

Tesfai Tecele: A 1st Rate Mobilizer Who Linked Regions & Religions for Struggle

By Woldeyesus Ammar

“We are already part of a passing generation before our core mission in the Eritrean struggle is fully accomplished” – Seyoum Ogbamichael (Harestai), 2004.



These expressive words were uttered by Martyr Seyoum Ogbamichael, the master of Tigrigna articulation. He was talking about another freedom fighter who died a short time before Seyoum himself suddenly passed away in December 2005. It is true that the historic generation that made Eritrean independence happen is now disappearing fast. Very few of today's Eritreans may have noticed that, this month, also **Tesfai Tecele**, a prominent member of Seyoum's outstanding generation that included national figures like Martyrs Ahmed Nasser, Abdalla Idris and Dr. Habte Tesfamariam, is gone at the age of 69. He is survived by two daughters and a son living in exile.

When Tesfai Tecele's body gave up to illness on 30 July 2018 while under treatment in Germany, a big gathering in Frankfurt of ex-members of his old ELF brigades, who have been denied safe return home since 1991, bid his remains farewell for burial in Eritrea.

The funeral ceremony was performed on 11 August. At what was called “state funeral” at PFDJ's Asmara cemetery for martyrs, the body of Tesfai was surrounded by army “generals” accompanying Eritrea's coldblooded dictator, most of whom had no soft heart for Tesfai during his entire lifetime. According to a source, also a very big Kerenite community travelled to Asmara to pay last respects to their region's topmost mobilizer for independence in the 1960s and early 1970s, at a time when only few Eritreans were aware of the struggle and the inescapable call to pay ultimate price for the national cause.

Tesfai Should Have Deserved More Tribute

Old friends in Melbourne, Australia, organized a memorial gathering in his honour on Saturday, 18 August. In addition to a few tributes in the Facebook, Radio Blina and Radio

Jahray also devoted their once-a-week broadcasts in Blin via the social media to tell Tesfai's story. But this Unsung Hero (to use Saleh Gadi's phrase on the fate of Osman Saleh Sabbe and his towering generation), this Tesfai deserved more than that – and he could have got it although history is most of the time stolen by the winner side, as is the case of boxers in a ring.

After independence, Tesfai Tecele saw it as his personal obligation to return home in order to repay a debt to the communities that served the revolution he helped build – in his own words, “To live with and serve the communities that supported the liberation struggle with all what they had.” But his old ELF comrades who did not opt to return home appeared to have not appreciated his decision. Much worse was the fact that the authorities of that strange new Eritrea were not ready to give a deserved welcome to him and his likes from “the other side.”



Tesfai (with bonnet on head) and other recognizable faces of the ELF of 1970s

Lifetime Struggle

Like many members of his generation, Tesfai Tecele was stung by the nationalist “virus” for Eritrean independence that landed him to a police prison in Keren at his early teenage, and had to escape another arrest in early 1967 by jumping through a window out of his high school classroom at the then Haile Selassie I Secondary School in Asmara. For the rest of the 25 years till Eritrea's independence, he went through the ups and downs of the struggle holding key posts in the ELF.

At the military conference of Adobha in August 1969, Tesfai Tecele and the current Eritrean dictator were elected to the 38-member ELF provisional leadership (the General Command/Kiyada Ama). Two years later at the First National Congress of 1971, he was elected member of the ELF legislative council (the Revolutionary Council) and re-elected at the Second Congress of 1975. Among other things, Tesfai held the high post of Deputy Chief of Military Staff of the then huge Eritrean Liberation Army (ELA) between 1975-1981. He also served as Executive Committee member in charge of security at a very critical hour in the life of his organization which broke down into three factions after its military defeat of 1981 in the hands of the Eritrean EPLF and the Ethiopian TPLF. During ELF's unhappy situation of the 1980s, Tesfai struggled as leadership member of the ELF-RC and other factions until independence.

Upon his return to independent Eritrea, many of his old comrades-in-struggle expected that Tesfai would normally be among the topmost leaders in the new state. But nothing has been normal in Isaias Afewerki's Eritrea, and, for obvious reasons, people's expectations did not work out. Instead, Tesfai spent the last 27 years serving in community development sectors in the old Senhit province, mostly at Hagaz, a township that he assisted to develop and rise to national limelight for a number of things. This included Hagaz becoming the location of an agriculture college that required a big tag-of-war to realize. Like his old friend Ibrahim Toteel, who disappeared in PFDJ prisons in recent years, Tesfai also worked till his end in the Red Sea region, again, in a sector related to community service, not politics.



Tesfai with Martyr Melake Tecele in 1975, and with Hamid Mahmoud at Rassai, March 1982.

A Giant Role in Building the Revolution

This writer sometimes wonders if the Eritrean Revolution could have grown to finally achieve independence without the role of a few energetic mobilizers and unifiers like Tesfai Tecele. The son of a Blin farmer - Tecele G/Kidan Abdurahman - and a Tigigna

speaking mother from highland Eritrea - Worku Mana – the now little acknowledged Tesfai Tecele was a successful master mobilizer of fighters for the struggle.

After narrowly escaping martyrdom at the disastrous battle of Halhal in the autumn of 1968, Tesfai became the virtual successor of army commander Omar Ezaz, who fell at that battle together with more than 50 young fighters.

The entire Senhit region, which is located between Eritrea's two major linguistic and religious segments that make up to 80% of the national population, looked at Tesfai Tecele to mobilize people and lead. And he did. Youthful army commander Tesfai crisscrossed the Senhit province attending at every social event like weddings, burial ceremonies and religious gatherings of both Islam and Christianity. He recruited young fighters in big numbers.

And Tesfai's recruits, bearing Christian and Muslim names, became reassuring links between the Tigrigna speaking highlands and the dominantly Tigre speaking Western lowlands. Many believed that the increasing number of "Christian" names among Tesfai's recruits in the ELF became a strong magnet to attract more fighters from highland Eritrea. In other words, Tesfai successfully played the role that the people of his province were always destined to play in Eritrea: forming a vital bridge between peoples, regions and religions of the country.

Only to underline, Tesfai and his likes always worked hard to narrow down the religious divide in Eritrea. And probably this was one of the reasons that made Tesfai fiercely angry against the divisive moves of Isaias Afewerki and his likes in the early 1970s. Tesfai led his "Aremrem" units against the groups that raised sectarian appeals to split from the mother organization. The long list of those martyrs for people's unity and national cause remains enshrined among the 6,000 names printed in volume one of ELF-RC's book on ELF martyrs published in the 1990s.

My Few Counters with Tesfai

The first time we met was in the summer of 1965 in Keren. I recall that discussed about how successful the March 1965 demonstration in Asmara was and how students in Keren and other Eritrean towns reacted. (He was later assigned to be a link of Keren students with Asmara).

The second encounter we had was at a mountain slope near Hagaz in the spring of 1970, me having come from Addis Ababa. I was not surprised to see Tesfai and some of his companions holding Mao's red book in Arabic, which was fashionable everywhere in those days. In the evening, we (my Ashera friend Memhir Qurban Negusse and five

fighters with Tesfai) went into a hat/tukul in the environs of Hagaz but only to leave the town after mid-night and travel with Tesfai back to my village of Ashera. Ethiopian agents could have known Tesfai's presence around Hagaz. Sadly, we were informed the next morning that Ethiopian army units surrounded Hagaz that night and randomly shot at many farmers and herdsmen who were sleeping outside their houses in the hot weather. We were told that at least 11 persons were killed and many wounded persons were taken to the hospital in Keren. This was one clear example of the brutality of Ethiopia's wanton killings of innocent civilians in Eritrea that, after 1991, Isaias Afeworki failed to ask at least apologies from his friends in Ethiopia.

The third-time encounters we have had were in late 1975 and early 1976 in villages not far from Asmara. It is then that I learned how much compassionate and much devoted Tesfai was towards his comrades-in-struggle. When I asked him if a long-time fighter, Gilay Ghirmai, was alive and well, Tesfai stared at me with his eyes full of tears. After a long pose, he confirmed that Gilay was not alive. I discovered that Martyr Gilay Ghirmai, who was ELF's urban envoy, was known to both of us. In 1966-67, Gilay was the cadre who met and assisted in the organization of ELF student cells in Asmara and Addis Ababa. (In Asmara, Tesfai Tecele, Ghirmai Hadgu and team represented the Haile Selassie Secondary School students while the main leading group was at Prince Mekonnen Secondary School including Gherezghiher Tewelde, nowadays in Canada, and Abdalla Hassen, now in Kassala, Sudan).



Tesfai at different stages in life.

Tesfai and I also met and discussed for long hours during the fateful Rassai days in March 1982 that ended in an internal ELF "coup" that claimed the life of heroic Melake Tecele. During the rest of 1982 and 1983, myself and Martyr Michael Ghaber held long discussions with Tesfai, at times disagreeing on how differences in the ELF could be resolved. And the last time we talked to each other was on the phone two years ago while

he was in Khartoum for a treatment. We then prayed that a day would come so that we recount the long past in a Keren tearoom. Now, that will not happen, and Tesfai will be missed for many things – including the valuable narrations and untold stories that should have been shared with his old friends and compatriots.

To all those who knew him well, the patient, soft-spoken and soft-hearted Tesfai Tecele was a generous and extremely compassionate man with full commitment and devotion to his duties and the people around him. I will always remember him for his deep thoughts about the recurring concerns related to the unity of the Eritrean people for which he contributed a lot.

May his soul rest in peace.

WA, 20 August, 2018.