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Reconstructing revolutionary intersectionality: the suppressed legacy of the Abyot Group in the Ethiopian student movement and revolution

Reconstruire l'intersectionnalité révolutionnaire : l'héritage occulté du Groupe Abyot au sein du mouvement étudiant et de la révolution éthiopiens

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Emerging from the revolutionary ferment of the 1960s and 1970s, the Abyot Group forged a liberation framework that challenged the dominant vanguards of the Ethiopian Student Movement. This paper argues that Abyot's central contribution was a pioneering Revolutionary Intersectionality – a theoretical synthesis that bypassed the rigid 'stage theory' of its rivals by integrating Maoist mass line principles with a decolonial critique of national oppression. While contemporary factions like MEISON and the EPRP prioritised a bifurcated queue of class struggle versus the 'nationalities question', Abyot's leadership – specifically Getachew Maru, Abiyo Ersamo, and Endreas Michael – conceptualised ethnic identity as the primary legal and moral engine of feudal-capitalist exploitation. By triangulating archival fragments from the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES) with participants' affective memories, this study reconstructs Abyot's suppressed legacy. I demonstrate that their rejection of urban adventurism and their focus on the 'internal colonialism' of the South provide a vital, overlooked counter-narrative to the centralised official historiographies of the Ethiopian Revolution.

Keywords: Ethiopian Revolution; Abyot Group; intersectionality; Marxism-Leninism-Maoism; internal colonialism; Global South

Issu du bouillonnement révolutionnaire des années 60 et 70, le Groupe Abyot a mis en place un cadre de libération qui remettait en cause les figures dominantes du mouvement étudiant éthiopien de l'époque. Cet article soutient que la contribution majeure d'Abyot réside dans une « intersectionnalité révolutionnaire » pionnière - une synthèse théorique qui a contourné la « théorie des étapes » rigide de ses rivaux en intégrant les principes maoïstes de la « ligne des masses » à une critique décoloniale de l'oppression nationale. Alors que des factions contemporaines telles que les MEISON et l'EPRP privilégiaient une distinction entre la lutte des classes et la « question des nationalités », les dirigeants d'Abyot - en particulier Getachew Maru, Abiyo Ersamo et Endreas Michael - considéraient l'identité ethnique comme le principal moteur juridique et moral de l'exploitation féodale-capitaliste. En triangulant des fragments d'archives provenant de l'Institut d'études éthiopiennes (IES) avec des souvenirs affectifs des participants, cette étude reconstitue l'héritage occulté d'Abyot. Je démontre que leur rejet de l'aventurisme urbain et l'accent

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qu'ils mettent sur le « colonialisme interne » du Sud constituent un contre-récit essentiel, mais négligé, face aux historiographies officielles centralisées de la Révolution Éthiopienne.

Mots-clés: Révolution Éthiopienne; Groupe Abyot; intersectionnalité; marxisme-léninisme-maoïsme; colonialisme interne; Sud global

1. Introduction

The historiography of the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution is traditionally entombed within a 'Great Bifurcation' – a binary narrative dominated by the centralised urbanisms of the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement (MEISON) and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP). While this vanguard-centric lens has successfully chronicled the 'biography of a generation' (Markakis 1974; Tadesse 1998; Zeleke 2019; Zewde 2014), it has simultaneously acted as an agent of erasure. Beneath the official record lies a suppressed heterodoxy: the Abyot Group. Far from being a mere synonym for the Amharic term for 'revolution', *Abyot* served as the specific designation for a clandestine organisation that sought to dismantle the rigid 'stage theory'¹ of its contemporaries. This group did not view the 'nationalities question' as a secondary hurdle to be cleared after class liberation; instead, they pioneered a 'revolutionary intersectionality' that identified ethnic identity as the very legal and moral engine of feudal-capitalist exploitation in the Ethiopian South.

To unearth Abyot is to confront a landscape of contested definitions, beginning with the term 'feudalism' itself. While student radicals utilised the term as a revolutionary catch-all, the academic reality was far more granular. As famously distinguished, 'Abyssinian feudalism' must account for the unique Gult and Rist land-tenure systems, a distinction vital to understanding Abyot's specific focus (Crummey 1980). Unlike the communal Rist rights of the North, the *gabar* (tenant) system of the South functioned as a form of 'internal colonialism',² which identifies as the true driver of agrarian radicalism (Rahmato 1984). Abyot's intellectual contribution lay in synthesising this geographic reality with a Maoist 'mass line', prioritising rural mobilisation over the urban 'adventurism' that ultimately consumed the EPRP leadership.

The marginalisation of this vision is not accidental; it is a symptom of systematic 'epistemological suppression'. Even recent intellectual histories, such as Elleni Zeleke's *Ethiopia in Theory* (2019), focus primarily on the 'history of ideas' by tracing social science concepts within mainstream journals like *Challenge* and *Struggle*. While valuable, these works stop short of a comprehensive intellectual history that accounts for the movement's clandestine shadows. Furthermore, Messay Kebede's theory of 'cultural dislocation' suggests that the adoption of 'alien' Marxist frameworks by Western-educated elites (Kebede 2008) was a form of self-alienation. Analysing Abyot through this lens reveals a rare attempt to indigenise theory, moving beyond the 'Eurocentrism' argued to have plagued other homegrown opposition parties (Alemu 2022). This study reconstructs Abyot's legacy by triangulating fragmented evidence: I cross-reference clandestine circulars at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES) with the 'affective archives' found in participant memoirs, most notably Hiwot Teffera's *Tower in the Sky* (Teffera 2013). In a history defined by erasure, the memoir is not a supplementary source; it is a vital counter-archive against political silencing.

The paper proceeds by critically analysing the ideological crucible of the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM) (Section 2), followed by a reconstruction of Abyot's specific Maoist-influenced intersectionality (Section 3). Section 4 examines their organisational praxis and relational density, while Section 5 analyses the Abyot Path as a distinct Maoist heterodoxy focused on rural strategy. Section 6 compares the Abyot Group's vision of 'agrarian federalism' with the post-1991 EPRDF's centralised ethnic federalism, identifying a crucial 'path not taken'. Section 7 details the tragic collision with the EPRP and the Derg that led to the execution of leaders

like Getachew Maru and Abiyo Ersamo. I conclude Section 8 by situating Abyot's suppressed legacy within the broader history of Global South revolutionary ethics.

2. Historical context: imperial decline and the rise of revolutionary movements

The historiography of the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution – or *Abyot* – is defined by an enduring struggle to reconcile Ethiopia's idiosyncratic social architecture with universal revolutionary theory. While early materialist accounts emphasised the structural decay of the 'Amharised state' (Addis 1975; Markakis 1973), more recent scholarship has pivoted toward 'cultural dislocation' (Kebede 2008) and the 'quest for a socialist utopia' (Zelege 2019; Zewde 2014). Yet, a critical silence persists regarding the specific internal polemics of the 'Abyot Group'. Their critique of 'Eurocentric Marxism' was not merely academic; it was a pragmatic response to the unique frictions of the Ethiopian landscape – specifically the violent collision between northern and southern land-tenure systems.

By the early 1960s, the Solomonic monarchy functioned less as a modernising state and more as a 'ghost' haunting a crumbling architecture of extraction. To understand the radicalisation of the Abyot Group, one must move beyond the sterile 'feudalism debate' (Clapham 1989). In the Ethiopian context, 'feudalism' was not a monolithic hierarchy but a volatile tension between two incompatible logics: Gult and Rist. In the northern highlands, the Rist system granted the peasantry an inalienable 'blood-right' to land, anchoring them legally even as a military elite held Gult rights to collect tribute. This created a paradoxical northern autonomy where the peasantry remained a conservative, landed force.

This northern stability stood in harrowing contrast to the South. Following Menelik II's 19th-century expansions, the imperial state installed a predatory machinery of dispossession. Indigenous populations – including the Oromo, Hadiya, and Sidama – were reduced to *gabars*: landless tenants on their own ancestral soil. In these territories, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and a transplanted *neftegna* nobility monopolised the earth, with the Church alone claiming up to 20 percent of all cultivated land (Sarbo 2009). For the *gabar*, survival was a mathematical impossibility; tributes frequently consumed 75 percent of every harvest. The state made itself known to the South only through the tax collector or the soldier – a configuration John Markakis (1973) termed the 'Garrison State'.³

The Abyot Group's distinctiveness lay in its explicit rejection of the 'stage theory' prevalent in Addis Ababa's radical circles. Derived from orthodox Stalinist historical materialism, stage theory dictated that society must progress through rigid, chronological steps: first completing a bourgeois-democratic revolution to eliminate feudalism, before later advancing to a socialist revolution. In the ESM context, this meant factions like MEISON and the EPRP argued that class struggle or national self-determination had to take absolute chronological priority (Zelege 2019; Zewde 2014). Conversely, the Abyot leadership – many of whom hailed from the southern periphery – forged a 'revolutionary intersectionality' that viewed these crises as simultaneously co-constitutive. They argued that in the south, ethnic identity was the legal prerequisite for economic exploitation. By coding southern peoples as culturally 'alien', the state created the moral vacuum required to seize their land – an engine of 'internal colonialism' (Sarbo 2009).

This critique asserted that the southern peasantry was not a 'pre-political' mass waiting for urban guidance, but the primary revolutionary agent whose struggle was simultaneously national and materialist. The terminal indictment of this order arrived with the 1973–1974 Wollo famine. As 200,000 people perished while the imperial centre exported grain to satisfy global markets, the 'Abba' (Father) myth of the Emperor dissolved. For the students of the ESM, the famine made their theories of 'internal colonialism' flesh – not because Wollo was itself a site of

southern-style *gabar* tenancy, but because the willingness of the imperial state's to allow hundreds of thousands of its own northern subjects to starve while exporting grain to global markets revealed the predatory logic of the 'Garrison State' in its fullest expression. If the state could abandon the northern peasantry with such impunity, the southern peasantry – already legally dispossessed – had no protection whatsoever.

3. Methodology: excavating the archival shadow

Reconstructing the Abyot Group requires a forensic recovery against deliberate erasure. Because the group's heterodox Maoism was systematically purged by both the Derg state and the EPRP leadership, no 'Abyot Manifesto' survived the Red Terror. To recover this vision, this study moves beyond a descriptive narrative toward critical fabulation (Hartman 2008). As Hartman formulated it, critical fabulation is a method of narrating the impossible history of the dispossessed. It works at the limits of the archive by reading not only what is present but also what is absent – the silences, gaps, and 'unsaid' that point to deliberate suppression. This method is not fictionalisation, but rather a rigorous interrogation of why certain lives and possibilities leave only ghostly traces. For the Abyot Group, the absence of a manifesto is treated not as a failure of evidence, but as empirical proof of successful erasure. This study therefore triangulates indirect discursive markers – the emergence of specific lexicons in student journals, the affective testimony of memoirs, and the friction between oral accounts – to reconstruct a plausible rather than definitive history, acknowledging the limits of what can be known.

3.1. Archival forensics: Reading the gaps

Historical erasure is rarely total; it leaves a shadow in the official record. Within the IES at Addis Ababa University, I examined the ESM Collection for indirect discursive markers rather than overt declarations. Specifically, I sought an emerging lexicon that deviated from the Eurocentric 'stage theory' then prevalent in Addis Ababa.

No document in the IES collection bears the explicit heading 'Abyot Group', making attribution strictly inferential. By mining these specific archival folders, this study unearths the text-based traces of a faction systematically omitted from later official party compilations. For instance, the group's ideological divergence regarding the 'nationalities question' is traced to the clandestine publication *Struggle* (Vol. V, No. 2, November 1973; Catalogued under IES/ESM-F412-1973), where anonymous editorials matching the prose styles of the Abiyo-Geta-chew cohort argued against a centralised, Amharic-centric state model. Furthermore, internal party cleavages are documented in the clandestine circular *Democracia* (Vol. 2, No. 7, August 1975; IES/EPRP-L94-1975), which contains the central committee's explicit polemics condemning 'right-wing opportunism and rural adventurism' – a direct reference to the Abyot group's resistance to urban military engagements. These findings demonstrate that the history of suppressed political movements cannot be written using memoirs alone; researchers must comb through official and clandestine archives to find the structural footprints left behind by marginalised groups.

The primary marker of this factional influence was the conceptualisation of 'internal colonialism'. While the broader student movement remained preoccupied with cultural-linguistic autonomy, Abyot-aligned cells redirected the debate toward the material extraction inherent in the Southern *gabar* (tenant) system. In the 1971 pages of *Struggle*, unsigned editorials began reframing tenantry as a mechanism of colonial extraction rather than mere feudalism. This archival trail grew distinct in the 1973 debates over Mao's Hunan Report in *Challenge*, where a factional voice emerged to reject the urban-industrial focus of senior radicals, arguing instead that

the peasantry was the primary revolutionary agent. They rejected a status quo that saw the south as a mere pantry for the centre, identifying the southern *gabar* system as a structure of internal colonialism that systematically hollowed out the lives of the majority to support a thin urban elite.

This was not a mere tactical pivot but a moral one, forged in the trauma of the 1973 Wollo famine, and nowhere is this more vividly captured than in a secret month-long military training session that summer at Lake Langano. Among the early Abyot radicals (future EPRP core members Getachew Maru, Matheos, Abiyo Ersamo, and Endreas Mikael), nightly debates turned to the logistics of a future socialist Ethiopia. When Matheos raised a pragmatic concern about how such a poor country could feed its population, Abiyo Ersamo confidently replied: ‘It is easy to feed the people. *Kocho*’. He argued that *enset* (the false banana plant) grows easily even in dry, poor soil and could sustain the country if only people could get used to eating it. Matheos, however, found the idea absurd. Turning to Getachew Maru, he joked that his own vision of a socialist paradise involved not *kocho* but *injera* with chicken sauce (*doro wat*): ‘If we are feeding them *kocho*, why am I struggling? I was thinking of giving them a better alternative. There is no need to fight to eat *kocho* ... There is no need for bloodshed to feed the people *kocho*!’

In clandestine circulars, these radicals bypassed high-theory abstractions to interrogate the literal caloric viability of *kocho* (*enset*). But the Langano exchange reveals a deeper split: Abiyo’s austere, self-sufficiency proposal versus Matheos’s insistence that a revolution worth fighting must deliver a tangible improvement in living standards. By championing this indigenous, drought-resilient ‘tree against hunger’, the Abyot Group issued a silent indictment of the revolutionary establishment, yet Matheos’s retort also warned against a utopia that asked the masses to sacrifice for the same meager fare they already had. They understood that cultural autonomy was a hollow victory if it did not guarantee food security, viewing *enset* not merely as a dietary staple but as a material weapon of sovereignty. Because this resilient crop resisted the central state’s capacity for easy requisition and taxation, it offered a practical pathway to decouple the peasant’s physical survival from a predatory state apparatus. At the same time, the Langano laughter over *kocho* versus *doro wat* foreshadowed a tension that would haunt the EPRP: between a Spartan, peasant-centred revolutionary asceticism and a more ambitious promise of material abundance. This insistence on grounding liberation in material survival and food security – and the very real debate over what that food should *be* – provides the empirical fingerprint of the Abyot Group, contrasting sharply with the Eurocentric, high-theory abstractions of the EPRP’s urban leadership.

3.2. *The counter-archive: orality and strategy*

To ground these archival fragments, I conducted semi-structured interviews between 2022 and 2025 with eight key participants, utilising ‘vantage-point’ criteria to map the group’s composition. These oral accounts provide crucial context omitted from official records.

Gezehegn Sime and Zewdu Belay provided a vital corrective to the 1974 merger with the Ethiopian People’s Liberation Organisation (EPLO), reframing the event not as a marriage of equals, but as a hostile takeover that initiated the group’s ideological liquidation. The accounts of Abera Paulos and Berhanu Ersamo moved the history of Ethiopian radicalism out of the university and into the regional ‘laboratories’ of Hadiya and Shashemane, detailing the practical application of the ‘mass line’ where Abyot’s decentralised pluri-nationalism was first tested in agrarian corridors. Furthermore, the testimonies of Tadelech Hailemichael and Hiwot Teffera documented the clandestine networks and gendered labour – the logistics of survival – that sustained the movement but remain invisible in male-centric histories.

3.3. *The friction test: subjectivity as evidence*

To counter the institutional bias embedded in state-sanctioned repositories like the IES collection, this study treats Hiwot Teffera's *Tower in the Sky* (2013) as a crucial site of narrative memory and a vital counter-archive. Traditional historiography often risks discounting Teffera's work by mischaracterising it as a purely localised, personal memoir. In reality, *Tower in the Sky* is a complex assembly of testimonies from multiple living witnesses and revolutionaries involved in the ESM and the Abyot faction. While Teffera's proximity as the romantic partner of central Abyot leader Getachew Maru grants her intimate access to the inner workings of the EPRP leadership, her text functions less as an unmediated factual log and more as a polyphonic record of suppressed history.

To navigate the retrospective biases inherent in both personal accounts and institutional documentation, Teffera's narrative of Getachew Maru's leadership is subjected to a 'friction test'. This methodology does not treat her subjectivity as a liability; rather, it places her account in structural tension with independent, institutional histories, including Kiflu Tadesse's *The Generation* (1993, 1998), Gebru Tareke's historical work (2008), Dima Noggo Sarbo's *Memoirs of a Participant* (2013), and Babile Tola's *To Kill a Generation* (1989).

Weighing the emotional weight of the contentious 'prison debates' against the testimonies of Abera Paulos and the unpolished polemics found in *Combat* and *Struggle* reveals a fundamental structural collision: the fatal tension between Abyot's decentralised ethos and the EPRP's increasingly rigid, top-down Leninist structure. For example, the strategic transition from urban guerrilla warfare to rural mobilisation discussed in these prison debates is validated by the independent testimony of political scientist Babile Tola (1989), who estimates that between 1976 and 1978, internal ideological liquidations within the radical left accounted for a significant portion of early casualties prior to the full deployment of the state-sponsored Red Terror (Qey Shibir). By placing these oral and textual accounts in deliberate structural tension, the narrative isolates the exact ideological deviations – such as Getachew Maru's 'mass line' faction objecting to the central committee's urban assassination strategy – thereby verifying the political mechanics of the purge independent of personal relationships.

This framework explicitly rejects the 'pre-political' classification often applied to student activists. The radicalisation of the Abyot cohort was a direct consequence of agrarian tensions witnessed in Shewa and Sidamo long before their university enrolment. By mapping these provincial realities against the 'democratic centralism' later imposed by the EPRP, this methodology illuminates a suppressed 'third way' in African liberation, a vision of decentralised pluri-nationalism that was silenced when Maru's 'Two Centers' model was branded as 'liquidatorism', a Leninist death warrant.

4. *The genesis of the Abyot Group: relational density and the rural pivot*

The foundational efficacy of the Abyot Group was not an artifact of sudden university radicalisation; it was the product of a long-gestating relational density forged in the crucible of provincial secondary education. The secondary schools of the 1960s functioned as 'mini-parliaments' where the burgeoning land-to-the-tiller sentiment and the fallout of the 1960 attempted coup were already being debated (Kebede 2008). This 'trust infrastructure' was built on a web of secondary school bonds and shared provincial origins that preceded the formal hierarchies of the Addis Ababa student movement.

This early development was particularly evident in the partnership between Abiyo Ersamo and Gezehegn Sime, whose friendship began at Ras Gobena Dache Secondary School in Woliso (Gezehegn Sime, interview, 2025). For Abiyo, a Hadiya from rural Ambicho Gode

(then part of Shewa province), politics was an inheritance of the *gabar* system rather than a campus discovery. His early exposure to the lived reality of provincial administration and imperial dispossession provided an ‘empirical vaccine’ that later protected the group from the pure abstractions of the EPLO’s foreign-based leadership.

To correct persistent biographical errors in early revolutionary historiography, it is necessary to establish the precise prosopographical profile of Abiyo Ersamo. Unlike Getachew Maru, who was born in Addis Ababa to an Amhara family and educated within the elite urban institutions of the capital, Abiyo Ersamo was born in rural Ambicho Gode within the Hadiya zone. Ersamo’s entry into the Haile Selassie I University (HSIU) student landscape in the late 1960s brought a distinct southern agrarian perspective to the student movement. This regional background directly informed his theoretical focus on the southern land tenure system and *gabar* tenancy.

The pre-political connection between Maru and Ersamo occurred during their shared tenure at the Beedemariam Laboratory School in Addis Ababa (Class of 1967), forming a critical cross-ethnic and cross-regional intellectual alliance that fused urban Marxist-Leninist theory with real-world southern agrarian grievances. The network deepened through elite educational conduits like the Beedemariam Lab School, where Abiyo Ersamo and Getachew Maru developed a cross-ethnic alliance during the 11th and 12th grades.

Their reconnection at Haile Selassie I University was a consolidation of existing political identities, not the birth. This cohort was defined by a shared rejection of the ‘armchair’ intellectualism of the urban elite. When Getachew and Gezehegn shared a dormitory in the university’s Mechanical Engineering department, the clandestine cells they managed were extensions of an existing ‘kinship of exile’. This relational density allowed the group to survive early purges; when Abiyo was expelled from the university, his leadership of clandestine study groups continued through his deputies, who functioned more as kin than cadres.

The movement’s claim to a ‘homegrown’ revolutionary ethics was cemented through high-stakes symbolic acts of class renunciation that translated theory into immediate, familial practice. A pivotal instance, recounted by Abera Paulos (2025), involved Endreas Michael, who implored his prosperous father in Kambata to redistribute his surplus land to the local peasantry. By successfully navigating the tension between his revolutionary ideals and his family’s position in the southern land-tenure system, Endreas provided a moral blueprint for bridging the gap between the university and the rural periphery.

Under the editorship of Endreas Michael, the journal *Abyot* (Revolution) began to codify a synthesis of Maoist ‘mass line’ principles with a decolonial critique of ‘internal colonialism’. This terminology often clashed with the more orthodox Marxist-Leninist frameworks found in *Combat*, the organ of the ESM in North America. While *Combat* (1972–73) frequently emphasised the ‘centralised vanguard’, the Abyot Group’s circulars prioritised ‘regional incubators’, seeding cells across southern extraction zones, from Mekonnen Bayisa’s groups in Shashemane to Zewdu Belay’s network in Gondar. Unlike rival factions that favoured rapid urban mobilisation, the Abyot Group insisted on a stringent, slow-growth recruitment process that prioritised ideological alignment over raw numbers. While retrospective accounts estimate the group eventually influenced up to 10,000 individuals (Teffera 2013), its primary impact lay in its professionalised vanguard, which successfully embedded revolutionary discourse into the very agrarian schisms that would later define the post-imperial state.

5. The Abyot path: Maoist heterodoxy and the rural strategy

The Abyot Group’s departure from the ‘senior radical’ orthodoxy of the ESM was defined by a surgical adaptation of Maoist ‘new democracy’ (Zedong 1940) to the Ethiopian ‘nationalities question’. While contemporary factions like MEISON adhered to a mechanical ‘stage theory’

– often reflected in the early 1970s issues of *Struggle*, which relegated the ‘nationalities question’⁴ to a byproduct of feudal land tenure – Abyot’s internal polemics theorised a condition of internal colonialism (Lemma 1979; Zewde 2010, 2014). This distinction is crucial for understanding the ‘indirect references’ to Abyot’s influence within the broader ESM archive. In the 1971–1972 volumes of *Challenge* (the journal of the Ethiopian Students Union in North America), a simmering debate emerged regarding the ‘Right of Nations to Self-Determination’. While the majority of the ‘exile’ leadership viewed this through the lens of Lenin’s 1914 thesis, Abyot’s homegrown cadres pushed for a deeper ‘decolonial’ reading. They argued that the destruction of the landlord-tenant relationship was an insufficient revolutionary goal; true liberation necessitated the dismantling of the imperial state’s cultural and linguistic hegemony.

This ideological synthesis rejected the class-reductionism prevalent in ESM circles in favour of a framework that addressed overlapping axes of oppression. By reading ‘against the grain’ of the Derg’s Ethiopia Tikdem (Ethiopia First) platform (Togia 2012), Getachew Maru and Abiyu Ersamo identified a looming military-state chauvinism. They predicted that a ‘top-down’ socialist transition would weaponise national unity to crush regional autonomy. This analytical clarity dictated their strategic pivot: the rejection of ‘urban adventurism’ – the Guevarist-inspired foco strategies favoured by the ‘exile’ leadership in the early pages of *Combat* (1973–1974) – in favour of a protracted, peasant-based struggle.

For the Abyot leadership, the EPLO’s drift toward urban foco strategies was ‘ethically reckless’. Getachew Maru’s derisive critique of the ‘Tupamaros’ (referencing Uruguayan urban guerrillas) highlighted a lethal divide between homegrown radicals and the EPLO leadership, whom Kiflu Tadesse (1993) identifies as increasingly detached from the agrarian reality (Tadesse 1993; Teffera 2013). While the EPLO viewed the peasantry as a logistical support base, Abyot viewed them as the primary revolutionary agent. This was not mere mimicry of Mao’s Hunan Report (Zedong 1927); it was a pragmatic response to an Ethiopian society where the industrial proletariat comprised less than 1 percent of the population in 1974 (Fanon 1963).

This commitment to the ‘rural path’ was codified in physical practice during the summer of 1973 at Langano. There, the leadership balanced tactical manoeuvres with the material realities of the Wollo famine. The iconic debate between Abiyu Ersamo and Matheos over the sustainability of *kocho* (enset) as a revolutionary staple illustrates the group’s grounding in material survival (Teffera 2013). They were not merely debating the ‘soul’ of the revolution; they were calculating the caloric viability of a peasant. This pragmatic focus on the immediate material conditions of the Ethiopian South further solidified their critique of urban foco strategies, which they viewed as a perilous shortcut to power that bypassed the essential politicisation of the masses.

By situating the revolution within the ‘conquered south’, Abyot’s vision for a ‘pluri-national socialist republic’ offered a sophisticated alternative to both the class-reductionist Marxist factions and narrow ethnonationalist movements. Their insistence on a ‘United Front’ with the Derg’s early land reforms – viewed by rivals in the EPLO as a betrayal – was a tactical necessity to secure the ‘Red Political Power’ zones required for long-term mobilisation. This was the ‘Abyot Alternative’: a vision of liberation that sought to dissolve the ‘Garrison State’ (Markakis and Ayele 1986) not through a coup in Addis Ababa, but through the systematic, rural-led dismantling of internal colonialism.

6. Divergent federalisms: the Abyot alternative vs. EPRDF centralism

To avoid diachronic anachronism, the comparison between the Abyot Group’s 1970s conceptual framework and the post-1991 Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) governance structure is framed strictly as a study of ideological lineage and path dependency. This analysis does not equate the operational realities of a 1970s clandestine cell with a

modern state apparatus. Instead, it examines how the ‘nationalities question’—initially debated in underground student circles—was systematically transformed when implemented as state policy.

As political theorist John Young demonstrates in *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia* (1997), the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) drew directly from the radical debates of the ESM to formulate its post-1991 ethnic federal model. By placing Abyot’s model of ‘agrarian federalism’ alongside the EPRDF’s actual implementation of ‘administrative/ethnic federalism’,⁵ one can trace a clear ideological shift. This comparison demonstrates that the debates over ethnic federalism in modern Ethiopia did not begin in 1991 with the EPRDF. Instead, these models trace directly back to the 1970s underground student movement, where factions like the Abyot Group were already trying to balance national self-determination with socialist economics, deepening our understanding of the historical roots of Ethiopia’s modern political framework.

The implementation of ethnic federalism under the EPRDF was haunted by a structural paradox: a theoretical ‘coming together’ of nations – the language the TPLF leadership itself used to frame the 1995 Constitution – executed through the iron-fisted verticality of Leninist vanguardism (Gebregziabher 2019; Young 1994). However, as scholars such as Alem Habtu (2005) have argued, Ethiopia’s federal arrangement is more accurately characterised as a ‘holding together’ federation, where a previously centralised state devolved powers to ethnic regions to manage diversity and prevent collapse. The ‘coming together’ framing obscures the reality that the constituent ‘nations’ did not pre-exist the state as sovereign entities; rather, the TPLF constructed ethnic regional boundaries as a mechanism of control to stabilise central power.

This tension becomes analytically legible when evaluating the structural taxonomy of federal architectures. Whereas contemporary political science scholarship largely classifies the post-1991 EPRDF-led state as an uneasy attempt at a ‘holding together’ model of federalism – wherein a highly centralised corporate vanguard devolved ethnic administrative boundaries to prevent the imminent centrifugal fracture of an asymmetric state – Abyot’s radical vision presupposed a fundamentally distinct departure. Rather than a top-down mechanism designed to hold a collapsing empire together, the group’s concept of ‘agrarian federalism’ resembled a revolutionary, grassroots ‘coming together’ model of federalism. In this conceptual framework, the sovereign national communities of the south, newly emancipated from the structural extractions of the feudal garrison state, would voluntarily pool their sovereignty from the bottom up. By contextualising Abyot’s decentralised pluri-nationalism within this dichotomy, it becomes clear that their project did not merely anticipate the institutional layout of the 1990s, but contested its very distribution of power, favouring an organic, localised coalition over a centralised ethnic federation.

Comparing the Abyot Group’s 1970s vision with the post-1991 era reveals a profound ‘path not taken’ in the history of Ethiopian constitutional design. Where the EPRDF prioritised administrative federalism – the cartographic demarcation of ethnic borders – Abyot championed agrarian federalism. Grounded in their theory of internal colonialism, Abyot argued that national self-determination was completely unworkable without first restructuring the agrarian economy from the bottom up, making self-determination a ‘hollow mask’ if it was not fused to the material control of land (Lemma 1979). From Abyot’s perspective, the post-1991 federal arrangement replaces the imperial ‘garrison state’ with a new garrison centred in TPLF elites. The pivotal distinction lies in the management of the Gult (extractive land grants) and Rist (communal land rights) systems. While the Derg and later the EPRDF nationalised land under a centralised state bureaucracy, Abyot envisioned land reform as a decentralised engine of local sovereignty. In their ‘pluri-national socialist republic’ model, the ‘nationalities’ were not merely a linguistic unit but self-managed economic collectives. Sovereignty did not reside in a regional capital like Mekele or Hawassa, but in the village council.

For Getachew Maru and his cohorts, the ‘mass line’ was a logistical commitment to provincial autonomy intended to collapse the hierarchy between the Addis Ababa centre and the peripheral extraction zones. By replacing the ‘garrison state’ with a network of autonomous associations, Abyot proposed a union held together by shared material survival – harmonising the northern peasant’s desire for land security with the southern peasant’s need to dismantle colonial-style land alienation (Addis 1975; Crummey 1980). To conflate this with the EPRDF’s ‘coming together federalism’ is to ignore the vanguardist amnesia that silenced Abyot. The post-1991 crisis in Ethiopian federalism was not inevitable; it was the result of choosing a centralised, TPLF-style vanguardism over the decentralised, grassroots alternative that was espoused by the Abyot Group but liquidated by centrist elements in the ranks of the EPRP.

7. The vanguard’s maw: consolidation, purge, and the erasure of Abyot

7.1. *Structural incompatibility and the 1974 merger*

The 1974 unification of the Abyot Group and the EPLO into the EPRP was not a revolutionary marriage, but a hostile takeover. Publicly framed as a grand coalition, the merger functioned in practice as the ideological colonisation of homegrown, agrarian radicalism by an external, vanguardist elite. Four interrelated factors help explain this asymmetrical outcome.

First, the merger was initially justified as a tactical application of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist methodology. Getachew Maru, Abyot’s key intellectual leader, utilised a ‘united front’ logic to argue that despite minor ideological nuances, both groups shared absolute common enemies: feudalism and imperialism. He viewed consolidation as a necessary tactical mechanism to pool fractured progressive circles into a single vanguard capable of toppling the imperial regime and countering the rising military junta (the Derg). To validate this broader coalition, he drew historical parallels to the Chinese Communist Party’s temporary alliance with Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist Party (Gezehegn Sime, interview, 2025).

Second, Abyot’s profound analytical depth coexisted with a distinct political innocence and youth. Gezehegn, Getachew’s close friend, later reflected that while older external leaders like Berhanemeskel Redda possessed substantial history in international student movements abroad, the homegrown leaders of Abyot were comparatively young. Getachew was intensely disciplined, viewing actions purely through a purist lens of revolutionary theory. However, this academic idealism created a fatal blind spot: he deeply and unconditionally trusted his comrades. As Hiwot Teffera’s memoir explicitly notes, the external EPLO factions did not surpass the Abyot group in intelligence or education; they simply outmanoeuvred them through political intrigue and ruthless organisational mechanics that the purist Abyot intellectuals failed to anticipate.

Third, acute practical necessity drove the merger. Although Abyot had successfully constructed an intricate, rapidly expanding domestic network of underground cells spanning over 15 regional nodes – including Ambo, Jimma, and Wolayita Sodo – they lacked key international logistics. Conversely, the external wings of the ESM (ESUNA in North America and ESUE in Europe) held a monopoly on international funding and the publication pipelines used to smuggle core Marxist literature into the country. Furthermore, while Abyot cells conducted basic local training at Lake Langano, the EPLO factions had secured elite military training pipelines abroad, including 20 slots in Al-Fatah camps in Syria through collaborations with global revolutionary groups like the PLO. Abyot therefore viewed the merger as a vital synergy to combine its massive domestic base with the EPLO’s external logistical power and military capabilities.

Finally, Abyot’s leaders assumed that the newly formed party would strictly adhere to democratic centralism, believing that structural contradictions could be ironed out through internal

theoretical debate and official party congresses. Tragically, this analytical brilliance proved to be their undoing. When deep conflicts arose over the disastrous transition to urban guerrilla warfare – which Getachew heavily opposed – the dominant external clique bypassed accountability altogether. Fearing that a representative party congress would hold them accountable, the ruling clique weaponised the party apparatus, branded the homegrown dissenters as factionalists (Anja), and orchestrated the execution of Getachew Maru alongside the systematic purging of the original Abyot elements. The merger was not a failure of analytical foresight, but a tragedy of asymmetrical ruthlessness: Abyot's leaders foresaw the tensions but operated on the naive assumption that their counterparts would respect organisational democracy. They were not out-thought; they were outmanoeuvred.

This structural friction was deeply rooted in the domestic group's foundational identity. While Abyot provided the domestic cadre base, the EPLO's foreign-based leadership sought to import a rigid brand of Leninist centralism (Tadesse 1993) that demanded the complete liquidation of the homegrown entity. From the very beginning, key domestic leaders – including Abiyo Ersamo, Bekri Mohamed, and Andreas Michael – strongly opposed dissolving their organisation. As their contemporary Mesfin later recalled, Abyot was already a highly organised, robust body prior to 1974. It operated under its own established constitution, enforced a highly stringent and disciplined recruitment process, possessed a far larger domestic membership base than the EPLO, and held deep roots among the youth and the working class, such as the labourers at the Wonji Sugar Factory. Because Abyot held the vast majority of the domestic infrastructure, its leadership viewed total dissolution into a small, externally based faction as an unnecessary and premature surrender of an infrastructure they had painstakingly built under state surveillance and imprisonment.

To reconcile this incompatibility, Getachew Maru and Zewdu Belay fiercely championed a 'two centres' leadership model in June 1974 to prevent the revolution from becoming 'Addis-centric'. Maru presciently argued that a singular, distant urban command would inevitably degenerate into a bureaucratic centre detached from provincial realities. Under his proposed framework, the revolutionary movement would maintain two distinct operational nodes: a Domestic Centre (Abyot) to command the physical underground cells and expanding agrarian mass base inside Ethiopia, and an External Centre (EPLO) to manage transnational networks, international funding, and foreign military training pipelines.

This commitment to a decentralised, rural-based struggle was mirrored in Abiyo Ersamo's logistical pragmatism. Rather than deploying weaponry for immediate use in the capital's streets, Ersamo facilitated the strategic transfer of arms to teacher-cadres in Debre Berhan. Though located in North Shewa, this move sought to establish a rural base area within striking distance of the capital, bypassing the EPLO's preference for urban guerrilla warfare. This strategy explicitly rejected the focoist 'perilous shortcut' to power. While rival factions favoured Che Guevara's foco model of small, militarily focused guerrilla groups, Abyot maintained that liberation must emerge through the protracted politicisation of the peasantry and the creation of 'Red Political Power'. For Abyot, the revolution's laboratory was the agrarian South, where the contradictions of Internal Colonialism were most acute. By grounding their ideological centre in the southern peasantry but staging their logistics in the provincial north, Abyot attempted to build a revolutionary structure capable of surviving an urban state crackdown.

The EPLO delegates, however, rejected the 'Two Centres' framework, viewing any deviation from a singular, centralised command as 'Liquidatorism', a Leninist death warrant for any thought that threatened the party's military monolith. To the EPLO leadership, democratic centralism meant that once the centre spoke, dissent became a capital offense. This institutional deadlock shattered any illusion of mutual respect, provoking a deep sense of disillusionment among the homegrown elements. Recognising that the external wing prioritised absolute

organisational capture over genuine internal debate, sections of the original Abyot membership began effectively ‘doing their own thing’, operating with a degree of factional autonomy. When Getachew Maru was temporarily sidelined or imprisoned, prominent internal figures such as Abiyo Ersamo, Endreas Michael and Getachew Assefa attempted to bypass the deadlocked central command entirely, initiating independent discussions and localised organisational strategies. This structural drifting ultimately led core domestic organisers to distance themselves from the unified EPRP apparatus. By rejecting the ‘Two Centres’ model and crushing this localised autonomy, the EPLO leadership enforced an ‘epistemic monopoly’ (Zelege 2019) that prioritised the absolute survival of the Party over the liberation of the People.

7.2. *The mechanics of factional liquidation*

The historical claim of systematic erasure is supported by evaluating the shifting political definitions within underground documents from the period. According to human rights data compiled by Amnesty International (1978) and analysed by Tronvoll and Schaefer in *The Ethiopian Red Terror* (2008), inter-left factional violence between 1976 and 1978 resulted in substantial casualties within the student intelligentsia, occurring alongside state-directed operations.

The subsequent internal purges and the EPRP’s Central Committee-organised executions were the logical conclusion of the EPLO’s drive for a political monopoly. When the ‘White Terror’ – the EPRP’s urban offensive – began, the EPLO wing’s dogmatic commitment to urban warfare effectively neutralised the homegrown leadership, leaving the rural masses without their most grounded advocates. When Getachew Maru later condemned the EPRP’s slide into urban guerrilla warfare as ‘ethically reckless and tactically unsound’, the leadership treated it as a breach of the monolith rather than a legitimate debate. Getachew’s refusal to endorse the planned assassination of Mengistu Haile Mariam served as the final pretext used to seal his fate.

The historical complexity of this period is exemplified by the trajectory of Berhane-Meskel Redda. Although Berhane-Meskel was a founder and primary leader of the EPLO/EPRP, he eventually underwent a significant ideological break with the Central Committee’s rigid urban strategy. Rejecting urban guerrilla warfare as suicidal adventurism, Berhane-Meskel aligned himself with the Abyot faction’s ‘mass line’⁶ and rural-centred approach, working in close coordination with the Abyot leadership until his eventual capture and execution by the Derg. This migration within the party underscores that the tension was not merely between rival organisations, but between competing visions of the Ethiopian terrain itself.

The physical liquidation of Getachew Maru in 1977 is confirmed by contemporary underground circulars distributed by EPRP defence committees, which framed his execution as a necessary containment of ‘factional secessionism’ and a breach of Leninist democratic centralism. Historian Bahru Zewde notes in *The Quest for Socialist Utopia* (2014) that the elimination of these independent thinkers left the student movement structurally vulnerable, hollowing out the intellectual centre capable of negotiating a democratic alternative to the Derg’s military dictatorship. By labelling the Abyot leadership – specifically Getachew Maru, Abiyo Ersamo, Endreas Mikael, and Bekri Mohammed – as ‘opportunists’ and ‘traitors’, the EPRP achieved a double erasure: they physically eliminated the dissenters and intellectually pathologised the dissent. Their executions in 1977 represented the final silencing of this ‘third way’, closing the door on a decentralised, peasant-centred Ethiopian revolution.

The collapse of the EPRP was not merely the result of external repression by the Derg, but a consequence of this lethal internal fracture. The party had split into a destructive binary: an ‘Internal Right’ (EPLO) obsessed with vanguardist order, and an ‘Internal Left’ (Abyot) committed to agrarian populism. In their drive for centripetal power, the EPLO sacrificed the

movement's moral and logistical roots for a desperate gambit in the capital. By branding the decentralised vision of the 'mass line' as 'left-wing infantilism', they severed the party's connection to Ethiopian soil. The 1977 executions represented the final victory of the administrative right over the movement left, leaving the EPRP an intellectual hollow that had destroyed its own soul before the Red Terror could finish the task.

8. The mechanics of erasure: reclaiming the Abyot alternative

The disappearance of the Abyot faction from the Ethiopian revolutionary record was not a passive omission, but a structural outcome of vanguardist policing. This erasure was executed in two definitive stages: first, the institutional 'absorption' of Abyot into the EPRP, which prioritised a monolithic Leninist command over Abyot's decentralised agrarianism; and second, the physical liquidation of its theorists by the EPRP's own Central Committee-organised 'killing squads'. Unlike the broader casualties of the Derg's Red Terror, the deaths of Getachew Maru and his cohorts represented an internal 'cleansing' of the movement. By 1977, the EPRP leadership utilised 'democratic centralism' as a jurisdictional death warrant, pathologising Maru's rejection of urban guerrilla warfare as 'liquidatorism' and 'right-wing opportunism'. This internal terror initiated a 'vanguardist amnesia': citing Abyot's original theories became a capital offense, and the memory of their 'Two Centres' leadership model – a final attempt at a pluralistic coalition – was buried alongside their bodies.

Hiwot Teffera's *Tower in the Sky* (2013) serves as the primary witness to this transition from debate to execution. She documents a climate where the names of Abyot's leadership – men who had correctly predicted that urban adventurism would lead to a state-sponsored genocide – were rendered 'unpersons'. To move beyond memoir, I must analyse this as the ultimate failure of the 'United Front' strategy. The EPRP-Derg conflict narrowed the Ethiopian revolutionary imagination to a binary choice between two forms of centralism, effectively crushing the 'road not taken': Abyot's Maoist-inspired, peasant-centred rural strategy.

Ultimately, the recovery of Abyot's legacy through oral testimonies and fragmentary archives functions as a counter-archive. To invoke the names of Getachew Maru, Abiyo Ersamo, and Andreas Michael is to reclaim a revolutionary epistemology that prioritised ethical mass-mobilisation over elite-led vanguardism. Their vision of a 'pluri-national socialist republic' remains a necessary correction to the history of the 1974 revolution, a reminder that the most brutal silencing often comes from within the vanguard itself.

Notes

1. An orthodox Marxist-Leninist framework, heavily influenced by Stalinist historical materialism, which dictates that human societies must progress through fixed, sequential economic eras. In a pre-capitalist or feudal society, this required first completing a 'bourgeois-democratic' revolution to build capitalism before the working class could mount a distinct, secondary socialist revolution.
2. A structural critique describing the political and economic subjugation of a distinct geographic periphery or cultural population within the borders of a single nation-state. In the Ethiopian context, this refers to the systemic exploitation of southern peoples (such as the Oromo, Hadiya, and Sidama) who were legally and economically dispossessed by northern Solomonic imperial expansion and reduced to landless tenant status (*gabar*) on their ancestral soils.
3. A governance model conceptualised by John Markakis where a highly centralised ruling elite relies primarily on military coercion, regional outposts, and localised standing forces rather than organic civil or democratic institutions to enforce imperial administration, extract economic resources, and suppress domestic dissent along a vulnerable periphery.
4. The foundational ideological debate within the ESM concerning the legal, cultural, and political status of diverse ethnic groups within the multi-ethnic empire. The core friction centred on whether to grant

- diverse ethnic regions the absolute right to self-determination up to and including secession, or whether regional cultural struggles should remain subordinate to universal class liberation.
5. A top-down constitutional and governance framework where a strong corporate or state vanguard draws regional, cartographic borders largely along ethnic-linguistic lines. While ostensibly granting local administrative autonomy, this structure relies on centralized party control to hold regional components together from the top, functioning in direct contrast to grassroots models where local agrarian communities voluntarily pool sovereignty from the bottom up.
 6. A Marxist-Leninist-Maoist political method of leadership and organisational praxis that argues revolutionary strategy must originate directly from the immediate, lived realities and grievances of the grassroots masses (the peasantry and working class) rather than being dictated top-down by an insulated urban elite. It demands that vanguards process popular local needs, refine them into coherent strategies, and return them to the masses to drive collective mobilisation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Statement of ethics

The interviewer clearly communicated the scope and purpose of the research project to all interviewees. All interviewees gave consent to be interviewed for the purposes of this research. All interviewees also consented to interviews being used for publication purposes.

AI statement

I used Gemini (Google, version 3.5 Pro) as a generative AI tool during the manuscript writing phase of this paper. My primary reason for employing this tool was to receive editorial feedback and rewrite suggestions for early-stage manuscript sections. Gemini provided precision feedback on argumentation, structural coherence, transitions, tone, and language use, helping to refine prose and clarify historical arguments. All output generated by the AI was rigorously reviewed and substantially revised by me to ensure historical accuracy, interpretive nuance, and the complete fulfillment of core authorial responsibilities. No generative AI was used for creating or manipulating images, figures, or original research data. This use was undertaken with continuous human oversight and a commitment to transparency, aligning with evolving ethical guidelines for AI-assisted technologies in research.

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