

Dispatches from Eritrea # 3: A Tribute to Wel-Wel (Wolde'ab Woldemariam)

[[Dispatches](#)]

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DISPATCHES FROM ERITREA

A Weekly Column by Elias Amare Gebrezgheir
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Hanti (One) Eritra & Dehai (Voice of) Eritra

**A Tribute to Wel-Wel (Wolde'ab Woldemariam),
The Greatest Newspaperman Eritrea Ever Produced
Part II**



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*“ksaE lomi: nzKone yKun nay baEdawi
slTan Elama agelgilen tela'iKen ayfelTn::
nbarnet zebele Kulu Sela'i'u iye: zKone
yKun Hbrun melkUn:: zKone yKun seb:
iewroPawi yKun weys afriqawi: ab zKone
yKun Aynet arUt barnet nmQuran
kigddeni ayK'eln:: zeymeslekan
zeytesemAkan gber ilu nmQtaley dfret
'ente aHdere ke'a: ane'wn sle poletikawi
'emneteyn sle Harnet hagereyn sle
uneteNa TQmi aHwateyn nmumat tbAt
aHdire aleKu::”*

*“Up to now, I have never served nor
become a messenger for any foreign
power or interest. I am an enemy to
any kind of slavery, in all its shapes
and colors. No man, be he European or
African, can force me into the yoke of
any kind of bondage. If there be some
one who dares to attempt my*

*assassination in order to force me to submit to doing things contrary to my
feeling and will, then I also have in me the courage to die for my political*

beliefs, for the cause of liberty of my country, and for the genuine interest of my brothers and sisters."
-- Wolde'ab Woldemariam in *Hanti Eritra*, Issue # 88, August 22, 1951

The words above are not empty rhetorical boasting of a politician; they reflect the words of truth written by Eritrea's foremost nationalist newspaperman, **Memhir¹ (educator) Wolde'ab Woldemariam**, a week after the 6th attempt on his life by Ethiopia's Unionist agents of terror. Such was the unshakable belief of the man in his cause of freedom, and his unwavering hatred of all kinds of oppression that no amount of threats on his life could intimidate him into silence. It also reveals his independence of mind, his love of freedom, and his hatred of being subservient to any foreign power, be it (white) European or (black) African.

It is because of such a strong foundational nationalist vision of "*iertra n'iertrawyan*" (Eritrea for Eritreans) of men like **Memhir Wolde'ab Woldemariam**, **Shiekh Abdel Kadir Kebire**, **Ra'esi Tesema Asberom**, **Sheikh Ibrahim Sultan**, **Degiat Hasen Ali**, **Azmach Berhe Gebrekidan**, **Haj Imam Musa**, **Degiat Sebhata Yohannes**, **Degiat Woldegiorgis Kahsay** and his son **Grazmach Asberom Woldegiorgis**, **Qenazmach Berhanu Ahmedin**, **Blatta Kahsay Malu**, etc., and the sacrifices they were willing to pay for their beliefs that we are today enjoying a united, independent and sovereign Eritrea. There were also other principled men like **Fitawrari Gebremeskel Woldu** (who stood up for Eritrea's fate to be decided democratically by "fruyat" notables and "deqeQti" masses) and **Blatta Omar Mohammed Qadi**, who became a staunch defender of Eritrea's federal arrangement and its Constitution in the 1950s. I must point out here that my father emailed me a note from the US last week to remind me that I should have mentioned Blatta Omar Qadi and his short-lived newspaper *Unione e Progresso*, and by way of apologizing for being remiss in mentioning many such honorable men, I would refer readers to Alemseged's invaluable *AYNFELALE*, which provides the complete list of the pioneering patriots and all the political actors of that period.

As I said earlier in the first part of this essay, Memhir Wolde'ab shone above these other patriots in that he had that unique ability to articulate in powerful words the visions that he shared with his nationalist colleagues. He also understood early on the power of the written word and worked diligently to develop Tigrinya as a modern literary language for the awakening young Eritrean nation. As he was appointed to the editorship of *Semunawi Gazette*, the weekly organ of the British Military Administration of Eritrea, he quickly realized the power of the medium in disseminating the nationalist vision and started to use it tentatively towards such a goal. *Semunawi Gzetta* provided him with a good opportunity to hone his journalistic craft and to guide the debate that was then raging between the nationalists and the unionists. *mruSat AnqeSat ato welde'ab: 1941-1991*, edited and compiled by **Ato Tekuabo Ares'e** (Hidri Publishers, Asmara, 1995) provides a good sampling of Ato Wolde'ab's preoccupation with the concept of the nation during this early period. In his articles in *Semunawi Gazette*, Memhir Wolde'ab was very much concerned about *hager* (nation) and what it meant for Eritreans of that transition period. He was also very much involved in the development of education in Eritrea, and penned several articles regarding the importance of education for the development of the people.

As a result of working in proximity of the British administrators during his years at *Semunawi Gazette*, Memhir Wolde'ab Woldemariam (or Wel-Wel, one of his favorite pen names) was able to



witness at close range their behind-the-scene machinations of dividing Eritrea into Christian Highland (kebessa) and Muslim lowland (metaHt). Early on, he was given an English article by the British administrator of Eritrea, Brig. General Steven Longrigg, to translate into Tigrinya and publish it in *Semunawi Gazetta* as an article written by a concerned Eritrean advocating for division of Eritrea and seceding its parts to Ethiopia and Anglo-Egyptian Sudan respectively. As a result, he became a fierce opponent of such divisive politics that was being promoted by the British. One can see his resolute stand for national unity and rejection of the British strategy of divide-and-rule in one poem that he wrote for *Hanti Eritra* titled “*men yK’elo nay ‘engliz mKri*” (“Who can match the English conspiracy?”).



Perhaps the most dangerous British official (*wditeNa mekonen*, to use Alemseged’s term of reference) who worked tirelessly (and nearly succeeded) to destroy Eritrea as a unified nation and deliver it to the Ethiopian ruler Haile Selassie was a man by the name of **Frank Stafford**. (One wonders here who the Stafford of our times may be?) Born in 1895, and thoroughly steeped in the divide-and-rule philosophy of the British Empire, he was one of those last empire defenders whom Kipling exhorted in his famous poem to “Take up the White Man’s burden” of civilizing the savage races. The most formidable independent politician of that time was **Sheikh Ibrahim Sultan** as leader of the **al-Rabitta al-Islamiya** (the Muslim League), and Stafford did his best to destroy Ibrahim Sultan as a politician and his political organization al-Rabitta as a unifying pro-independence force of Eritrea’s Muslim population. Stafford also directed his divisive ploys against *maHber iertra n’iertrawyan* (or in English the Liberal Progressive Party) of Ato Wolde’ab and Ra’esi Tesema, and had managed to entice several political notables into his snare. Memhir Wolde’ab wrote a scathing article in *Hanti Eritra* condemning the divisive agenda that

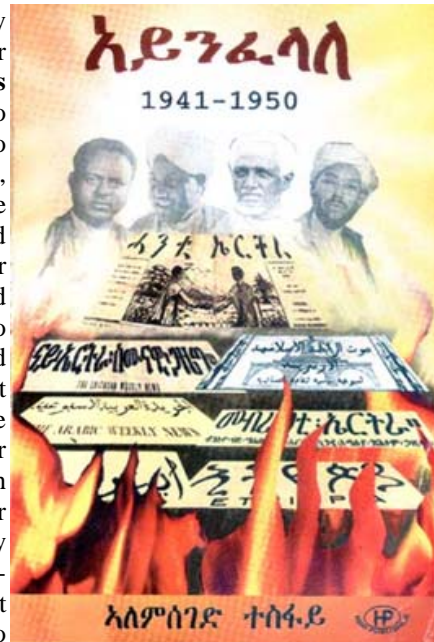
Stafford was advancing in the late 1940s and early 1950s to destroy the coalition of the nationalists in the Independence Block (*selfi natsnet*).

Wel-Wel was also fair, balanced and objective as a journalist. Both in *Semunawi Gazetta* and later in *Hanti Eritrea*, he gave fair coverage to both sides of an argument. He could have easily used his influential position as an editor to thwart the voice of his opponents in the columns of his newspapers, but he was a fair and honest editor and gave them ample space to articulate their viewpoints. Of course, he came back to demolish their arguments with his powerful pen, but not without giving them equal space and opportunity to air their views first. We find an example of this in *Hanti Eritra’s* issue # 112 of February 6, 1952, in which he gave Sylvia Pankhurst space in the letter to the editor section to advance her argument why union with Ethiopia was desirable. Sylvia Pankhurst was the Englishwoman who did more than any other Western writer/intellectual activist to advance Ethiopia’s cause during her invasion by Italy’s Fascist Mussolini, and later in the 1940s and 1950s to support its annexationist moves against Eritrea through her propaganda writing. Pankhurst had also authored the book *ERITREA ON THE EVE* (1952), and was otherwise a progressive intellectual and one of the early feminists, but she had erred big time by slandering the good name of Wolde’ab and his nationalists colleagues as quislings! There were plenty of quislings in the opposing camp, but certainly not in the camp of Memhir Wolde’ab. Furthermore, when Tedla Bairu, his arch political nemesis, was elected as the first Chief Executive of the Eritrean Government in 1952, Memhir Wolde’ab prominently displayed Ato Tedla’s photograph in the front page of the September 3, 1952, issue of *Hanti Eritra*, and wrote a generous and supportive article towards him as a person and the government he was about to establish. There was no bitterness and spite in that article, despite all the bad blood between the two, and the vicious words that were hurled against him in earlier times. This was characteristic of Memhir Wolde’ab as a person; truthful, honest, full of character and integrity,

forgiving and always forward-looking.

Wel-Wel's style of argumentation was eloquent, persuasive (sometimes subtle) and very brilliant. Witness his serialized four-part article in the April-May 1947 issues of *Semunawi Gazetta* under the title of “*iertra nmen?*” (“Eritrea for Whom?”). He starts out with a stance that would seem he favored union with Ethiopia, but as the article progressed in subsequent issues, it becomes clear that he is arguing the opposite. He was advocating for what became known as the “*Hbret bwEI*” position: more stringent conditions for union with Haile Selassie's Ethiopia, which he knew well would be rejected by the Unionists, but would expose their hidden agendas to the public. We find another example of Wel-Wel's excellent penmanship in issue # 128 of *Hanti Eritra* of May 28, 1952, under the title of “*TQmi krkebo zK'el nay klte aEruK krkr*” (“A debate between two friends which could be useful”), in which he answers Blatta Omar Qadi's article, which I assume must have been published in Omar Qadi's *Unione e Progresso*. In this article, Ato Wolde'ab focuses on the issues rather than personality and responds point-by-point to all the charges that Omar Qadi had raised earlier, emphasizing his principled stand for the need of Christian-Muslim unity in the face of Unionist/Ethiopian and British divisive maneuvers.

Hanti Eritra lived only for two years and was replaced by *Dehai Eritra*, whose maiden issue came out on September 21, 1952. I asked TebeQa (Legal Counsel) Ato Yohannes Tsegai (who also happens to be my uncle) a few days ago when I visited him at his home in Geza Banda, why Ato Wolde'ab ceased to publish his *Hanti Eritra*. Incidentally, Ato Yohannes is one of the walking encyclopedias of the political history of that period, and he has contributed valuable information, and insight as well as photos and other documents to Alemseged Tesfai, who has duly acknowledged his contribution in his book *AYNEFELALE*. Besides, Ato Yohannes also deserves due praise for preserving a bound volume of old issues of *Hanti Eritra* throughout the difficult years of Ethiopian rule and finally contributing his private collection to the Research and Documentation Center for historical preservation. TebeQa Yohannes told me that with the Federal arrangement coming into effect, Memhir Wolde'ab and his colleagues in the Independence Block (by this time it had changed its name to “demokrasiyawi selfi”--Democratic Party) considered the part of their mission of that period was accomplished, and that what remained now was to



see to it that the democratic rights enshrined in the Constitution were to be defended. That mission was to be carried on by the younger generation who established *Dehai Eritra*. I also think that as Ato Wolde'ab was now heavily involved in the founding and running of Eritrea's first labor union, which became the backbone of the anti-Unionist nationalist struggle in the following phase, this was to take the bulk of his focus in the remaining couple of years before he was forced into exile.

Dehai Eritra entered the stage with gusto and started to write provocatively critical articles pertaining to the government of Eritrea's activities. Its editor was **Hussien Seid Hayoti** (for a while **Mohammed Said Mohammed** was also the editor) and it was a weekly newspaper written in Tigrinya and Arabic, with a smattering of Italian articles occasionally. Two of its brilliant writers of the early period were **Elias Teklu** and **Siraj Abdu**. Elias Teklu was later imprisoned for his vigorous defense of the democratic constitutional rights of Eritreans and was taken to Ethiopia where he languished in prison for some years and finally joined the rank of the earlier martyrs. One article of the early period was titled “*wshTawi naSnet iertras nabey abilu Kon iyu zguAz zelo*” (Whither the internal autonomy of Eritrea?); another expose under the title of “*qunqune ab hnSa mengsti iertra*” (termites inside the structure of Government of Eritrea) warned against corruption of power of the *Baito* representatives.

In *Dehai's* issue #16 of January 3, 1953, we find a rare intervention by Wel-Wel in the columns of *Dehai Eritra*. Under the title of "*Isan kab mgza'es Alem mgza'e yQell*" ("It's much easier to govern the world than to control one's tongue"), the veteran journalist gently admonishes the young turks of *Dehai* to practice responsible journalism and stay away from vitriolic polemics. He notes that the poisonous words that have been exchanged between the columns of *Dehai* and *Etiopia* have caused concern and alarm and that journalists should understand the influence of their pens and write responsibly. Sadly, however, Memhir Wolde'ab himself was to fall victim of the 7th assassination attempt on his life a few weeks later, and *Dehai* informed its readers of this tragedy in its #18 issue of January 17, 1953. In its front page article titled "*ezi'oms Sela'ti hzbi iertran ityoPiyan d'a ybehalu*" ("These can only be the enemies of the Eritrean and Ethiopian Peoples!"), *Dehai* reported that unknown assailants had gravely injured Ato Wolde'ab with a handgun that previous Tuesday at 9:25 PM, but the assassins' bullets had once again failed to extinguish the life of that venerable patriot.

Soon after, *Dehai* was illegally closed for a year because it continued to expose the violations of the Eritrea's Constitution and the federal arrangement. In issue #28 of March 5, 1954, *Dehai* reopened by the order of Eritrea's High Court, and it defiantly informed its readers that it will continue to fight for Eritrea's rights against Ethiopia's illegal encroachments on the internal affairs of Eritrea. On May 28, 1954, *Dehai* had a big headline congratulating the Eritrean people and declared "*hzbi iertra des ybelka: sre ATiQom l'uKatka*" ("Congratulations to the Eritrean People! Your Representatives are finally getting bold"). The article reports the debate of the Eritrean parliament and the majority decision to stand up against the violation of the federal arrangement and for the formation of a special committee to investigate the issue. Unfortunately, not long after the publication of this article, *Dehai* finally ceased its publication with its last issue # 50 published on August 6, 1954. It was followed by *Zemen* and later *Hibret*, and with these publications the era of stagnation and decline under Ethiopia's rule sets in. I must acknowledge here Professor Tekie Fessehazion's well researched article "*A Brief Encounter with Democracy: From Acquiescence to Resistance During Eritrea's Early Federation Years*," on this period which appeared in *Eritrean Studies Review* Volume 2, Number 2, 1998, pp. 19-64, which first brought to my attention *Dehai Eritra's* courageous defense of the Eritrean Constitution.

What are the lessons to be learned for our times from the legacy of Wel-Wel and the two great Eritrean national papers, *Hanti Eritra* and *Dehai Eritra*? The first lesson is obvious: For a newspaper to be viable and flourish, it must represent the national interest of the country. No newspaper could be considered independent while it receives financial backing from foreign sources and advocates issues contrary to the national interest. Wel-Wel was a fierce nationalist, first and foremost, and he rejected all kinds of foreign interventions in Eritrea's internal affairs and he steadfastly refused to be corrupted and bribed by Haile Selassie's money. Secondly, national newspapers must have a serious commitment to journalistic integrity, fairness, objectivity and must have a balance in their news coverage as well as editorials. Memhir Wolde'ab Woldemariam has left us a high standard of journalistic tradition that any newspaper aspiring to national status must adhere to.

Unfortunately, a whole generation or two who were raised under corrupt Ethiopian standards are totally oblivious of Eritrea's rich tradition of a vigorous free press. Over a period of close to 40 years, successive Ethiopian regimes have managed to destroy Eritrea's cultural heritage of a vibrant and democratic press. In this regard, the worst atrocities were committed under the evil reign of the Dergue. While the generation that carried on the armed struggle escaped the corrupting influences of Ethiopian occupation, its links to the earlier tradition of the 1940s and 1950s were weak and tenuous, and its preoccupation was mainly in carrying out the political message of the national liberation struggle and the information counter-propaganda effort against the enemy.

There was much hope placed on the brief experience of the post-independence period of the private press, but that too sadly failed to carry out its national obligations and fell victim to foreign machinations as well as the greed of its owners. People who are more suited to be hustlers after the buck, or worse yet guards and messengers of foreign embassies, and cannot recognize the heroic EDF as the national army of a sovereign country but keep referring to it as "*serawit hgdef*" (PFDJ's army) can in no way shoulder the heavy responsibility of independent journalism and be expected to fill in

the big shoes that Eritrea's great newspaperman has left for future generations. In order for a vibrant and independent press to flourish in Eritrea now, we need to reclaim the nationalist and democratic legacy of Wel-Wel and once again match the standards of *Hanti Eritra* and *Dehai Eritra*.

Errata:

In Part 1 of this essay, I had made a couple of errors of information, which need to be corrected:

1. I referred to Benedict Anderson as a British political scientist. **He is Irish and not British.** For a man who specializes on nationalism studies, this is not a minor point. Try referring to an Eritrean as an Ethiopian, and you will know how important such issue is.
2. The number of assassination attempts on Memhir Wolde'ab's life by Ethiopia's terrorist agents were **seven** and not nine as I had erroneously reported. Not that it lessens the horror of the barbaric acts that the man had faced from Ethiopia's agents throughout his early political activism in Eritrea, but as a matter of historical accuracy the record needs to be set straight.

"The struggle is a long and difficult one. Therefore, mask no difficulty, tell no lies and claim no easy victory."--Amilcar Cabral

Memhir

In this article, I have taken the liberty of using the title "**memhir**" on Wel-Wel more than his two commonly used titles: the more formal "**ato**" and the informal "**aboy**". Literally speaking, "memhir" means a schoolteacher, a professor, or in the broader sense an educator. "Ato" over the years has evolved to be the modern Tigrigna equivalent of the English "Mr.". On the other hand "aboy" literally means "father" or "elder". For the last two decades, Wel-Wel was universally addressed as "**aboy Wolde'ab**". The generations that used "aboy" on Wel-Wel are the 1940s generation and those that are younger. The "aboy" in this case is not only a reference to age, but a tribute to his age-bestowed wisdom and knowledge as well. In my humble opinion, "Memhir" is a more fitting and historically correct title that should be used for Wel-Wel. Before he assumed the role of a journalist, Wel-Wel was indeed an educator, a "memhir." From 1931-1942, he had served in the Swedish Evangelical Mission School system of Eritrea first as a schoolteacher and later as the director of the entire system. It was this role as an educator that groomed Wel-Wel to become an expert of the Tigrigna language. It was also in his capacity as a teacher-director that Wel-Wel managed to publish several editions of his "**tgrNa njemerti**" and he, without a doubt, was the principal contributor to the now classic Tigrigna reading book "**Arki temharay**" that was published by the Swedish Evangelical Mission.

Even after Wel-Wel became a journalist, he managed to edit the "semunawi gazieTa" so as to be used not only as a newspaper but also as a resource for classroom reading. For the decade of its existence the newspaper was universally used by school children who had no access to Tigrigna reading books. The "semunawi gazieTa" used to carry short stories written by school inspectors, headmasters, teachers and other intellectuals of the time. These stories served as a fertile reading source for teachers and students. By this not only did Memhir Wolde'ab manage to teach children of the 1940s the proper use of the Tigrigna language but the love of reading newspapers as well. Even in his latter years, as a politician living in exile, Wel-Wel remained an educator of his own kind. These are some of the reasons I chose his rarely used title "Memhir". For sure Wel-Wel was a unique teacher, "**mwaalim**" or "**Mwalimu**" as East Africans affectionately used to call another teacher-turned-statesman Julius Nyerere.
