

THE ORIGINS OF THE TIGRAY PEOPLE'S LIBERATION FRONT

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ABSTRACT

The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), at its inception, was grounded in an ethno-nationalist consciousness generated by the cumulative grievances of Tigrayans against successive central governments of Ethiopia. An association of Tigrayan elites, the urban-based Tigrayan National Organization (TNO), prepared the groundwork for the formation of the TPLF. The TPLF, for its part, utilized class and ethno-nationalist ideologies to mobilize Tigrayans until it ousted the Mengistu government in 1991. This article analyzes how this ethno-nationalist organization emerged, grew and finally came to dominate Ethiopia — a state with an emerging multi-national character.

LITTLE HAS BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT THE ORIGINS OF THE TIGRAY PEOPLE'S LIBERATION FRONT (TPLF). Even less has been written by any author with inside knowledge.¹ As a founding member of the TPLF, who was part of its leadership for eleven years, I believe I have something relevant to share on this subject with anyone interested in contemporary political developments in Ethiopia.

The TPLF started in February 1975 as a small guerrilla band in the northern region of Ethiopia and eventually grew to provide the core of the Ethiopian government. It was originally an ethno-nationalist movement that aimed to secure the self-determination of Tigray within the Ethiopian polity. It succeeded in mobilizing the people of Tigray to such extraordinary effect that, in 1991, it won state power in Ethiopia in the name of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The latter — the government of Ethiopia today — is often accused by opponents of being 'simply a Tigrean front'.² During an armed struggle that lasted for 16 years, the TPLF mobilized Tigrayans behind the front and created a

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1. Former senior TPLF members Giday Zera-tzion, Kahsai Berhe and the present author have written critical articles on their differences with the TPLF leadership after they broke with the organization. Though valuable documents, they were not published and remain in private hands.

2. Solomon Gashaw, 'Nationalism and ethnic conflict in Ethiopia', in Crawford Young (ed.), *The Rising Tide of Cultural Pluralism: The nation-state at bay* (University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, WI, 1993), p. 156.

large and disciplined army that defeated not only rival liberation fronts but also the military government itself, one of the strongest in Africa.

The historical roots of the problem

The recorded history of Ethiopia as a state has its origins in the third century AD in the present Tigray region, then known as the kingdom of Aksum. The Aksumites developed their own civilization as illustrated by their script, *Ge'ez*, their number system, *Kutir*, and their calendar, *Awde-Awariih*, which are still in use at the present time. In AD 340, the Aksumite king Abraha (Ezana) adopted Orthodox Christianity, which quickly became the religion of the inhabitants of the region and provided the symbolism and substance of the royal ideology. With Aksum as a pivot, an empire expanded over the Ethiopian highlands. Present-day Tigrayans who are situated at the centre of this ancient civilization have indeed something to be proud of.

The Aksumite civilization, however, did not last longer than the seventh century. The gradual loss of dynamism of the centralized state in turn gave rise over the centuries to the emergence of local kings and princes, often entangled in endless wars for supremacy. By the nineteenth century, northern Ethiopia (Tigray and present-day Eritrea) was divided into no less than twenty-four independent units, according to the writer Zewde Gabre Selassie,³ and contained many more firearms than any other region in the country. During the period 1830 to 1850, Gabre Selassie notes, there were 28,000 matchlock guns in Tigray, while Begemidir, Shoa, and Wollo had 4,000, 1,000 and 1,000 respectively.⁴ Firearms became abundant in Tigray partly because it was so often the gateway for incursions by foreign invaders. The period of anarchy from 1760 to 1855, which totally undermined the Ethiopian state, was known as the *Zemene Mesafint* ('Era of Princes'). At that time, war became a common occurrence and the gun a highly prized asset, particularly in Tigray, competing with the tradition that had persisted for centuries of resolving conflicts by peaceful means through religious leaders and *shimagiles*, groups of notables and influential elders who mediate parties in conflict. In most cases they preside on their own initiative but are sometimes invited to do so.

Amid this anarchy, Kassa Hailu, a rebel from Gondar, succeeded in becoming emperor, taking the name of Emperor Tewodros (1855–68) after defeating all the local kings and princes or *rases*. He managed at last to resurrect in Ethiopia the semblance of a unitary state based on the Aksumite

3. Zewde Gabre Sellassie, *Yohannes IV of Ethiopia: A political biography* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1975), pp. 2–3.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

religious ideology. Kaysay Mircha, a rebel from Tigray, succeeded Tewodros as Emperor Yohannes (1872–89), and was crowned in Aksum. Despite their success in re-establishing the Ethiopian state, the reigns of these two emperors were never stable or peaceful, due to both internal conflicts and external invasions. Locally, lords who aspired to power were likely to rebel whenever conditions were favourable. There were countless local wars both between regional chiefs but also, more intensely, to resist the emergence of Kassa Hailu and later Kaysay Mircha as Emperors Tewodros and Yohannes. Also, external forces, including Britain in 1868, Egypt in 1875–76, Sudanese Mahdists in 1889, and Italy in 1887–96 and 1935, were responsible for a series of incursions that made the defence of the country the main preoccupation of the rulers and the people, thereby making stable life almost impossible. Tigrayans, living in the gateway to Ethiopia, carried the greatest burdens of war.

On top of these wars, famine was taking its toll, dislodging the working population and dismantling the fabric of the society that had been built up over centuries, beginning with the Aksumite civilization. The peasant population was constantly forced to side with one or the other warlord in their battles and to feed their predatory armies. The spiralling combination of foreign assaults, local wars and deadly famines left Tigray in utter destitution. As John Young observed, 'In the period between the death of Yohannes in 1889 and the present day an estimated seventeen famines have struck Tigray, the biggest being in 1958–9, 1965–6, 1972–4, and 1983–4'.⁵ During these periods millions of people died and still more were displaced from their homes.

Subsequent leaders of Ethiopia — Emperors Menelik II (1889–1913) and Haile Selassie I (1930–74) — were not concerned to address or attempt to mitigate the dismal state of Tigray, but both fought extensive wars in this Ethiopian gateway, notably at the battles of Adwa (1896) and Maichew (1935) respectively. During Menelik's reign, Gebrehiwet Baykedagne, a political economist of the time, wrote:

... there are hardly any Tigrayan youth left in their birthplace, Tigray. Like a swarm of bees without their queen, they are aimlessly scattered in four corners of the earth. Some people ridiculed their widespread poverty. Unfortunately, whilst other people live in tranquillity, Tigray has never been free from wars, leave alone outlaws and bandits.⁶

This situation seemed to have no end. While regions adjacent to Tigray were also substantially affected by these calamities, the southern part of

5. John Young, *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia: The Tigray People's Liberation Front, 1975–1991* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 49.

6. Gebre-Hiwet Baykedagne, *Emperor Menelik and Ethiopia* (Swedish Mission, Asmara, 1912), p. 12.

Ethiopia was relatively stable and gave sanctuary to the fleeing Tigrayans, but also gave them derogatory names.

When in 1942–43 peasants in central and southern Tigray began to rebel out of desperation, they were met with a harsh response. Haile Selassie's government in collaboration with the British Royal Air Force (RAF), after dropping warning leaflets addressed to 'the Chiefs, Balabats — people of Tigre province' on 6 October 1943, devastated the region including Mekelle, the capital of Tigray, throughout the rest of that month. This quelled the Tigrayan peasant uprising, known as Woyane, meaning 'revolt'.⁷ Thousands of defenceless civilians lost their lives as a result of aerial bombardment. It is recorded that 'on 14th October [1943] 54 bombs dropped in Mekelle, 6th October 14 bombs followed by another 16 bombs on 9th October in Hintalo, 7th/9th October 32 bombs in Corbetta'.⁸ Repression did not stop there. The people of Tigray region were forced to pay large sums of money and their land was confiscated and distributed to loyal gentry as a punishment and as a deterrent to future revolt. A new taxation system was imposed that 'cost the peasants five times more than they had paid under the Italians'.⁹ In the name of centralization, Haile Selassie took away regional power from hereditary leaders and gave it to loyal Showan administrators.¹⁰ This predicament again raised the level of collective resentment, taking the form of ethno-nationalist sentiment against the Showan ruling class at the centre. As Gilkes rightly observed, 'independence from Shoan (sic) rule was raised as a rallying cry and proved popular'.¹¹ The punitive measures of the central government, and especially the memory of the RAF bombardment of Mekelle on behalf of Haile Selassie's government, became grievances rooted in popular memory.

British administrators in Eritrea in the late 1940s had a strategic interest in supporting the popular call of Tigrayans that their hereditary leaders should rule their region, thereby creating a growing awareness of Tigrayan nationalism. Moreover, 'Before the British the Italians had already advanced this policy in what they named *politica tigrina*'.¹² Ras Mengesha Seyoum, the last hereditary governor of Tigray, made some attempts to

7. On the Woyane, see Gebru Tareke, *Ethiopia, Power and Protest: Peasant revolts in the 20th century* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991); Patrick Gilkes, *The Dying Lion: Feudalism and modernisation in Ethiopia 1941–1943*, *Asian and African Studies* 15, 2 (1981), p. 219; John Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (Zed Books, Atlantic Heights, NJ, 1990).

8. Gilkes, *The Dying Lion*, p. 180.

9. Haggai Erlich, 'Tigrean nationalism, British involvement and Haile-Sellassie's emerging absolutism — northern Ethiopia, 1941–1943', *Asian and African Studies* 15, 2 (1981), p. 219.

10. Showa is a region from which the Amharic-speaking ruling elite of Ethiopia, who monopolized top political and administrative positions, came. This class of Showans governed the rest of Ethiopia from the beginning of the nineteenth century, the period of consolidation of the Ethiopian empire.

11. Gilkes, *The Dying Lion*, p. 187.

12. Erlich, 'Tigrean nationalism', p. 195.

introduce industry to the region, but without success. Tigrayans were obliged to migrate to the former Italian colony, Eritrea, or to Addis Ababa and other cities in southern Ethiopia in search of work, as conditions were relatively better there. But at the same time it earned them a number of derogatory names that wounded their pride. Tigrayans' mobility was sarcastically compared to that of a Land Rover jeep, to describe how they roamed over large areas of the country. It was said that Tigray was condemned to 'growing rocks' instead of grain. Generations of Tigrayans grew up with deep feelings of desperation. The neglect of Tigray in the 1900s up to the revolution of 1975 was generally perceived by them as a deliberate and systematic policy of the Showa-Amhara ruling class in order to weaken and demoralize the Tigrayans. This view was a reflection of the historical rivalry of the two ruling houses and the Tigrayan and Amhara aristocratic classes; it should be emphasized that, as Hizkias Assefa rightly puts it, 'this situation does not mean that the great majority of the Amhara people have been "dominators" or beneficiaries of the political, economic or social system that bore their name'.¹³

These were all factors that nurtured Tigrayan ethno-nationalism, including a cultural domination reflected in the linguistic disparities within the empire. In 1972–74, the worst famine on record left more than half the population of Tigray destitute. The failure of the state to resolve the resentments simmering throughout the country tended in the end to encourage people to seek a solution in their own localities, producing a series of ethno-nationalist mobilizations. Thus, not only local grievances but also a general resentment directed against holders of power at the centre acquired expression in the form of ethno-nationalism, gradually building up and being passed on to the next generation. There was gradual erosion of the authority of the central government, and an increasing number of sporadic rebellions, locally known as *shifinnet*.¹⁴

The end of the empire

For years, then, struggles were taking place in Tigray in various forms against Emperor Haile Selassie's monarchical rule. This background created the conditions for the eventual emergence of the TPLF and its rapid growth. Legal and illegal political associational activities, strikes, underground movements, sporadic armed rebellions and even appeals for

13. Hizkias Assefa, 'Ethnic conflict in the Horn of Africa: myth and reality', in K. Rupesinghe and V. A. Tishkov (eds), *Ethnicity and Power in the Contemporary World* (UN University Press, Tokyo, 1996), p. 35.

14. For a broader understanding of *shifinnet*, see Timothy Fernyhough, 'Social mobility and dissident elites in northern Ethiopia: the role of banditry, 1900–1969', in Donald Crummey (ed.), *Banditry, Rebellion and Social Protest in Africa* (James Currey, London and Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH, 1986), pp. 151–72.

divine intervention were some of the modes of struggle waged to challenge the rule of a repressive regime and to mitigate Tigrayans' misery.

Although such anti-government movements were taking place in other parts of Ethiopia as well, including armed uprisings in Bale (1963–68), Gojjam (1967) and Eritrea from 1961, none of them was successful in toppling the national government. Finally, however, in February 1974, a spontaneous revolution broke out at the centre of the empire, galvanizing the entire Ethiopian population and bringing about a dramatic change in a government that had appeared invincible. Almost without resistance, the once mighty emperor was overthrown, and the whole monarchical structure and feudal system collapsed. But it was only to be replaced by a military dictatorship of the worst type. The subsequent military regime, which adopted Marxism as its ideology, was even more brutal than the imperial administration in its dealings with those Ethiopians who aspired to democracy and justice, and especially so with regard to the Tigrayans and other marginalized nationalities whose demand was self-determination. Roughly speaking, this demand for self-determination implied autonomous administration, a fair distribution of political power, and equal recognition of culture, language and religion.

Following the February revolution, already by July 1974 political power was in the hands of the military. The armed forces were better organized than any other socio-political group in the country because of Ethiopia's long-standing military tradition. On 12 September in the same year, the military junta known as the Derg put Emperor Haile Selassie under house arrest and officially declared its seizure of power. Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam emerged as the leader of a government whose motto was 'Ethiopia First'. Its ideology was oriented towards both nationalism and modernization, and was thus 'directed against the weakening of the state by "secessionist" movements'.¹⁵ In this respect, 'Mengistu's regime in no time revealed itself as essentially no different from the previous regime towards the assertive ethnic-nationalities, only this time accompanied by the harshness of military dictatorship'.¹⁶ The Derg regarded Ethiopia as a monolithic society, thereby declaring any ethno-nationalist grievance or demand for self-determination as contrary to Ethiopian unity and interests. Its superpower ally, the Soviet Union, supported this rigid stand of centralization both ideologically and politically. Nationalists who opted for some sort of regional autonomous rule or self-determination, which by no means amounted to a demand for secession, were prime targets of the Derg's

15. Fred Halliday and Maxine Molyneux, *The Ethiopian Revolution* (Verso, London, 1981), p. 29.

16. Aregawi Berhe, 'Ethiopia: success story or state of chaos?', in Ronaldo Munck and Purnaka L. de Silva (eds), *Post-modern Insurgencies: Political violence, identity formation and peace-making in comparative perspective* (Macmillan, Basingstoke and St. Martin's Press, New York, 2000), p. 99.

assault. It was during this period of political uncertainty and terror that many socio-political groups emerged as national and multi-national political organizations to challenge the dominance of the military.

How the armed struggle began

Throughout the 1950s and '60s there had been rebels attempting to create a movement with a broad perspective. In the tradition of Haile Mariam Reda, who led the Woyane, the Tigrayan peasant revolt of 1942–43, Gessew Ayele (widely known by his nickname Sihule) was one person striving hard to create a broad-based rebellion against the government. By the same token, the eventual founder of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) that set out to wage an armed struggle in Eritrea in 1961, Idris Awate, started his career as a *shifita* or bandit. Gessew Ayele (Sihule) was one of several Tigrayans who had contacts with Idris Awate. Many politically conscious Tigrayans showed sympathy and admiration for the insurgents in Eritrea, not because they supported the secessionist agenda that was gradually taking shape, but out of their resentment against the governments that left the people of Tigray in misery and despair. Emulating the Eritrean movement as a courageous challenge, many radical elements had, since 1970, been forming groups that contemplated an armed struggle to assert the rights of the Tigrayans for equality and fair treatment. Besides Sihule, other individuals involved in such arduous challenges included Amare Tesfu, Tekeste Wubneh, Mussie Kidane, Gebre Meskel Hailu, Raswork Ketsela, Mulu Tesfay, Atsbaha Hastire and the present author. In 1973, for instance, a group led by Amare Tesfu was on the verge of starting an armed rebellion in Tigray but was thwarted by a split that occurred at the last minute concerning the nature of the Eritrean fronts with which a working relationship was to be established. Amare and Tekeste recommended co-operation with the ELF, while others favoured the rival Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF).

Initially, when the Showan-Amhara-dominated regime of Emperor Haile Selassie was overthrown in 1974, it was hoped that a new government would address the plight of Tigrayans, but such expectations were soon dashed as the military took full power towards the end of that year. The military regime of Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam wasted no time in proving to be the worst enemy of Tigrayan aspirations. Thus, there emerged many Tigrayan ethno-nationalist groups unwilling to negotiate with such a regime, but determined to assert their rights through the 'barrel of the gun'.¹⁷ The Tigrayan National Organization (TNO), soon to become the TPLF, was only one of these. The genesis of the TNO will be described in more detail shortly.

17. 'Political power grows out of the barrel of the gun' was Mao's dictum frequently reiterated by the revolutionary generation of the time, ethno-nationalists and multi-nationalists alike.

At the same time, there was a growth of other associations that were not overtly revolutionary in nature. This included student associations. Tigray had no university or college until the mid-1990s. Indeed, as recently as the 1950s, it had only four high schools, without adequate teachers or facilities, for a population of about 3.5 million people. High school students were engaged in sporadic movements to protest about the dismal conditions of their schools and the misery reigning in their region in general. For some time they had no associational structure to pursue their demands, but with the collaboration of the last imperial governor of the region, Ras Mengesha Seyoum, a semi-legal cultural association called Tigray-Bahli was formed by the efforts of people like Ato Gessesew Ayele, Ato Hagos Alemayehu and others. In this association hundreds of students and teachers participated actively to promote their culture and assert their Tigrayan identity. Yet, the obstacles posed by the central government were so many that the association fizzled out in a matter of two to three years. A weekly newspaper called *Semyenawi Kokeb* ('Northern Star') was also established, but that too did not last long.

In the Haile Selassie I University (now renamed Addis Ababa University), however, the political atmosphere was, to a certain extent, conducive to students articulating their grievances and coming together to form associations, but not without cost. Thus, most students from Tigray, when they went to the university, saw it as part of their student life to participate actively in protests that called for change either at national or regional level. This was why many university students from Tigray played such a prominent role in the struggle against Haile Selassie's feudal regime. Their aim was not the restoration of Tigrayan hegemony over the whole of Ethiopia as some politicians have presented it. The university at Addis Ababa became the venue where politically minded teachers and students from all districts of Tigray converged and discussed issues concerning the whole of Tigray. Land degradation, recurring famines, massive unemployment, political marginalization, cultural domination and different aspects of social problems were some of the issues that arose, and their solutions were debated by students. They compared the level of the problems with those in other regions of Ethiopia, believing that conditions in Tigray were by far the worst. This assessment was often expressed sentimentally, in relation to the past glory of Tigray and its standing in the history of the Ethiopian nation.

The pan-Ethiopian student movement was growing in scope from the second half of the 1960s. Earlier prominent activists of the Tigrayan students' movement included Sibhatu Wibneh (killed by Haile Selassie's security agents in 1970), Giday Gebrewahid (killed in mid-1975 by the Derg soon after it came to power), Amare Tesfu (also killed in early 1975 by a group called the Tigray Liberation Force, of which he was a member),

Tesfay Teklu, Mitiku Asheber, Abebe Tesema, Atsbaha Hailemariam, Gebrekidan Desta and Rezene Kidane, among others. In the early 1970s the Tigrayan University Students' Association (TUSA) was formed. TUSA pledged to function not only in Addis Ababa but also in Tigray when the university closed for the vacations. Many Tigrayan university students, including all the founding members of the TNO, were involved in the association's activities during both the academic year and the vacations. As members of the university community, they were also participating actively at all levels of the Ethiopian student movement, in many cases taking a leading role. Meles Tekele — later killed by the Derg — and Abay Tsehaye, who still survives in the EPRDF leadership today, were TUSA members who led the editorial branch of the university students' union. The present author headed the university's political science students' association for a year (1972–73), and Berhane Eyasu, a leading member in the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), who was to be killed fighting the Derg, was also a TUSA activist before he joined the EPRP.

In Addis Ababa, TUSA's function was limited to discussions of a political nature and to contacting influential people like parliamentarians, businessmen and professional personalities from Tigray to persuade them to contribute something tangible to mitigate the dismal situation in Tigray. Occasional papers like *Etek* ('To Arms!') and *Dimtsi Bihere Tigray* ('Voice of the Tigrayan Nation') were produced and distributed free of charge. Such activities were agitational in nature and broadened the link among Tigrayans engaged in various walks of life. The contribution of Tigrayan parliamentarians like Ato Gessesew Ayele (Sihule), Ato Asfaw Woldearegay, Ato Alemseged Gebre Egziabiher, Weyzero Tsehaytu Gebreselasie, Kegnazmach Teklit Mekonen, Ato Zenawi Tokola and others, both in terms of financial input and many aspects of advice, was immense. Intellectuals and professionals, among them Ato Bekele Berhane, Dr Assefa Abraha, Dr Itbarek Gebre Egziabiher, Ato Tsegaye Hailu, Ato Hagos Atsbaha, Ato Kidane Asayehgn, Ato Aynalem Aregehegn, and Dr Tesfay Berhe, gave initial support to the movement. Such people and many others saw themselves as victims of ethnic repression and political persecution. Ato Alemseged G. Egziabiher, for instance, had to spend months in poor conditions in prison under the Haile Selassie regime on account of his progressive views as a parliamentarian.

TUSA's major activities, however, were carried out in the eight *awrajas* (districts) of Tigray, particularly during the Ethiopian winter when the university was closed for vacation. Supplementary education for high school students, development projects such as reforestation, and political awareness-raising on fundamental problems and their solutions, were the focus of the association's activities. Educational and developmental activities were carried out with legal permits and the co-operation of the then governor of

Tigray, Ras Mengesha Seyoum, who, on one occasion, when TUSA's leading members approached the Ras in Addis Ababa, went so far as to criticize openly various government ministers, particularly the minister of education, for standing against his developmental policies in Tigray. TUSA's political awareness programme, however, was carried out without the knowledge of the provincial government authorities, which would certainly have thwarted every activity of the association if they had known that they themselves were being blamed for collaborating with the oppressors in the central government. Ras Mengesha himself was seen as an accomplice of the ruling group both by marriage and class interest, hence an element to be removed by the wind of change.

While advancing the associational programme, clandestine groups were organized to study Marxist dialectics, the class struggle, the national question and other revolutionary issues of the time. These study groups used every legally permitted opportunity in their activities to disseminate their revolutionary ideas with the aim of raising the level of consciousness of the people as a whole. The dissemination of nationalist revolutionary ideas was carried out through leaflets, songs and informal discussions, which were carefully crafted so as not to antagonize the conservative peasant society of Tigray. No mention of Marxist rhetoric was made outside the young educated revolutionaries. In those days everyone seemed motivated to exchange revolutionary ideas advocating change. The call for armed struggle to get rid of the oppressive feudal regime was entertained more often than it was mentioned.

Within TUSA, a politically conscious group by the name of Mahber Gesgesti Bihere Tigray (MAGEBT), aimed at creating a higher form of organization, evolved at the beginning of 1974. Literally translated, the name means the Association of Progressives from the Tigray Nation, but for convenience it was called the Tigrayan National Organization (TNO). The TNO was later to become the mother organization of the TPLF. While these TNO-led activities were under way, another group called the Political Association of Tigrayans (PAT), led by Yohannes Teklehaimanot and Gebre Kidan, was involved underground in a purely political mobilization of Tigrayans against the Ethiopian regime. This association advocated the outright independence of Tigray and later emerged as an armed organization known as the Tigray Liberation Front (TLF). It was the TNO that was to evolve into the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and, after sixteen years of guerrilla war, was to become the government of Ethiopia.

The TNO was established at a meeting held on 14 September 1974, attended by seven university students: Zeru Gessese (Agazi),¹⁸ Fantahun

18. The names in brackets were given to the respective individual members of the organization in the early days of the struggle to disguise their real names for fear of enemy pursuit. Some of those listed have retained these pseudonyms.

Zeratsion (Giday), Mulugeta Hagos (Asfeha), Ambay Mesfine (Seyoum), Alemseged Mengesha (Hailu), Amha Tsehaye (Abay) and the present author (Berihu). The seven met in an inconspicuous café in Piazza, in the centre of Addis Ababa. Ato Gessesew Ayele (Sihule), twice a member of parliament and still a popular representative of Tigrayans at the time, belonged to this group but could not attend the meeting for security reasons. All these people had known each other for years, working together in the struggle against the repression of the Tigrayans in particular and the Ethiopian peoples in general.

The aim of the 14 September meeting was, first, to reach a common understanding of the nature and disposition of the Derg's regime with respect to the self-determination of Tigray and the future of democracy in Ethiopia; second, to reflect upon what form of struggle to pursue and how to tackle the main challenges that would henceforth arise; and third, to outline how to work and co-ordinate activities with the Ethiopian left which hitherto had operated according to much broader revolutionary ideals. These grand ambitions were not new. Those at the meeting had previously been reflecting on these matters informally. Thus, by the end of the day they had drafted a two-page general guideline.¹⁹

The guideline declared that:

- The strategy of the movement is the formation of a democratic Ethiopia in which the equality of all nationalities is respected.
- A national armed struggle should be waged that would advance from the rural areas of Tigray to the urban areas.
- The movement should be led by an urban-based organization known as the Tigrayan National Organization until such time as the armed struggle could begin.

It was unanimously understood that the TNO was a preparatory stage for the armed struggle. The founders of the TNO collectively assumed many tasks including undertaking propaganda and political work to prepare for the ensuing armed struggle, recruiting individuals to be members of the TNO from which later combatants in the armed struggle could be recruited, collecting materials and information necessary for the struggle, and so on. To accomplish these and other broadly defined tasks, the TNO founders had to organize closely the active elements in the association and political movements with which they were in contact so far and on which they would rely for the painstaking fight ahead. It is therefore necessary to give a short account of the activities in the association and of the political

19. This two-page guideline should be located in the archives of the TPLF as a classified document. Access to such documents is only possible with the permission of Meles Zenawi, the current Prime Minister.

movements from which the TNO sprang and on which it would depend so heavily in the ensuing sixteen years of armed struggle to bring down the military government. The TNO had contacts with many radical Tigrayans, and later it was not difficult to assemble them in the TPLF. The TNO's immediate goal was achieved when it transformed itself into an armed organization, the TPLF, in February 1975.

Political ideologies

The Ethiopian student movement of the 1960s and '70s was marked by an unprecedented political radicalism. It was dedicated to struggle against imperialism and feudalism — systems that were believed to have kept Ethiopia in the most backward stage of development. Most of the younger generation who had passed through high school and university were revolutionary enthusiasts belonging to this ideological and political wave. Their dream was to change Ethiopia's dismal backwardness in a revolutionary manner. At times they played the role of an opposition political party. The experiences of the Bolsheviks' Russia, Maoist China, Ho Chi Minh's Vietnam and Che Guevara's internationalism were espoused as guiding precedents to redeem Ethiopia from its predicament. The revolutionary student generation of that time was, as it later proved, ready to make any sacrifice to undo the grip of imperialism and feudalism in the country. This revolutionary fervour was part of the international wave of the 1960s. Marxist revolutionary ideals were thought to be impeccable, the only appropriate guiding tenets through which the country was to be transformed from its backwardness.

Although class-based ideological orientation was prevalent among the student body, ethno-national mobilization was also a concomitant ideological stance in the students' movement. Marx's stand on the Irish national question — that it had to be resolved if the British proletariat were to advance to socialism — was recalled to justify the question of nationalities in Ethiopia. The theories of Lenin and Stalin on the national question were also used as tools for combating national oppression in Ethiopia. In Leninist fashion, revolutionary students referred to Ethiopia as the 'prison house of nationalities'.

The ethno-nationalist sentiment in the young educated class was strengthened by several factors. On the one hand, the monopoly of power by the dominant Showan-Amhara feudal class, that fostered its ethnic hegemony and kept Ethiopia in the dark, was the prime cause for ethnic resistance. On the other hand, the influence of the previous rebellions in Tigray (the 1942–43 Woyane), in Gojjam (the 1967 revolt), in Bale (the 1963–68 rebellion) and in Eritrea (the 1960s–70s armed struggle) served as historical precedents to challenge the existing oppressive state of affairs.

Those who came from marginalized ethnic nationalities wanted to assert their hitherto neglected identity and equality by all means possible. Revolutionary students from the dominant nationality, the Amhara, as well, vigorously upheld, as a matter of principle, the right of nations to self-determination. Walleign Mekonen (an Amhara from Wollo region) produced an outstanding article on the national question in Ethiopia, in November 1969 in which he stated that 'Ethiopia was not a nation, but a collection of nationalities ruled by the Amharas. To be an Ethiopian, you will have to wear an Amhara mask.'²⁰ Moreover, the negative and repressive reaction of the state to such sentiments and the dreadful conditions in the various localities that were the heartlands of different ethnic groups were other important factors that solidified ethno-nationalist sentiments among the various ethnic groups.

Members of the TNO, who either saw no contradiction or ignored any incompatibility in espousing the class and ethno-national forms of struggle simultaneously, actively participated in both. It was assumed that the ethno-nationalist movement, if and when it was guided by a Marxist ideology, was a sub-set of the class struggle, the former levelling the way for the latter. For them, the struggle for the creation of a democratic Ethiopia was tantamount to bestowing the right to self-determination on its component parts, with all the people able to live harmoniously in a fair political and economic relationship. Those who saw the ethno-national struggle as a tactic to achieve equality within a united Ethiopia and not as a strategy for secession were unaware of the turns and zigzags that ethno-nationalist mobilization could take. They were not able to see that 'The more politicized ethnicity becomes, the more it dominates other expressions of identity, eclipsing class, occupational, and ideological solidarities',²¹ and that ethnic struggles can become ominous. The young revolutionaries focused only on the positive contribution of ethno-nationalist mobilization as the most effective and shortest way to uproot the oppressive system. Their attitude was in conformity with Horowitz, when he wrote that 'Ethnic affiliations provide a sense of security in a divided society, as well as a source of trust, certainty, reciprocal help, and protection against neglect of one's interests by strangers'.²²

In this political atmosphere, the progressive Tigrayan students who formed the TNO also continued to participate actively in the pan-Ethiopian student movement. They played a role in all the major political activities

20. Walleign Mekonen, quoted in Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation: The history of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party* (Part 1) (The Red Sea Press, Trenton, NJ, 1993), p. 54.

21. Milton J. Esman, *Ethnic Politics* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1994), p. 15.

22. Donald L. Horowitz, 'Democracy in divided societies', in Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner (eds), *Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict, and Democracy* (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD and London, 1994), p. 49.

that were to bring about the downfall of Haile Selassie's monarchy. When the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC), more widely known as the Derg, took over, they still persisted in forming a pan-Ethiopian front that could get rid of the military administration and institute a civilian participatory democratic system. TNO members (later subsumed into the TPLF) played a major role, among other things, in exposing the vices and the cynicism behind the Derg's 1975–6 'Campaign of Development and Co-operation', a scheme that was intended to disperse the student body and control or eliminate its radical elements. Later, it was discovered that eight prominent members of the TNO, because of their high profile in revolutionary activities, were on the hit list of the Derg's security office. The revelation of the existence of this list forced not only those named but also other radical Tigrayans to go underground or withdraw from areas of the country controlled by the Derg and find shelter in rural Tigray or abroad. Some of those who stayed behind in the Derg-controlled area — revolutionaries like Meles Tekle, Giday Gebrewahid, Abraha Hagos and many others — were soon killed by the Derg. Those who left for rural Tigray went not just in search of shelter but also to find ways and means to launch resistance against the government. It was these realities that led the TNO to transform itself into the TPLF and engage in armed insurrection within months of the Derg's take-over. For TNO members, it was clear that the intellectual debate that emerged in the early days of the revolution would soon come to an end with the inevitable establishment of the military, the best organized section of society. The TNO/TPLF went so far as to warn those political groups that were hesitating between working with the Derg and standing firm against it to take the latter position before it was too late.

Tigray on the eve of the insurrection

The population of Tigray in the 1960s was estimated to be nearly two million.²³ The 1994 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia recorded it as 3.1 million.²⁴ This census does not include Tigrayans living outside the region, estimated to be more than one million. More than 75 percent of the population of Tigray even now speak Tigrigna, a spoken and written language that had been forbidden by the central government since the 1940s for use in schools, law courts and other official organs. The other languages spoken in Tigray are Afar, Saho, Agew and Kunama. More than 90 percent of the people at the time the armed struggle began lived in the

23. Markakis, *National and Class Conflict*, p. 250.

24. Population and Housing Census Commission, *The 1994 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia* (Government of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, 1996), p. 10.

rural areas and worked in agriculture, with a small percentage of pastoralists living in the lowlands. In the densely populated highlands, because land was privately owned for generations in a system known as *rist* in which every family member could claim a plot, land fragmentation increased the fragility of agricultural production, forcing the bulk of the peasantry to live far below subsistence. Still worse, recurring famines (like those of 1972–4), as a result of drought and locusts, claimed the lives of tens of thousands of peasants. Government authorities not only neglected the plight of the people but also continued to levy numerous taxes that it was practically impossible for the peasants to pay. As a result, thousands of peasants abandoned their villages with or without their families. It was common to observe desperate families seeking shelter in churches and mosques and begging for food in the streets. Life was often intolerable and desperation reigned.

When the revolution of 1974 uprooted the imperial system, there was a general desire in Tigray for change. Through songs, writings and other available means people voiced their readiness to pay any price in the struggle that could bring them a better future. A series of events like the dramatic fall of the Emperor, the flight of the hereditary provincial governor of Tigray, Ras Mengesha Seyoum, and the seizure of power by an unknown group, was witness to the confusion that reigned during this period of the early 1970s.

The persistent call of the young educated class — basically students and teachers — for radical change, with the self-determination of Tigray as a rallying slogan, inflamed popular aspirations. The imposition of central control, domination by the Showan-Amhara ruling class, heavy taxation, and the failure of leaders to improve the wretched life of the people, including that of the Showan peasantry whose life was no better than that of the rest of the peasant population, were sources of complaint in every forum. It has been said that 'The most painful cut of all was the banning of the Tigray language in a region where, as late as the mid-1970s, only 12.3 per cent of the males claimed to speak Amharigna and only 7.7 per cent could read it'.²⁵

In the rural areas, while farming, and while celebrating religious holidays or attending a wedding ceremony, men and women alike routinely sang songs that either evoked the dismal conditions they had to endure or looked forward to the moment when they could rebel against the repressive system. In a predominantly peasant and illiterate society like that of Tigray, ideas are usually communicated orally and are well expressed through songs. Two of the popular songs that reflected the feelings of anger went as follows:

25. Rodolfo Stavenhagen, *Ethnic Conflicts and the Nation-State* (Macmillan, Basingstoke and St Martin's Press, New York, 1996), p. 168.

Tigray kinday maalti kitsebeyeki, (Tigray, how long should I linger?)

Ab balijay geyre kimalaalki (Let me get 'it' [the gun] for you)

Gobez Tigray! Gobez Tigray! (Brave of Tigray! Brave of Tigray!)

Zebenka iu tsemede bieray! (Now is your time to mount the ox/weapon)

Students used to write, demonstrate, organize in study groups and sing songs of a revolutionary nature that were more straightforward and programmatic. University students took the lead in these revolutionary activities, confining their Marxist rhetoric to the company of their peers and expounding the national self-determination of Tigray within the conservative peasant society. The ethno-nationalist cry was stretched so far as to invoke the martyred patriots of the 1943 Woyane while hailing their own movement as the second Woyane. The presence of the elderly Sihule as a leading figure also helped to popularize the nationalist stance of the movement and divert attention from the Marxist posture of the students. Almost every Tigrayan, even the feudal lords and the clergy, who might have to lose some of their privileges after the revolutionary struggle, seemed to approve of the call for self-determination, the vision of the educated young generation, and their efforts to realize it. It was in these circumstances that the TPLF emerged.

From TNO to TPLF

The core task set by the TNO was to prepare the groundwork for the armed struggle. All other activities of the TNO revolved around this central objective. Many university and high school students, teachers and civil servants were recruited as members of the TNO with the objective of waging the armed struggle. Although all members understood that the direction of the TNO was to enter upon an armed movement, only the younger and more able ones were advised to engage in mental and physical preparation for the protracted war ahead. They were encouraged to read about experiences of guerrilla movements in Algeria, China, Cuba, Eritrea, Guinea-Bissau, Vietnam, and so on. The endurance and revolutionary discipline exhibited in these revolutions were emphasized. The older members, on the other hand, were advised to keep a low profile and to work underground in towns controlled by the government in order to provide support for the forthcoming armed struggle. Recruiting and organizing urban dwellers in cells and supplying them with propaganda materials and other necessary things like medicine, plus collecting money and stealing relevant information from the enemy camp, were some of the tasks assigned to them.

Another important task the TNO undertook was establishing a working relationship with the two existing Eritrean fronts, the EPLF and ELF, for practical reasons. Although the EPLF claimed to be 'more progressive' than

the ELF, and the ELF similarly claimed to be 'more truly nationalist' than the EPLF, the TNO regarded both fronts as nationalist organizations fighting for the independence of Eritrea. The TNO undertook no research on this matter, and no formal discussion took place in order to reach this position on the nature of the fronts and the future of Eritrea. The TNO adopted this view purely for pragmatic reasons and without serious thought about its consequences. TNO leaders focused only on the support they could procure from the Eritrean fronts to facilitate their struggle against the military regime in Ethiopia.

Because of geographic proximity and language similarity, it was not difficult for Tigrayans to trace and contact ELF or EPLF fighters. Above all, a sympathetic attitude on the part of Tigrayans towards the Eritrean fighters was taking shape in the university, where some Eritrean students were trying to break the exclusively nationalist stance and forge a people's movement all over Ethiopia. When TNO leaders contacted the ELF, the response was not completely positive. This was because another Tigrayan group, the TLF, led by Yohannes Tekle Haimanot and Gebre Kidan Asfaha, had already established a working relationship with the ELF, making the TNO a somewhat unattractive option to the latter at that time. Perhaps also the ELF might have considered the TLF as more truly nationalist, since it upheld the independence of Tigray, similar to the Eritreans' position. The response from the EPLF, on the other hand, was prompt and positive. Two factors might have expedited this reply. First, the EPLF must have been aware of the fact that its arch-rival the ELF had already established working relations with a Tigrayan front, the TLF, that could help it expand its area of operation. Secondly, a group of founders of the EPRP were already in the field with the EPLF, but their relationship was not going smoothly, since the former were not able to adopt a clear-cut position on the question of Eritrean independence.

As communication proceeded for more than five months via letters, Mehari Tekle (Mussie), an EPLF fighter but a Tigrayan by birth, finally emerged to facilitate matters. He met with two TNO representatives, Seyoum and Aregawi, in the outskirts of Asmara in November 1974. Initially, the TNO leaders thought Mussie was a contact-person representing the EPLF, but in their first formal meeting with him they discovered that, with the consent of the EPLF leadership, he was coming to join the TNO and fight for the self-determination of Tigray. He also disclosed to the TNO leaders that many other Tigrayans who had been fighting on the side of the EPLF were eagerly talking about an armed struggle commencing soon in Tigray and that they were keen to come to their region to fight the enemy. It had been a common experience for Tigrayans going to Eritrea in search of work to join the Eritrean fronts to fight the government that was the cause of their misery. Girmay Jabir, Iyassu Baga, Marta Kahsa, Haile Portsudan

and Kokeb Wodi-Aala were among such fighters. As it emerged later, Mussie was to be a very important link in many aspects. At a critical time (the end of 1974 and the beginning of 1975) when the ELF and EPLF were ferociously competing to gain more ground from the demoralized and retreating Ethiopian government forces, Mussie was the one who maintained the link between the EPLF and the TNO. The situation was otherwise very difficult to handle for inexperienced TNO leaders in a territory with which they were not familiar.

In the initial discussions with Mussie, the first issue of concern was military training, since none of the founders of the TNO, except Sihule, had any military experience whatever. TNO members, most of whom were university and high school students plus a few teachers, were keen to engage in training. Mussie informed the TNO that the EPLF was willing to train as many Tigrayans as the TNO could yield. He also made it clear that the EPLF leadership would like to see fewer student trainees and more peasants, the rationale being that the peasants could endure hardship in the rural circumstances to which they were accustomed. The TNO leaders were not convinced of this argument, but nevertheless proceeded to recruit peasant trainees as well. The EPLF's wish to increase the number of peasant recruits in the future TPLF army was eventually to have the effect of neutralizing the educated element in the guerrilla army, which otherwise would have continued to scrutinize critically and challenge the manner of leadership at all times, as experienced in the *Menkae* incident of 1973.²⁶

It was not difficult to raise recruits for military training. The first group selected for such training in the EPLF-liberated area arrived in Asmara in January 1975, a month before the TPLF declared its existence in Tigray. Among these future *tegedalti* (fighters) were Abay Tsehay, Hailu Mengesha, Sahle Abraha (Seye), Atsbaha Dagneu (Shewit), Yohannes Gebre Medhine (Walta), Tikue Woldu (Awealom) and Legese Zenawi (Meles). The last-named is the current prime minister of Ethiopia. They had to remain for some days in hotels in Asmara, as the route to the EPLF field of operation including Asmara itself had become a war zone, in which it was unsafe to travel unarmed. During this somewhat chaotic situation, Meles vanished from the group that was due to move to the field whenever the situation permitted. Within a few days, however, the situation was calm, and under the guidance of Mussie, the group, minus Meles, slipped out of Asmara at night and after two days arrived at the nearest EPLF training camp, Riesi Adi. There, they started rigorous military training immediately. A month later Hailu and Abay, on their way with a mission to Tigray, found Meles

26. *Menkae* refers to an attempt by cadres in the EPLF to democratize the organization, which the leadership labelled as 'anarchism' and crushed by harsh military measures. For details see Markakis, *National and Class Conflict*.

75 kilometres from Asmara, in Adi Quala where his mother comes from. They demanded an explanation for his separation from his comrades in Asmara. The normally eloquent Meles had nothing plausible to say about this, and has never given an explanation to this day. The matter was glossed over in favour of more pressing matters at the beginning of the armed struggle, but the mystery of his unexplained absence continues to hang over Meles.

Back in Tigray, the assignment of assembling peasant trainees was assumed by Sihule and his younger brother Berhane Ayele (Fitewi) in their home district of Shire. Sihule was to emerge as the single most important figure in establishing the armed struggle and in the origin of the TPLF, as we shall shortly see. The two brothers concentrated on recruiting active and motivated peasants who could cope with the rigorous military training required. In a matter of three days, some thirty individuals from both peasant and urban backgrounds, including a few students like Niguse Taye (Kelebet), were contacted and volunteered to join those who had already started training in Eritrea. Agazi and Seyoum led this group all the way from Tigray to Eritrea across enemy-held territory. They joined the first group and in less than three months had graduated from their training and were ready for combat.

In the town of Enda-Selassie, Shire, where Sihule was the indispensable host, the rest of the TNO members were organizing themselves for the declaration of the beginning of the armed struggle in the countryside of Tigray. For more than a week, most of the TNO leaders (among them Sihule, Giday, Asfaha, Seyoum, Agazi, and the present author) had been discussing and making preparations for when, how and where to start the long awaited war. On the recommendation of Sihule, it was decided to start the armed struggle from Dedebit as soon as possible. Other colleagues who joined this group at this preparatory stage were Asgede (a former soldier in the Ethiopian army), Kahsay Berhe (Misgina), Michael, Melay and Abraha. It was believed that the armed struggle should begin before the ultra-nationalist TLF, the Ethiopian 'Bolshevik' EPRP and the monarchist Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU), all of which were poised to fight the Derg from Tigray, could gain ground.

The final preparation for commencing guerrilla warfare was concluded at Sihule's home. Sihule made available three rifles, and a fourth came from Giday who had pilfered it from his father in his absence. Field equipment and other logistics were either bought or collected from members and supporters and assembled in Sihule's house. Sihule's family prepared a few days' rations for the contingent that would march to Dedebit. On the last day before the group's departure to Dedebit, where the first engagement was to take place, Sihule's house looked like the military base of a small contingent. The future guerrilla fighters were dressed in khaki clothes

suitable for the heat and rough terrain. All wore shorts and the locally made sandals known as *temalaget* — most of them for the first time. Everyone was given a pack of about 20 kg to carry. A mule was bought to help carry extra provisions. As the family was preparing what was necessary for the field, the strange scene in their house puzzled all of Sihule's children, some of whom were crying because they thought that they were going to lose their father forever.

At midnight on 18 February 1975 (11 Yekatit 1967 by the Ethiopian calendar), Fitewi led the way to avoid the police and the government militia. The group headed for Dedebeit, about 80 kilometres from Shire and 900 km from Addis Ababa — a journey which took two nights. Dedebeit became the starting point and the initial base area of the TPLF. Dedebeit saw the beginning of the armed struggle and the birth of the TPLF. The TPLF referred to its struggle as the *Kalai Woyane* ('Second Woyane'), referring to national self-determination against an oppressive state. From here on, the TPLF took over the TNO, all of whose activities and members automatically became part of the TPLF. The time span in which the TNO was formed and transformed into the TPLF was short, but this swift development at the time of the Derg has to be seen in the light of the Tigrayan struggle which had been simmering for decades. Tigrayans in general and the founders of the TNO/TPLF in particular were more than ever ready at this revolutionary period to assert their rights in the most effective way.

The military Derg with its radical slogans — mostly borrowed from the revolutionary university students — might have attracted many Ethiopians who were seeking change. The TNO/TPLF leaders, however, did not believe that the spontaneously assembled military officers would live up to their revolutionary promises. This time, many Tigrayans, including the founders of the TNO/TPLF, were determined to create a homegrown organization that could put forward the legitimate interest of the Tigrayans and find a lasting space in Ethiopian power politics. This was in actual fact the essence of the struggle for self-determination, for which thousands of Tigrayans were yearning. Moreover, with its nationalist slogan of 'Ethiopia First', the Derg's attitude towards ethno-nationalist movements was so discordant that the TNO/TPLF leaders who saw the rocky path ahead, were forced to expedite the challenge in its highest form — armed struggle.

*The role of Sihule*²⁷

In traditional Tigray, in the rural areas, hardly anyone took the students' voice seriously at first. When it came to waging an armed struggle, elders

27. Although Sihule is the 'field name' given in the armed struggle to Gessesew Ayele, people liked to call him by this pseudonym as a sign of respect.

would immediately scorn the students, mocking them with remarks like 'they must be joking', or 'they will go back to their mothers tomorrow'. This attitude presumably developed from the harsh experiences of vicious wars, in Ethiopia in general and in Tigray in particular, in which endurance was tested and scrutinized by others. The key to changing this attitude was Gessesew Ayele, known as Sihule, who was much older than the young revolutionary students he joined in the TPLF to wage an armed struggle in the 1970s.

Sihule was in his late fifties when he left his family and his well-paid government position as a member of parliament to start the armed struggle with a few young university students in their twenties. It was not the first time that he had rebelled against a repressive system: as a boy of 14, he had resisted the Italian fascist army that occupied Ethiopia from 1935 to 1941, going with his uncle as far as the southern front to fight the invaders. After the war, he worked as an Ethiopian representative in British-administered Eritrea. In 1962, he rebelled against Haile Selassie's government. At one point he met Idris Awate, a leader of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), to discuss the creation of a united front of struggle, although this did not materialize because of the secessionist stance of the Eritrean movement. Coming of age in the Ethiopian struggle against the Italian occupation, Sihule was politically formed in the era of Ethiopia's struggle for modernization and democratic revolution of the 1960s and early '70s. He was an ardent Ethiopian who never embraced the secession of Tigray as an option, unlike some of his young revolutionary comrades. He was a fighter who always rebelled against higher authorities whenever he observed them failing to render justice to the ordinary people.

Sihule's rebellious character in imperial Ethiopia, where absolute loyalty to the higher authorities was not to be questioned, gained him popularity not only in his own district of Shire but also in the whole province of Tigray. Whether or not he held a government post, his house at Enda-Selassie, Shire, was the venue for peasants with problems who came to seek his advice and to persuade him to use his influence to find solutions. Sihule held positions in government on many occasions, but when he found himself at loggerheads with senior authorities, including Ras Mengesha Seyoum, the last hereditary governor of Tigray, he more than once went back to his own locality to pursue his rebellious life. In early 1970, the people of Shire voted overwhelmingly for him to represent them in the Ethiopian parliament, where he argued bravely against many odds. Time and again, he spoke not only for the cause of his own constituency but also for the Ethiopian people as a whole. After the installation of the Derg, he took up arms against the military dictators who had toppled Haile Sellasie's regime, in spite of the fact that the new rulers had promised to elevate him to higher posts in view of his background and popularity.

Gessesew Ayele 'Sihule' was more than just one of the founders of the TPLF: he was someone whose background and personality made an immense contribution to the smooth development of the TPLF, especially in the initial stages. He was instrumental in organizing the start of the TPLF military activities, when the armed struggle led by the TPLF against the Derg began on 18 February 1975. Dedebit, in the remote hills of western Tigray, was selected as the place to start the armed struggle because Sihule had prior knowledge of this area and, more importantly, he had the respect of the people living in the villages adjacent to this terrain. Otherwise, the people in these villages would definitely have been hostile to the unknown students whose activities had previously been only in the towns. When representatives of the people in Shimelba, Tselimoye and Adi-Mohamedai, three villages surrounding Dedebit, were approached by the TPLF to render their support, they did not hesitate. This compliance was granted not because they understood the objectives of the emerging front, nor because of the young revolutionary students, but simply because Sihule, whom they knew very well, was involved. Thus, it was not surprising that, for some months, the TPLF was referred to not by its proper name, but as a group that belonged to Gessesew Ayele.

Gessesew Ayele acquired his nickname 'Sihule' at the beginning of the armed struggle in February 1975, in reference to the eighteenth-century Tigrayan warrior and kingmaker Ras Mikael Sihule, whose power was felt as far as Gondar and Wollo. Ras Mikael Sihule was known for his decisive action in getting rid of emperors he thought illegitimate and replacing them with those of his own choice. He overthrew King Ioas in 1769 and 'was responsible for placing the next two Emperors on the throne'.²⁸ Sihule had a large extended family and was married to Weyzero Zimam Gebre Hiwet, who supported him throughout his rebellious life. They had seven children. Although he was known as a good family man, this did not stop him from once again engaging in the armed struggle against the new military dictators that was to cost him his life in 1976. Even his rivals respected him. Asked about the death of her husband, Weyzero Zimam often says '*Nebir bitemot lij tekta*'²⁹ ('if a leopard dies, she leaves behind her offspring').

Without the popular Sihule, the unknown TPLF would have found it difficult to survive and prosper in the district of Shire. The whole area in the 1970s was infested with *shifita*. Almost every sub-district of Shire contained two or three renowned *shifitas* who had under their command groups ranging from five to thirty in number. Some of the leaders of these *shifita* bands were essentially of a criminal type, like Alem Eshet, who considered

28. Gilkes, *The Dying Lion*, p. 7.

29. She also said this in an interview with the daily *Addis Zemen*, Meskerem 9, 1991 (Ethiopian calendar.).

himself in sole command of his domain. The more powerful *shiftas* had considerable numbers of automatic rifles. They knew the rugged and rocky terrain like their own backyard and could manoeuvre effectively. They could have swept from their territory any unfamiliar group like the TPLF, if it had not had Sihule. But the reputation of Sihule, and of his younger brother Berhane Ayele, was sufficient to intimidate every group of *shiftas* in the district. At that early stage of the struggle, even fellow peasant fighters used to treat the student fighters as 'kids who only know how to play with paper', believing that leadership should rest with peasants who knew how to handle a gun. From the start, Sihule gave the TPLF the legitimacy and popularity that none of its other members could provide. So it was that an organization with its roots in a provincial tradition of armed resistance was able to equip itself with a sophisticated political ideology and eventually to take over state power.

Self-determination: a postscript

At the foundation of the TPLF, 'self-determination' was understood to mean autonomy or self-rule for Tigray in a democratic, poly-ethnic Ethiopia. Later, in the early days of the struggle, self-determination was interpreted by an ultra-nationalist group within the emerging TPLF to mean secession from the Ethiopian nation-state, with the aim of establishing an independent republic of Tigray, as declared in the TPLF manifesto of 1976. This standpoint of an independent republic was included in the manifesto by the group that had been given responsibility for drafting and printing it, which incidentally happened to be the core of the ultra-nationalist section, included Abay Tsehay, Sibhat Nega, Seyoum Mesfin and Meles Zenawi, the current prime minister. The idea of secession, however, was contemplated only by a section of the leadership and not by the rank-and-file of members or by the people of Tigray, who constituted the historic core of the Ethiopian polity. This extreme position was challenged as soon as it emerged and was relinquished straightaway, since it had no popular support but remained for some time a source of subsequent splits in, and defections from, the organization.

In 1978, the secession option was proclaimed to have been dropped, after pressure from an internal opposition and from other Ethiopians who saw no future in secession. Ironically, external pressure, particularly from the EPLF, also played a significant role in the fight against the secessionists.

Another wedge that was to emerge within the TPLF in the early 1980s was that caused by the development of an ultra-left ideological brand of Marxism-Leninism (Stalinism specifically) which culminated in the formation of a group called the Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray (MLLT) in 1986. Although the MLLT seems nowadays to be out of sight, the

ideology it extolled was the source of divisions and defections that by and large have been racking the organization from within to this day.

The inclusion in the current Ethiopian Constitution of a right to secession for every nationality (article 39.1), and the adoption of 'revolutionary democracy' as a guiding ideology by the current government, are intrinsically linked to both the ethno-nationalist and ultra-leftist stances of the faction led by Meles Zenawi, who governs Ethiopia today.