

Aleqa Tayye: 1st Ethiopian scholar at Berlin University

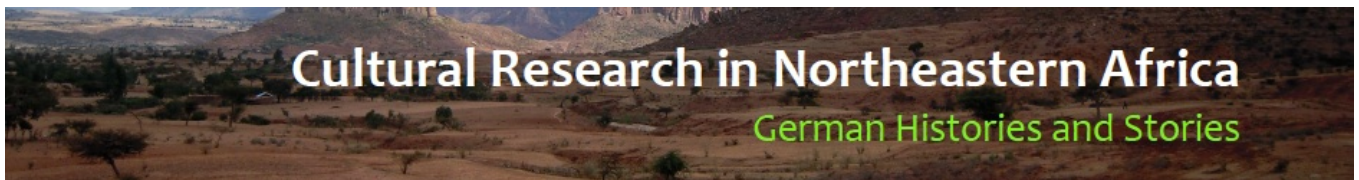


Amharic lecturer at the Oriental Institute of the University of Berlin from 1905 to 1908, deployed by Emperor Menelik II, one of the first African scholars at a German university, author of an Amharic work on theology and of a traditional history of Ethiopia and its people, *qiné* specialist

In his early life, Aleqa Tayye was a Ge'ez and Amharic specialist in the Lutheran-Protestant Swedish mission in Massawa and Imkullu in Eritrea, writer of one of the first linguistic books published by an Ethiopian (1889, *Metshafe Sewasiw*). In 1905, after recommendation by Emperor Menelik II, he became an Amharic and Ge'ez teacher at Berlin University, as the language assistant of the Semitist Eugen Mittwoch, and the first Ethiopian scholar working at a German university. During his stay in Germany as a language lecturer, Aleqa Tayye was especially important as go-between in the rising Ethiopian-German relations. He was for example training young Germans for diplomatic service in Ethiopia. One of these was Lorenz Jensen, the first German diplomat fluent in Amharic, who lived in Ethiopia from 1909 to 1921. Tayye also supported the first Ethiopian diplomat in Germany, the envoy dejjazmach Meshesha Worqé, who arrived in 1907, and with whom Tayye travelled back to Ethiopia. In Berlin he contributed to the creation of Amharic texts, among others on folklore, which were used for several

generations of Amharic students in Germany. His writings also show him as a great *qiné* specialist deeply enrooted in the Orthodox Church tradition, even if his theological views differed. Aleqa Tayye was one of the early pioneers of Amharic writing. Especially when he was back in Ethiopia, he authored Amharic books on history and theology, including poetry (*qiné*), using Ethiopian manuscripts found in Europe for his writings. With his theological works, he became a contributor to theological debates within the Ethiopian Christian Orthodox Church, linking ideas of Protestant reform with the literal and spiritual heritage of the Church. Aleqa Tayye was the author of a rich account of traditional knowledge about the origins of the Ethiopian peoples, including the Amhara. He reports the tradition that they descended from the ancient Aksumites, the word meaning "free people" originally according to folk tradition. This tradition was vividly remembered also in the period of Emperor Menelik II who claimed descent from the Solomonic Amhara rulers, Tayye thus became an important chronicler of the traditions of his time.

Text: Wolbert Smidt



Exhibition at the Goethe-Institut Addis Ababa, April 2015