 1924 (Bahru, 69; Fantahun 2000: 315).

At his funeral, his sister is reported to have lamented:

ወዝውዘው ወዝውዘው ጣሉት እንደዝሆን፤  
ያው ወደቀላቸው ይበሉት እንደሆን፡፡  
ከጨለማ መሀል ቢወጣ ብርሀን፤  
አጥፉት አጥፉት አሉ እንዳይታዩን፡፡ (Aleme, 20)

They shake him to bring him down like an elephant  
He collapsed and let them eat him.  
A light shines amidst darkness  
They said extinguish to keep us in darkness.

## Aleqa Tayye as a Nationalist and Reformist

Putting his religious beliefs aside, *Aleqa* Tayye was profoundly nationalist and reformist. While he was in Berlin, he wrote a letter to Emperor Menilek urging him to send young Ethiopians to Europe to study science and technology like what the Japanese and Moroccan governments did. Part of his letter reads:

**ጃንሆይ ከአገርዎ ልጆች ወደ አውሮፓ ሰደው ቢያስተምሩ መልካም ነው፡፡ የጃፓንና የሞሮኮ መንግስት ሰው እየሰደዱ አስተማሩ፡፡ ... ይህን አይቸ ለአገሪ መንግስት ቅንኣት እንደሳት በላኝ፡፡ ... ምንኮ አደርጋለሁ፡፡ አዝኘ ወደ መቃብር እወርዳለሁ፡፡**

Your majesty, it would be beneficial if you could send young Ethiopians to study in Europe. The Japanese and Moroccan governments have already sent their people to Europe. While witnessing this, envy burned me like a fire. What else can I do? I will go down to my grave grief stricken.(Quatero, p. 2; Bahru, 138).

Tayye tried to point out the fundamental reasons for Ethiopia's backwardness which he attributed to the lack of modern education and the negative attitude toward craftsmanship. He thus suggested that the Ethiopian government should introduce compulsory education, establish a printing press and issue a proclamation banning the use of scornful language against craftsmen. In addition, he proposed the replacement of the Maria Theresa thaler by a national currency. In another letter he sent to Emperor Menilek in May 1907, Tayye went to extraordinary length to explain why Ethiopians remained backward. His letter partly reads:

The whole world is created by God who is impartial. He has not created a complete heart (mind) for one people and an incomplete heart for another ... To one who asks why Europeans, the Asians and some of the African people are skilled while we, Abyssinians ... do not progress in spiritual and secular wisdom, the answer is a short one. First, it is because the people (of Abyssinia) are not educated... Secondly, it is because, in our country people with some knowledge are insulted, despised and badly treated, instead of being respected;(As a result) such people have chosen to live lazily without working (Aleme, 29).

According to Bahru, the letters of Tayye were “one of the most influential documents produced by intellectuals” (Bahru, 131). Tayye's letters seemed to have prompted Emperor Menilek to issue edicts on the introduction of modern education and on the dignity of craftsmanship between 1905 and 1908. Also, in response to Tayye's call for a national currency and a printing press, Emperor Menilek issued a currency in his name and installed a printing press (*Ibid*, 131, 165).

Despite his nationalist feelings and reformist ideas, Tayye was severely persecuted by his opponents. In this regard, Gebre Heywot Baykedagn lamented:

**...ጥቂት ተምረው ያገራችን መንግስት ሊጠቅሙ የሚፈልጉ ወንድሞቻችን ፕሮቴስታንት፣ ካቶሊክ፣ መናፍቃን፣ የሌላ መንግስት ሰላዮች እየተባሉ ሲራቡ ሲከሰሱ እናይ የለምን፡፡የነዚህን መከረኞች ስም ስንት ብለን እንቁጠር፡፡ የሚከተሉት የሁለት ሰዎች ስም ግን እንዲወሱ የግድ ነው፡፡**



እነሱም ከንቲባ ገብሩና አለቃ ታዬ ናቸው፡፡ ሦስት ዓመት ሙሉ አዲስ አበባ ላይ ስቀመጥ እንደነዚህ ሁለት ሰዎች አርጎ መንግስቱን የሚወድ አላየውም፡፡ ይህ ደግነታቸው ግን እስከዛሬ ድረስ አልታወቀላቸውም ይመስለኛል፡፡ እጅግ ያሳዝናል፡፡ የነሱን እድል ያየ ሰው የኢትዮጵያ መንግስት ለወዳጁ አይጠቅምም ብሎ ተስፋ ይቆርጣልና፡፡ (Aleme, 25)

When our few foreign educated brothers came back to help their government, they are labeled Protestants, Catholics and spies of other governments and we see them being accused and starved. How many names of such victims shall we mention! Among others, we have to mention two names: These are *Kentiba* Gebru and *Aleqa* Tayye. During my stay in Addis Ababa for three years, I have not seen any person who loves his government as much as these two men did. However, their extraordinary good-heartedness has never been recognized. It is extremely sad. When one observes their fate, he may despairingly say the Ethiopian government is not grateful to its friends.

*Aleqa* Tayye was also determined to work toward the return of Ethiopian manuscripts from Europe. In response to Menilek's instruction to compile a list of Ethiopian manuscripts taken to Germany, he sent him two letters. In his letter of September 1905, he listed 54 manuscripts including *Tarika Negest* (History of Kings), chronicles of Zer'ia Ya'eqob, Minas, Fasiledes, Yohannes I, Iyyasu the Great, Bekafa, Tewodros II and the book of Henok, *Fitha Negest* (Justice of Kings), and *Metsehafe Felasfa* (Book of Philosophers). In another letter he sent to Menilek in May 1907, he listed about 17 manuscripts including the history of Sertse Dingil and Susenyos (Aleme, 26-28).

Although *Aleqa* Tayye proved himself as a prolific writer, only two of his works have seen the light of day (Aleme, 21). His books on Amharic grammar and a history of Ethiopian people were published at Menkullu in 1897 and Asmara in 1927/28 respectively. There is now more credible and highly conclusive evidence that some of *Aleqa* Tayye's manuscripts were finally acquired by *Blaten Geta* Hiruy W. Sellase who published them as his own works. These include *A History of Ethiopia*, *Wazema* (Eve) and *Ethiopia and Metemma* (Bahru, 150).

The other manuscripts which have never been published include a dictionary, *Tsewone Nebs* (Remedy of the Soul), *Mezmure Kirstos* (Songs of Christ), *Melkea Medhanealem* (Image of the Saviour), *Melkea Iyesus* (Image of Christ), *Mestehafe Mikir* (Book of Advice), and *Yemengist Heywot* (Life of a Government) (Aleme, 22; Tayachew, 3).

*Aleqa* Tayye had also poetic talents. He used to express his feelings with elegant poems. While he was in jail he composed several poems. He had a Muslim friend named *Sheikh* Zekaryas who later embraced Christianity and suffered persecution by his fellow Muslims. Like Tayye, he was accused of apostasy at local and regional courts. He was finally brought before Emperor Menilek and successfully defended himself. Touched by the fate of *Sheikh* Zekaryas (renamed *Newaye Kirstos* after his baptism) that had striking similarities with that of his life, *Aleqa* Tayye composed a long poem in praise of his friend (Tiruneh, 49-50; Crummey 1972: 58).

In addition, *Aleqa* Tayye has contributed considerably to the development of Ethiopian historiography. He underlines what historians should do while writing history. In this regard, he remarkably notes:

“Just as the bee applies itself with diligence and keenness to preparing from the nectars of various flowers sweet and nutritious honey so does the historian write history more beautiful and more sweet than honey by reading and examining carefully and diligently books about his country’s history ...” (Bahru, 147).

The information about *Aleqa* Tayye’s family life is very scanty. While he was still at Menkullu, Tayye is reported to have been preparing to marry a lady named Tirunesh in February 1889. It is highly unfortunate that his fiancée passed away a couple of days before the wedding. He later married another lady named Tsehaytu who met untimely death a few years after the wedding. Finally, just six months before his death, Tayye was married to the daughter of John Parkyns, *Woyzero* Tirunesh. *Aleqa* Tayye died before having children (Aleme, 24).

## Conclusion

*Aleqa* Tayye was a victim of religious intolerance. Because of his reformist views on some religious issues like representations and pictures of saints, the mediation roles of saints, the importance of *tezkar* (commemorative feasts for the deceased), and the practices of fasting, he was condemned as anti Mary. He was sentenced to imprisonment and languished in jail. Despite his trials and tribulations, he produced a number of works out of which only two have seen the light of day in his life time. Sometime after his death some of *Aleqa* Tayye’s manuscripts were published by *Blattengetta* Hiruy W. Sellase as his own works.

*Aleqa* Tayye was also a reformist. In his letters to Emperor Menilek, he was urging him to send young Ethiopians to study western science and technology, open modern schools, establish a printing press, and issue a law banning discriminatory language against craftsmanship. Menilek reacted positively by implementing these reforms.



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## Informants

Tamrat Mengistu, a son of the nephew of *Aleqa* Tayye interviewed by the author on 30 January 2016.

Tayachew Teshome, a Protestant priest interviewed by the author in Yifag on 30 January 2016.