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Education nexus politics in Agame Awraja during the imperial regime

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During the imperial regime of Emperor Haileslasie, there were only three secondary schools in Tigray Province. These were Atse Yohannis of Enderta, Nigiste Saba of Adwa and Agazi of Agame Awrajas. These secondary schools were centers of dissent. Linguistic oppression, maladministration and lack of adequate social institutions created very strong dissatisfaction among the people of Tigray Province. As what was happening in other parts of the province, there was very strong student anti-government political movement in Agazi Secondary School. Since the late 1960s, strike, demonstration, fighting against the police and breaking government vehicles became common political activities in the school. Both university and high school students of Agame Awraja arranged meetings, distributed several pamphlets and composed many revolutionary songs which agitated mass-based armed struggle against the imperial regime. Their strong determination to pay any form of sacrifice for the betterment of their society marked the end of the imperial regime in September 1974. This article is based on primary and secondary sources. The former includes numerous archival materials, information obtained from interviews of knowledgeable individuals, while the latter consists of books, articles and theses. These sources are critically examined and cross-checked for their reliability.

Key words: Students, boycott, demonstration, opposition, Agazi, Adigrat, Agame.

INTRODUCTION

Soon after the liberation of Ethiopia from the Italian occupation, the centralization policy of Emperor Haileslasie faced strong opposition from the people of Ethiopia in general and Tigray in particular. Several *awrajas* in Tigray strongly resented the imperial regime that suppressed their culture, language, history and identity and right to social services such as schools and health facilities. Even though the First Weyane Rebellion

of 1942/3 was suppressed by the use of British Royal aircraft, the people did not remain submissive to the regime. Rather, they waited for an appropriate time to organize themselves and fight against it. Between the 1940s and 1960s, there was no overt anti-government movement in different parts of the province. It was in the late 1960s that university and high school students of different *Awrajas* began to raise their voices against the

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regime. In *Agame Awraja*, many students were engaged in anti-government political activities. They managed to dispatch revolutionary ideas through preparing different pamphlets, songs, poems and music that agitated mass-based armed struggle against the regime. They won many supporters who contributed a lot to topple the feudal regime in 1974 with a considerable sacrifice.

The establishment of Agazi elementary and secondary schools in *Agame Awraja*

In 1942, an elementary school was opened in Adigrat Town. Very few teachers namely *Ato* Zewengel Gebre Kidane, *Bashay* Sibhat Batita, Karl (Sudanese teacher) and *Haleqa* Gebremariam started the school, which was made up of wood. In the mean time, its name was Baraka, an Italian word to mean a house made up of wood. It was later renamed Agazi Elementary School. Here, it is necessary to discuss the historical genesis of the latter name of the school. Agazi represents “liberator”. This name was not given without reason. It is stated that forefathers of Tigray had paid multifaceted sacrifices for their country since very ancient times. They managed to defend the dignity of their country at any cost. This was to remember their efforts, commitments and contributions that the school was named Agazi. Initially, the school ended in grade three. There was shortage of class rooms and other facilities. The imperial government was not happy with the name Agazi so it changed to Keyih Meseret. In 1958, the school got grade eight. Students who completed grade eight in Adigrat went to Mekele for higher education. Many students who had economic and other related problems withered their education.¹

This created great disappointment among the people of *Agame Awraja*. The people of *awraja* began to discuss how to solve the problem. Irrespective of several obstacles, they persistently requested the imperial government to open a secondary school in Adigrat Town.² Some committed individuals played a pivotal role in contributing money and raising the idea of establishing secondary school in Adigrat. These include Dr. Mengesha Gebre Hiwot, *Ato* Girmay Hagos, *Shum Agame* Kassa Gebre Mariam, *Aba* Kidane Gebray, *Barambaras* Hadgu Gebreyohannis, *Ato* Kahsay Gebre Hiwot, *Ato* Mehari Hagos, *Ato* Yohannis Gebre Mariam and teacher Sibhatu Bahire.³ In 1964, the first two persons went from Addis Ababa to Adigrat Town and met some elders and businessmen. They arranged meeting at Ethiopia Hotel, where many people participated and some promised to contribute their own share in the establishment of the school. This was a turning point in the history of Agazi Comprehensive Secondary School. During the meeting, ad hoc committee was established to facilitate the opening of the school. Unfortunately, in their return to Addis Ababa, *Ato* Girmay lost his life in a car accident that happened on 16 May, 1964 around Kobo.

Dr. Mengesha was also deposed from his position due to his failure to reach the capital city on time.⁴

Finally, they achieved their mission (Tables 1 and 2). A comprehensive high school was opened in the town in 1965, when grade nine was begun in the compound of

Table 1. Number of Agazi Comprehensive Secondary School Students between 1958 and 1974.

Year	Sex		Total
	Male	Female	
1966	91	27	118
1967	97	23	120
1968	287	94	381
1969	336	48	384
1970	493	150	623
1971	610	206	816
1972	750	207	958
1973	826	208	1034
1974	877	270	1147

Source: Agazi Alumni Adigrat Branch Archives (A.A.A.B.A., 2012)⁶

Keyih Meseret. Students in Adigrat Town sat for leaving certificate examination in 1968 for the first time (Aregawi, 2004, 2008).⁵

The establishment of Agazi Alumni

Before 1972, university students arranged tutorial classes for secondary school students in Adigrat. This created good opportunity between them in the town and it eventually became fertile ground for the formation of Agazi Alumni, which was established on 2 January, 1972. Agazi Alumni was not opened without several impediments. Its conception was must to get recognition of the governor of *Agame Awraja*, *Ato* Seyum Yakob, and the governor general of Tigray province, *Leul Ras Mengesha* Seyum. It was after several critical evaluations of its major objectives that the alumni got recognition among the aforementioned officials (Agari, 2012).⁸

The extent to which *Leul Ras Mengesha* Seyum was seriously examining the request for the establishment of Agazi Alumni can be seen from a letter that he wrote and sent to the governor of *Agame Awraja*. The letter reads:

b>Ä!G%T yxG"z! TMHRT b@T yqDä t¥¶äC ¥HbR ¥ÏÏM _QMT 14 qN 1964 >.M bq\$ _R 641¼7¼63¼ yÉÛT tmLKcêlh#ÝÝ ¥Hb,, lxgR -" ,Â lb S% mçn#N µmn#bTÂ bsbb# yEHL y+ltEu ZNÆl@ XNÄÄSkTL ybk#Lä `§ðnT kwsÇ bhúb# ytS¥¥h#bT mçn@N xS-ý" lh#ÝÝ⁹

I [the governor general] have already seen the letter, that was written on 22 October, 1973 with reference number 641/7/63, discussing on the establishment of Agazi Alumni. This is to inform you [Ato Seyum Yakob]my agreement on the formation of the alumni if you believe that the alumni is useful to the country and if you are going to be responsible for its involvement in political and cultural issues.

Table 2. Number of directors of Agazi Comprehensive high school during the imperial period.

No	Name	Year of employment
1	Yibeleh Negash	1957
2	Mesfin Belay	1958
3	Tomas Kanikadon	1959-1960
4	Alemu Ayana	1961
5	Destä Asayehegn	1962-1963
6	Zemenfes Qidus Ashebir	1964
7	Haileslasie Weldegerima	1965
8	Girmay Abera	1966-1967

Source: Agazi Alumni Adigrat Branch Archives (A.A.A.B.A.)⁷

Ato Seyum Yakob, on his part, wrote a letter to the students of Agazi Secondary School to inform them that the governor general, *Leul Ras Mengesha Seyum*, had considered their request and approved the formation of Agazi Alumni on 2 January 1972. The letter reads as follows:

YH yqDä yxGxz! TMHRT b@T t¥¶ãC ¥HbR ¥HbRnt\$ bâöšL XNÄ!fqD\$Ch# dUG¥Ch# b-y"Ch#T msrT yTGÊ -Q\$Y gçE L;#L %S mNgš S†M -HúS 24¼64 >.M bq\$ _R 3173¼5206¼49 btÉf dBÄb@ b¥Hb,, mĪĪM ytS¥ÑbT mçn#N...¹⁰

Based on your frequent appeals to get official recognition to the formation of Agazi Alumni, Leul Ras Mengesha Seyum, the governor of Tigray province, wrote a letter on 02 January 1972 having 3173/5206/49 reference number that shows his approval...

It was the first alumni in the country. It opened its main office in Adigrat and other branches in Asmara, Addis Ababa and other corners of the country including Begemidir, Bale, Sidamo and Arsi from where its members raised funds to consolidate the capacity of the alumni. For instance, on 2 July 1972, its branch office in Addis Ababa arranged fund raising program. *Tihilo*, the most preferable food of *Agametot* (the people of Agame), was prepared for invitation during which they collected Ethiopian birr 4967.85. The same was true in the other branches of the alumni irrespective of the difference in the amount of money collected.¹¹

The beginning and development of student movement in Agame Awraja

Agame *Awraja* was one of the three *Awrajas* of Tigray Province which have secondary school during the imperial regime. The people of Agame *Awraja* had got the opportunity to attend secondary education in Agazi Secondary School. Due to various social, economic,

political and other related problems, the people of the *Awraja* had no compassionate attitude towards the imperial government. Just like in other secondary schools of the province, there was strong student’s movement in Agazi Secondary School. Like their fellow Tegarü in Mekelle, Adwa, Axum, Shire, Maichew and other towns, the students in Adigrat were uncompromising in their struggle against the oppressive imperial rule of Emperor Haileslasie (Darch, 1976; Young J, 1997).¹²

The late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed new breakthrough in the history of the students of Tigray. It was the time when Tigrean University started to provide tutorial classes to the young students. Adigrat was not an exception. University students played a pivotal role in shaping the political movement of high school students in Adigrat. They distributed various political pamphlets among the latter. Demonstration, strikes, fighting with the police and class boycotts were common in the town. This movement was intensified from time to time. They pronounced “xTnúM wY (2) yöWÄL SR›T xYb”HM wY”, which literally means, “Would you wake up to end the feudal rule” (Solomon I, 2007). Some Tegarü university students visited Adigrat during the vacation while others came to the town as national service teachers (Mulugéta D, 2010; Young J, 1997).¹³

Under the cover of providing supplementary education to secondary school students, mobilizing the masses to participate in planting different seeds and cleaning the town, these students involved in disseminating revolutionary political ideas among the young students. According to Samuel Kidane, this was clearly stated as follows:

“...ሥውር ዓላማው ግን ገዢው መደብ በማያውቀው ውስጣዊ ዘዴ የመሬት ላራሹን ምንነት በመጠኑም ቢሆን በተማሪዎች መንፈስ እንዲሰርፅና ኣብሮ ከልጆቹ ኣካላዊና ኣምሮኣዊ ዕድገታቸው ጋር እንዲጎለግስ ማድረግ ነበር።”
 --- its hidden objective was to implant the concept of land to the tiller among the students so that it will grow in parallel with their mental and physical growth. But this was in a way that the ruling government couldn’t notice it. (Samueal Kidane, 2010).¹⁴

Some of these university students who provided tutorial classes in the town include Ato Siyum Masfin, Ato Atsbha Asgadom, Ato Hadara Berhe, Ato Girmay Gebre Tsadik, Ato Gebre Hiwet Gazahagn, Ato Mangasha Kihishan and Ato Gebre Mikael Damoz. Like in other corners of Ethiopia, the summer school in Adigrat gave prior attention to political activities igniting mass-based opposition against the imperial regime. It is stated that the program was aimed at politicizing the young students with the ongoing political conditions of the country.¹⁵

Initially, the imperial government did not know the university students’ hidden agenda and no serious supervision was done on them. But, later, the former realized the challenge of the latter against it after which the number of police forces in the town was increased greatly. Despite the increment in the number of security

forces in the town, the university students did not hesitate to teach politics openly (Daniel Grey R.1970).¹⁶

Some activist students strongly challenged the imperial government by mobilizing majority of the students in the Hailesiasie University. They established several clubs in which many political pamphlets were exchanged. Such activities shaped the political attitude of many university students towards the regime. The government retaliated against the revolutionary students. To this end, many Tegar University students, including Tilahun Gizaw and Sibhatu Wubneh, were killed. Their death highly shaped the nature of political movement among the high school students in Tigray in general and Adigrat in particular. This aggravated the situation in Adigrat Town, where the school was reported to have been closed for about a month. Many students stopped their education for one year while others did not return at all. The students of Agazi Secondary School arranged several meetings in which the life history of the dead Tegar was read for numerous audiences. They also celebrated “Zikre Tilahun ena Sibhatu” meaning “The memory of Tilahun and Sibhatu” every year.¹⁷

Students of the respective secondary school began to read poems criticizing Emperor Hailesiasie in front of their parents. Until this time, parents did not feel happy with the political movement of their students. However, the death of the aforementioned and other Tegar university students stirred bad feeling among the parents of Agazi Secondary School students. This eventually increased the bond between the secondary school students and their parents whose union marked one step forward to begin armed struggle against the feudal regime. Teachers in Adigrat were also patrons of the political movement. Some informants recalled that Rezene Melese, Melese Tekle and Giday Gebrewahid were some of the teachers who contributed a lot in developing the political consciousness of their students and parents in Adigrat Town. Every Friday, students arranged debate, drama and poems in which several sensitive political issues were discussed among the Agazi Secondary School students.¹⁸

Archival sources revealed that on 9 March, 1972, the students of Agazi Secondary School arranged a peaceful demonstration. The reason for the arrangement of the demonstration against the imperial regime was the dismissal of considerable number of students from the respective school. This situation led to a confrontation between the students of the school and security forces in the town. In such confrontation, the students were reported to have stoned houses at Che’anadug. Due to this reason, about 24 (twenty four) students were captured and against whom the director of Agazi Secondary School, Ato Mengesha Yibrah developed accusation. It is stated that Belay Teklehaimanot and Yirga Alemayehu were disturbing their teachers for no less than one week. On the same day, at 2:00 PM, around several hundred students of Agazi Secondary

School met together and asked the return of the two suspended students unless they would not continue their education peacefully. The disagreement between the students and the security forces in Adigrat Town was intensified. This caused material destruction including windows, iron sheets and doors. The director of the school, Ato Mengesha Yibrah, states that the destruction was costly.¹⁹

The conflict between the security forces and students of the respective school continued in the following day, on 10 March 1972. At mid night, the students were reported to have killed a certain soldier, Gebre Mezgebo, whose military code was 271. He was found killed and thrown into a hole. The list of the 24 students who were captured and arrested is in Table 3.

According to oral sources, the immediate cause for the clash between Agazi Secondary School students and police forces in Che’anadug was not the dismissal of the students. Rather, they claimed, on 8 March, 1972, the students of Agazi Secondary School heard a rumor that security forces in Adwa killed one activist student. The students in Adigrat, particularly in Che’anadug were asked “CGR Ztf-r xB ጎDê NSáTk#M XN=Y ÷YNk#M)” which literally means “The problem happened in Adwa, what is wrong with you?” Many police and mayor of the town went to Che’anadug to convince the students to give up their illegal political movement and to continue their education peacefully. However, such effort ended in vain. Even an attempt made to intimidate the students was futile. The students did not listen to the mayor and police. Instead, the students threw stones at the police after which the latter were reported to have fired their guns against the former.²¹

The skirmish between both parties wounded seven (7) students, including Araya Abrha and Gebremikael Seyum (Seyah). Since the rebelling students were large in number, the police forces ran away rather than confronting them. The students were believed to have captured two police men over whom minor damage was inflicted. Meresa Asefa, a police driver, was one of the captured and wounded police. Some students took the wounded students to hospital while others chased the retreating police forces. Students used the following song to show the weakness of the armed forces of the imperial government to suppress the student political strike in Che’anadug.

z#RÃ MŞ> _YT MN>R YzH

z#RÃ MŞ> _YT MN>R YzH

*T¹šlH x1# m_æ xmL x1HÝÝ*²²

Having equipped with excess bullets of Minishir (weapon)

Having equipped with excess bullets of Minishir(weapon)

People blame you that you retreated, you have bad behavior.

For this reason, the escaped police forces asked

Table 3. List of students captured during the March 10, 1972 revolt.

No	Name	Grade Level	No	Name	Grade Level
1	Beyene Abrha	11 th	13	Belay Aregawi	9 th
2	Kedir Hassen	11 th	14	Usman Abubekir	12 th
3	Abrham Desta	9 th	15	Yemane Abrha	9 th
4	Dawit Tekle	10 th	16	Seid Musa	10 th
5	Gebre Hiwot Fiseha	11 th	17	Yohannis Berhe	11 th
6	Asgedom Mengistu	10 th	18	Girmay Debalma	11 th
7	Mezgebu G/hiwot	8 th	19	Alemayahu Gebremedhin	10 th
8	Tekle Mehari	7 th	20	Alem Hadgu	11 th
9	Mehari Mebrahtu	10 th	21	Hailemariam Kiros	11 th
10	Hailay Abay	9 th	22	Girmay Seyum	12 th
11	Redae Beraki	10 th	23	Brhane Araya	10 th
12	Atsbha G/slasie.	10 th	24	Markos Seyum	10 th

(Source: N.A.L.A.A Box No. 297/4, File No. 1504/144/25- መጋቢት/2/64 9.90)²⁰

additional force to retaliate the students' action. The police force was ordered to hunt activist students and hand them over to the imperial government. Almost all but one police agreed to accomplish their mission. The exceptional one was *Ato* Gebre Mezgebe, from Sa'esi'e. He disagreed to fire off his gun against the "disturbing" students. He rather recommended punishment of such students using stick other than gun. Unlike the archival source, oral information reveals that the dead soldier was shot by his colleagues based on the order of the imperial government. It is stated that his refusal to accept the order brought him into conflict with his colleagues and urged him to pay its price. The imperial government was believed to have ordered a secret kill of *Ato* Gebre Mezgebe. As a result, he was assigned to spend the night watching the streets of the town after which he was shot by the government force.²³

Archival materials evinced that on 18 March, 1972, a meeting was held in the school. Many parents, teachers and government employees of the *Awraja* attended the meeting. They agreed that each student had to bring his /her parent to sign, showing their readiness to take the responsibility of controlling the illegal political activities of their children.

But, this attempt was not achieved because grade seven (7) and eight (8) students of the respective school claimed that they were not participants of the aforementioned riot so that they would not bring their parents. Grade 9 (nine) to twelve (12) students, on their part, argued that they did nothing wrong and refused to bring their parents to sign. This created dissatisfaction not only among the government officials of the respective *Awraja* but also among the teachers of Agazi Secondary School. Due to this reason, the school was reported to have been closed for a month.²⁴

Due to this, about twenty police officers left Adigrat and flocked to Mekelle to present their complaint to *Leul Ras* Mengesha, the governor general of Tigray province. Their

list is included in Table 4. When they were asked why they left Adigrat and marched to Mekelle Town, they mentioned the following reasons. First, due to the disturbance that was made by the students of Agazi Secondary School on 30 Feb 1972, five students were caught and put in prison. However, according to the security's view, one of the five arrested students was a son of the *Awraja* governor's sister due to which he was freed from prison. This created great disappointment among the security force. Second, on 8 March, 1972, the students of the respective secondary school were reported to have been involved in an illegal political opposition against the imperial regime. Many students were caught by the security force and imprisoned.

Unfortunately, the security officers claim that the *Awraja* governor freed the arrested students; the teachers and security force were blamed for the cause of the students' opposition in the town. Third, due to the confrontation between the students of Agazi Secondary School and security force on 10 March, 1972, Gebre Mezgebu was found dead and thrown into a hole. All these events discouraged the security forces and they left Adigrat and went to Mekelle Town.²⁶

Leul Ras Mengesha ordered the formation of ad hoc committee to assess the situation in the town. To this end, the ad hoc committee began to examine the situation in *Agame Awraja* and presented its findings to the *Leul Ras* on 24 March, 1972. According to the findings, the students of Agazi Secondary School caused costly material destruction. The conflict between both parties wounded two students: Gebreigziabher Demewez and Araya Abrha, who were taken into hospital for medical treatment. Other twenty four (24) students, most of them wounded, were arrested. The finding of the committee further claimed that the major cause for the conflict that took place between both parties on 10 March, 1972 was due to the dismissal of two activist students: Yirga Lema and Belay Tekle Haimanot. It is

Table 4. List of armed forces who moved from Addigrat to Mekele after the March 18, 1972 revolt.

No	Name	Title	No	Name	Title
1	Beyene Kidane	Deputy Commander of Hundred	11	Arafayne Mesfin	Soldier
2	Hiluf Asres	Soldier	12	Gebrehiwot Tesfay	Soldier
3	Fitsum Haileslasie	Soldier	13	Kalayu Alene	Soldier
4	Hadgu Gebrehiwot	Soldier	14	Abrha Tesfay	Soldier
5	Abay Berhe	Soldier	15	Brhanu Lakew	Commander of Ten
6	Abrha Tsegay	Soldier	16	Haileslasie Kidane	Soldier
7	Kindeya Gebru	Soldier	17	Mengesha Haile	Soldier
8	Tekleab Semon	Soldier	18	Niguse Berhe	Soldier
9	Belay Tesfaye	Soldier	19	Hailemikael Gebru	Soldier
10	Teka Gebre Tekle	Soldier	20	Mersa Asefa	Soldier

stated that in accordance with the rules and regulation of the Ministry of Education, confirmed by the governor of Agame *Awraja* and the head of police forces of the respective *awraja*, teachers and the director of Agazi Secondary School began to take measures against the agitating students of the school. Accordingly, the aforementioned students were dismissed from the school. The former students was grade 10 (ten) while the latter was grade 9 (nine).²⁷

Colonel Brhane Demewez, who was one of the assessing committee, stated that though the two students were punished for their leading role in provoking the majority students, there was still unstable situation in Adigrat Town that was common everywhere in the country including Addis Ababa. He also pointed out that the committee would continue assessing the situation in the town.²⁸

On 2 April, 1972, students of Agazi Secondary School posted several pamphlets on the walls of public halls and school compound at the night time. It is stated that this rumor was sent by *Barambaras* Gebreigzaibher Hailu, who was the secretariat of Tigray province. However, his letter did not get acceptance among the provincial and imperial state officials due to the nature of the relationship between the secretariat and the government officials both in Tigray Province and Addis Ababa. Their relationship was characterized by its hostile, or at least lack of trust nature. It is stated that *Barambaras* Gebreigziabher was removed from his post on 9 April, 1972. But, there were several letters dispatched by his address, stamp and signature until 24 April, 1972.²⁹

Even though he was summoned to the Imperial Government Ministry of Interior, he did not obey the request. The state officials claimed that every letter distributed in his name included groundless news so that they would not take it into consideration. They also stated that since he was not obedient to the imperial rules and regulation, he had to be subjected to a necessary punishment.³⁰

The students of Agazi Secondary School wrote an

impressive pamphlet calling the mass population of Agame *Awraja* for an armed struggle against the imperial regime. They stated that the *Awraja* lagged behind other *Awrajas* due to several reasons including the absence of twenty four (24) electricity services. It warned the people of the town that unless they raised their voices against the imperial regime, the government would give no attention to their problem. This pamphlet was found by the security forces on 03 April, 1972 posted on the churchyard of Medhane Alem Church of the town.³¹

The students of Agazi Secondary School were highly encouraged by the students of Atse Yohannis Secondary School. The latter ensured the former that they would be on their side for the sake bringing bright future for the people of Tigray. They stated, “እኛ የአፄ ዮሐንስ 2ኛ ደረጃ ት/ቤት ተማሪዎች በአናንተ ኮከል የደረሰው በደል ስለተማን የናንት የወንድሞቻችን ደጋፊዎች ሆነን ተነስተናል።” This literally means “We, the students of Atse Yohannis Secondary School, are your supporters since we have recognized the challenge that you face.” They, the students of Atse Yohannis Secondary School, mentioned some reasons why they decided to back up the students of Agazi Secondary School.

First, they stated that both were close kin. Second, the physical aggression under took by the security forces against the students of Agazi Secondary School alarmed the students of Atse Yohannis Secondary school to encourage the victims of the harsh measures to fight against the imperial regime to the end. For this reason, the students of Atse Yohannis Secondary School were urging the state to pay indemnity to the physically damaged students of Agazi Secondary School. This strengthened the unity between the students of both secondary schools.³²

They were requested to strength their cooperation until the materialization of their mission. This was proposed to be made without ignoring the form of sacrifice they were expected to pay. They underlined:

... እናንተ ተማሪዎች ሀሳባችሁን እንደብረት ምድሶ ከቆማችሁ ለተማሪ የማይቻለው ሀይል የለምና ብትታሰሩም ብትሰቃዩም ጸንድ ልብ ሆናችሁ

በሀብረት ለማስፈታት በመመከር ሃሳቦችሁ ከግብ 1! ደርሰላችሁ ይችላል። እኛም እስከ መጨረሻ ድረስ ደብዳቤ እየተለወደን የትግራይን ስም ማሰባሰብና ሃሳብን ከግብ ለማድረስ መጣር እንጂ ሁሉ ግዜ እንደምታደርጉት ካለዉጧት ወጥቶ ተመልሶ መግባት ለታላቁ የአግኦኪ ትጠዘር ቤት የሴትነት ስም ያሰጣል። አሁን እንደረመራችሁት "አንበሳዉ አግኦኪ" የሚል ስም አስጥቶታል በጀመራችሁት ወኔ ወርታላ ጸንዳታፈጥጭ። አደራችሁን ጥብቅ ነዉ።³³

Dear students, you may be arrested or tormented. Be any, if you have firm stand which is as strong as metal pillar, there would not force that would dissolve your unity and materializing your mission would be inevitable. We [the students of Atse Yohannis Secondary School] would try our best to agitate the identity of Tegarū until the achievement of our objectives. Inconsistent movement and retreat would destroy the greatness of Agazi School. Your present progress deserves a title "The brave Agazi" and you have a moral obligation to keep up the progress ongoing.

The same source further evinced:

... የኛም የናንተም ትጠዘር ቤት ለአንድ ዓመት ቢዘጋ ሌላሳባቸዉ ፅኑዋር እንጂ ትጠዘር አይወዱም የሚል ያላዋቂነት ስም አያጠንም፤ ጀግናዉ ያገፎ ህዝብ ሃዳግማይ ወያኔ አትፍራ ምክንያቱም የጥንት አባቶቻችን በጀግንነት ያቆዩትን አገራችን ምንም ስንፈራ ወንድም ሆነ ሴት ለወገንህ ታማኝነት ሳትፈራ ጸዉነትን ተመርኩዘህ ተከራከር፤ አይወህ ጀግናዉ የአጋሜ ተማሪ በሙሉ ኢትዮጵያ ግዛቶች ስምህን አሰከብረህ ሳትናገሩ በአደገጋ ዓዲግራት ከተማህ ከየአዉራጃዉና ከየጠቅላይ ግዛቱ የመጡ ተማሪዎች የጠቅላላ ለኢትዮጵያ ወገኖቻችን መብት ተከራከሪዎች ለመሆናቸዉ ምስጢር የሚሆን በአቅራቢያችን ያሉትን መብታቸዉ የተገፈፈባቸዉን መመልከት ነዉ።³⁴

If all of us [students of Agazi and Atse Yohannis secondary schools] close the school for a year, it would not be considered as our immaturity and lack of care to our education. Rather it would be a parameter of our determination to our cause. Dear our brave people, both males and females, you should take the responsibility of keeping our country, whose dignity was kept by our forefathers. You should argue based on faithfulness, honesty and courageous manner. Dear brave students of Agame, until your name become popular in different corners of Ethiopia, you have to continue looking at and advocating against the violation of human right in Adigrat, a developing town, where many students who came from different Awrajas are found.

The students of Atse Yohannis Secondary School went some way to raise other additional questions which were needed to be addressed by the imperial government. The following were some among the major ones. Where is the 25 million birr that was donated by the government of Italy to improve the monument of Axum? Why was the money collected from the people of Tigray used only for the development and expansion of Mekelle Town and not other towns of the province? Where was the 5 birr paid

by those who took private exam?

"ሁሉቀን ጅብ ከመሆን አንድ ቀን እንበሳ ሆኖ መምት ይጅላል። ታዳጊዎ ትግራይ ከአናንተ እርዳታዎን ለማግኘት እኛችን ዘርግታ ዓይኖቻችን ነፍሱን እርታዎን ታሰማለችና እንርጃት። ለሪያ ምታት ጭካኔ በት ለሆድ ቁርጠት ብላበት" ይህ ማለት ተንፈሳ የሚያሰጩ ተንኮል መልሰለት Negative x Negative = Positive ሃርጎላላ³⁵

It is better to live one day as a lion and die than living always as hyena. The developing Tigray is waiting your help by stretching her hands and opening its eyes. Act on the reverse against crooked situation, because the multiplication of two negative things is positive. This was a pamphlet that was found posed on the wall of Medhane Alem Church on 3 April, 1972. On the same day, on 3 April, 1972, the students posted a pamphlet on the wall of Medhane Alem Church of Adigrat. This pamphlet was entitled "ተማሪዎች ሆይ", meaning "Dear students". It informed the mass that student Yirga Alemayehu was arrested because he was suspected of motivating his friends to fight against the imperial regime. It also called the mass to raise their voice against the feudal government on behalf of the arrested student. This Written material states that sorrow was meaningless rather than helping the needy when they were alive. They also pasted an impressive poem,

18 xNqòC t¹_N XNdk#bT
t» ÆÄWQ nW XNJ tqðL y¼ mBT
trú mslÿ êÄW >§ƳCN
MN BIN tnún MNS msL xgßN
SUCN tqNî wDö wd g#DÜD
bMN MKNÄT nW lmƳR yMNFQD
xlh# xlh# BIN `§ yMN-Í
MN l!mÈBN µh#n# ykÍŸŸ³⁶

We are sold for 8 articles as compose
Students may not know but our right is violated
It seems as if our main objective is forgotten
What was our question and what about its response?
Our body is deteriorated and thrown to a hole
So why do we plan to learn
Our survival is uncertain
No more hardship worse than this.

At the mid night of April 12, 1972, the students of Agazi Secondary School posted a political pamphlet on the public hall of the town. The pamphlet was entitled with "yṭṭṭāC DM}" meaning "The voice of students". It had two pages dealing with the dissatisfaction of the students on the imperial regime and their plan for armed struggle for the wellbeing of their community.³⁷

On 15 May, 1972, there was strong confrontation between the students of the school and their counterparts. According to a letter sent from Lt. Colonel Bekelle Balcha, head of the first battalion of cavalry to the governor of Agame Awraja, it is stated that the students

of Agazi Secondary School continued posting different pamphlets on areas accessible to the mass population of the town and even they were reported to have used different military weapons of their parents to intimidate their counterparts. The Lt. Colonel, on behalf of his companion, complained that they were backing up to eight (8) school children. He claimed that the opportunity for free education that was granted by the imperial government of country for their military service was deprived due to lack of stability in the school. He urged the removal of the disturbing students in the school so that children of the military personnel in the town would be able to attend school peacefully.³⁸

On 27 May, 1972, between 7:30 and 8:00 PM, the students of Agazi Secondary School were engaged in riots. They moved to some individual houses including that of Teacher Lemlem Hagos's house; where they stoned and posted a pamphlet. This created great confusion among the officials of the imperial government particularly the armed force of the regime who were ordered to tightly control the day-to-day activities of the students and to undertake necessary measures including physical punishment. The Ministry of Interior also assigned the provincial state officials to closely supervise the situation in the town and to send timely reports regarding what was happening in Agame Awraja in general and Adigrat Town in particular.³⁹

On 8 June, 1972, at 12:00 PM, a meeting was held in Adigrat Town. Many people including the governor of Agame Awraja, director of Agazi Secondary School and other 32 teachers of the school attended the meeting and they discussed how to maintain the peace and stability of the town. The meeting was extended up to 1:30 o'clock in the night.⁴⁰

Posting different political pamphlets became common in Adigrat Town. Many pamphlets were posted in different corners of the town at different times. Due to this reason, the security forces which were stationed in the town were urged to standby for the sake of close supervision of the illegal political movement of students. They were ordered to work day and night in order to control the wide spread of revolutionary ideas that were disseminated by the students of the school through writing impressive political pamphlets and posting them in areas where many people of the town could find them. The students of Agazi Secondary School were very active not only during their school life but also after their graduation and employment in different imperial offices. There were some key examples showing this fact. For instance, Ato Araya Gidey, who was employed in the Ministry of Finance after he completed his grade 12 education in Agazi Secondary School, was reported to have been engaged in distributing different political pamphlets. According to an archival source, he was found with five pages political pamphlet by security forces.⁴¹

The political consciousness of students in Adigrat Town was enhanced over time.

Their voices against Tegarau and non-Tegarau feudal rulers, who owned large plots of land and led luxury lives at the expense of the masses, had got numerous supporters. According to informants, when the student movement was not strong enough, some activist students used some provoking songs that helped to develop uncompromising stand among the supporters of the movement in the respective schools. The following song is a good case in point,

Kz§ YBlÖ Kz§ YBlÖ f¶/# XMBR Kz§ YBlÖŸŸ⁴²
With a considerable hesitation, they are trying to show their readiness to fight [against the imperial regime.]

It was common for the students to go to local beer houses where they met many elderly persons with whom they discussed the dismal lives of the people of Agame Awraja. They frequently visited Girazmach Berhe's mead house where agitating songs were sung. The following song was reported to have been one of them,

lMN TY¾l> bTR yLWM bX°
 Xz! k#l# ÆHR²F ÂY mNÂNŸ, D°ŸŸ⁴³
*Why do you say he did not have stick on his hand?
 Whose eucalyptus [weapon] are all of these?*

The student's movement in Adigrat was aggravated from time to time. On December, 1973, the students of Agazi Secondary School went to the head office of Agame Awraja police and presented some major problems that affected their teaching and learning process. They uncovered that the prevalent situation did not encourage them to continue their education peacefully. They found no one was responsible to address their questions due to which they were urged to involve in political activities against the imperial regime. According to an archival material, despite their financial problem, the students were asked to pay exam fee while taking grade twelve (12) examination. Majority of the students, who were incapable of paying the exam fee, had no option than to drop out of school. Since they lost a timely response for their request of exemption from exam fee payment, students of Agazi Secondary School underpinned that the major reason why they closed the school was due to financial constraint. Lt. Colonel Brhane Demewez wrote a letter to the head office of Tigray province. His letter recommended officials of the head office of Tigray province in Mekelle to discuss on the issue and to decide a necessary action unless the situation in Adigrat would develop to uncontrolled degree.⁴⁴

Students' refusal to pay exam fee became a bone of contention between the students of Agazi Secondary School and the school administrators. According to the letter sent to the Ministry of Interior, on 3 December, 1973, at 5:00 o'clock, grade 12 students of Agazi Secondary School stopped their education until their exemption from the payment of exam fee to take grade

twelve (12) leaving certificate examination. They expressed their complaint to the head of the police forces of Agame *Awraja* who eventually asked the office of Tigray Province and the Ministry of Interior to give decision on the student's question related to exam fee.⁴⁵

A day later, on 4 December, 1973, more than 1000 grade seven (7) to twelve (12) students of Agazi Secondary School held a meeting at a place called Wolwalo. Having discussed on their problem, they finally agreed that unless they were given a written letter from the Ministry of Education ensuring their exemption from exam fee payment they would not continue their education in the school. This created great confusion among the provincial and imperial government officials.⁴⁶

Through time, elementary school students of Adigrat began to involve in the students movement in the town. It is stated that on 18 December, 1973, elementary school students in the town boycotted class and joined the secondary school students in the struggle against the regime.⁴⁷

In the late 1973, students' opposition continued in Adigrat. Parents were compelled to be responsible for the illegal political activities of their children. For instance, on 10 April, 1973, students' strike in Agazi Secondary School forced about 32 teachers to stop their teaching and learning process. Two days later, on 12 April, 1973, Parent-Teachers Committee and parents were summoned to a meeting to discuss the issue. Parents were obliged to sign, showing their agreement to take the responsibility of stopping the students' movement in the school. The parents were given four days to convince their children to continue their education peacefully.⁴⁸

A written source revealed that on the eve of the outbreak of the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution, the political maturity of the students of Agazi High School had grown to high level. They predominantly engaged in covert and overt anti-government political movements. Some of these include demonstrations, distribution of anti-government pamphlets, reading politically oriented poems, sudden attack on vehicles that crossed the town, breaking the windows of governmental offices and taking part in clandestine anti-government activities.⁴⁹

As the 1974 revolution approached, the students' movement in Agame *Awraja* became intensive. On 23 April, 1974, at 3:00 Am in the morning, students of Agazi Secondary School met Lt. Colonel Addis Agelachew, head of the first battalion of artillery, and told him their dissatisfaction due to lack of timely response to their questions. They also presented some urgent questions which are discussed below. First, they called for the replacement of the old electric power generator by a new one. Second, they strongly opposed the attempt of transferring an Indian female physician (Dr). Third, they requested for the dismissal of all employees of Adigrat Town Municipality Office. Fourth, they requested the removal of *Fitawrari* Bezabih Gorfu, who was the governor of Ganta Afeshum *Woreda*. Lt. Colonel Adisu

requested the students to continue their education peacefully until their questions were seen by concerned bodies. He also asked them to give him two days to discuss with other concerned bodies so as to come up with appropriate answers to their questions.⁵⁰

As the student anti-government movement was intensified across time, *Leul Ras* Mangesha established a special force, which was known as the "China-Group". The major objective of this special group was primarily to suppress the anti-government political involvement in Adigrat. Unfortunately, this objective was not materialized due to the fact that the government forces were persistently attacked by the "Anti- China Group" which was established by the revolutionary students.⁵¹ The need for a change in government through armed struggle became common among many people of Tigray in general and Agame *Awraja* in particular. For this reason, the people began to give good credit for military weapons. A commonly used song of the period expressed this fact as follows:

k 30 _© k 30 \$M

*MN>R YŠ\$SL sÆ%M b!çNMÝÝ*⁵²

It is better to have a Minishir [a type of military weapon] even it is broken,

Rather than having 30 caves and cows

As the imperial government undertook a number of repressive measures against the people of Tigray, it is stated that the people of the province developed uncompromising stand to struggle against the regime. Many people began to believe that the most appropriate option to end the dismal life in Tigray was armed struggle. Some activist students and others used some provoking songs to agitate mass-based movement against the regime. The following was one of the most impressive songs of the time,

TG%Y >dY (2)

*xYTNB: lY xYTBkYly ^É!R MN>R btE d-L SdDlyÝÝ*⁵³

Tigray, my homeland (2)

Do not cry, do not weep

Equip me with small minishir (weapon).

Informants claim that some of the major activist students in Adigrat were Mulugeta Gebreslasie (Wedi Hanta), Tekeste Asgedom, Alem Mesfin (who was member of Ethiopian People Revolutionary Party) and Alem Abadi. These student leaders later joined the armed struggle taking place in the rural Tigray. Tsegu Hadgu (son of *Barambaras* Hadgu) and Muluworq Gebreslasie (Wedi Aba Mengod) played significant role in composing many revolutionary songs.⁵⁴

Students were encouraged to read many history and fiction books. These include "How Japan Developed?," "Fikir Eske Mekabir," "Aleweledim," "Melike'a Seife

Nebelbal” and “The Savage Girl in Africa.” But, later, the imperial government issued a declaration prohibiting holding and reading such materials among the students. Those who failed to obey the declaration were subjected to imprisonment up to three years. The establishment of student council played its own role in strengthening the unity of students in the school.⁵⁵

As stated before, university students contributed a lot in the political movement among the students of Agazi Secondary School. Seyum Mesfin was the crucial ones. There was strong opposition of Agazi Secondary School students against different *wereda* governors. They used different impressive songs and poems to agitate mass-based opposition against several *wereda* governors. For instance, the following was one of the commonly used songs of that time,

wrÄ ¹#My lÖ,î Y?¹k#M lÖ,y
 XN-Y K?¹Ä lÖ,XÆ gddÄy lÖ,yÝÝ⁵⁶
District governor! Is it today better to you?
No! today is painful for us!

Particularly, the opposition against *Fitawrari* Bezzabih Gofu was very strong. Students blocked the highway where his car passed. Using the names of his son, Kahsay, and his daughter, Mebrat, the people of Agame in general and students of Agazi Secondary School in particular expressed their contempt against *Fitawrari* Bezabih as follows:

xî µ?úYy lÖ,î Y^Y> êYêy½
 xî mB%Ty lÖ,î Y^Y> xÝÄTy½
 XN-Y K?¹Ä lÖ,XÆ gddÄy lÖ,yÝÝ⁵⁷
Father of Kahsay! is it better now to shout?
Father of Mebrat! it is better now to cry?
No! now is worse for us

According to some informants, the opposition against the governor of Agame *Awraja*, *Fitawrari* Taye Gola, was not as strong as the *Wereda* rulers. Even though he was from Welqaita, the people of the *Awraja* did not blindly oppose him. As to informants, *Fitawrari* Taye, whose salary was Ethiopian birr 700, was good administrator. As the informants claimed, unlike *Fitawrari*, *Wereda* governors were corrupt and known for their maladministration.⁵⁸

Students continued to challenge the imperial administration in Agame *Awraja*. Agazi Secondary School students developed strong links both with university and secondary schools students, from whom they received political pamphlets. They also prepared their own pamphlets, which were distributed during the night times. They began to stone police stations in group and visited several *Weredas* such as Hawzen, Bizet, Zalambesa etc to provoke the masses for armed struggle to topple the feudal rule to the end.⁵⁹

In the late 1974, the people of Agame *Awraja* were aware of the fall of the imperial regime. The educated

men of the *Awraja* got many followers. Many military forces mostly police, teachers and peasants joined the revolution on the side of the intellectuals who were ready to pay any form of sacrifice so as to bring bright future to their society. The process of winning the support and developing the confidence of peasants was reported to have not been a challenging task for the university and high school students of the respective *Awraja*. Since the land case was a serious question and leading slogan of the time, the students managed to exploit this burning issue in order to secure popular acceptance among the peasants. It is said that the former used the following song to inform the latter that the end of the imperial regime would be followed by peasants' possession of their land.

Dá xYøá ?rSy
 dg!Mî !YlSSs@ kYMLSyÝÝ⁶⁰
Dear poor [peasant]! Till your land without fear
Hailleslasie [the emperor] would never return back to power

Conclusion

This paper attempts to show the intellectuals of Agame *Awraja* between 1960s and 1974. Before the expansion of modern education to different provinces of Ethiopia, the number of educated persons in the country was very limited. During the former times of the imperial regime, there was no or little participation of intellectuals in political movement in Tigray against the government. We can take the case of the 1942/43 Weyane rebellion. It was a peasant rebellion against the imperial regime. After the government suppressed the rebellion, the nature of political movement in the province remained covert until the 1960s. As far as the beginning of politicization of Agazi Secondary school students is concerned, the period 1960s is a landmark. Unlike the pre-1960s situation in Agame *Awraja*, university and secondary school students of the respective *Awraja* became politically conscious and committed to the case of their community. They used different methods to agitate mass-based political opposition against the imperial government. They prepared political pamphlets, revolutionary songs, proverbs and poems that tarnish the image of the government in *Awraja*. Despite the severe measures undertaken by many police force, students were strongly determined to struggle against the feudal regime to the end. Their active participation provoked the local people for armed struggle not only against the feudal regime but also against the Derg regime as well.

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