

WHAT LED TO THE TPLF REBELLION: THE RISE OF WEYANE UPRISING I – PART ONE

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It was in the Tigray country that, during the first seven centuries AD, the kingdom of Aksum reached heights of civilisation never again attained in Ethiopian history. Because of the antiquity of their region and the glory of their past, the Tigreans are to some extent the cultural aristocrats of Ethiopia.

Donald Levine

The Northern region of Ethiopia comprising Eritrea and Tigray has always been both the soft belly and the front line of Ethiopian defence. Attacks that have undermined the sovereignty of Ethiopia in the past, from the times of Yohannes and Menelik to Haile Selassie, have mainly come from the north. Even now the strongest of the national movements are in the north.

Ethiopia Profile

The Pain and Glory of Tigray

The history of Tigray where the battle of Adwa took place presents a curious mixture of pain and glory. Not surprisingly, this has become its strength as well as its weak spot.

Like all other Ethiopians, the Tigreans have taken pride in the glory of their past. The obelisks of Aksum, the temple of Yeha and the dam of Cohaito testify to this respectable history of Ethiopia. It has formed the basis for a proud consciousness

which the Tigreans share with their other compatriots. The core of this pride is a belief in the cohesiveness and unity of Ethiopia and the strength of the institutions to which Tigray has made cardinal contributions.

The Tigreans take pride in Ethiopia's heroic past and the valour and resoluteness of their leaders. Such pride finds its roots in the story of the Queen of Sheba and the historic trip she made in her quest to see the wisest man of her age.

But the Tigreans take greater pride in the fact that Ethiopia's first king and founder of the Solomonic line of kings was born in Tigray. The region is said to house the Holy Ark of the Covenant of Zion which many regard as one of the few biblical wonders of the world.

Tigreans are conscious of the fact that they were among the first people to renounce the pagan heritage and to accept belief in God. They honour the vision of Ezana (Abraha), who embraced Christianity long before Islam was born in the Middle East and centuries before pagan Europe rejected its icons of superstitious creed.

The early history of Tigray is viewed as a source of pride by the Christians and Moslems alike, because it embodies the common mythos of their existence beyond religion. It is seen as the force which held them together as a people of one origin; vision and destiny long before Christianity or Islam were introduced.

The region was the venue of thriving business and a conduit of international trade and diplomatic links. On the whole, feeding on a mixture of legend and history, and of a mosaic diversity of cultures, its people have historically taken pride in their past.

Nevertheless, there is a negative side to the pride in the past. One drawback is that the region was the centre stage of the various battles fought to preserve the territorial integrity of the country. Here, the Battle of Adwa was fought against Italian colonial aggression in 1896. The Italians were defeated and their southward thrust checked. However, Eritrea remained their colony until 1941.

But the war was burdensome for Tigray, not only because thousands of its people died in the defence of the country, but also because the region had to feed and sustain a large army. Ironically, however, this victory marked the beginning of the region's steady decline. Following the Adwa victory over the Italians, Menelik consolidated his grip over the Oromos and extended the confines of his Empire to the South.

Tigray was the venue of the Italian vendetta of 1935. This time, Ethiopia was not as lucky as in 1896. But, all the same, Tigray again had to bear the heaviest brunt of

the human and economic costs of the war. All in all, Tigray was the venue of over 30 major battles waged against foreign aggressors, including the Arabs, Turks, Egyptians, Italians and Mahdists.

Despite the above, however, Tigreans were angered by the fact that their historical role was nullified, so much so that it had begun to affect their self-confidence as a people. Many felt that as their past was relegated to oblivion, their chance of building a better future was being restricted by the negligible number of modern institutions which were available in the area.

One of the many reasons for the Tigrean displeasure was that the region was drained of resources. Even as the centre of the empire moved from the north to the south, the region did not get the respite it much needed. To this may be added the widely felt anger among ordinary Tigreans, who resented being denied a status of equality by the post-Yohannes rulers.

There is a general historical explanation for such reactions. One factor is the relationship between the centre and the periphery, or the provinces, which was predicated on subjugation and control rather than on power-sharing. Evidence of this is that for centuries, Ethiopian rulers had not made a genuine attempt to promote a process of integration based on a measure of equality and of give and take. This had historically accentuated the sense of alienation felt and expressed by many nations and/or regions. The root causes of this problem go back in time, and extend well into our times, as the following passage indicates:

In the eighteenth century, however, the Ethiopian monarchy fell victim to a perennial rival, namely the force of a highly virile provincialism, which historically had divided the Christian society into a number of self-conscious provincial units that are mutually antagonistic and stubbornly resistant to the centralised rule represented by the imperial throne. Provincialism traditionally has contested the centralizing tendencies of the monarchy, and the dialogue between the two rivals has always been tense, and often violent, throughout the course of Ethiopian history. The triumph of provincialism in the eighteenth century was made possible by the precipitous decline of imperial authority caused by events that undermined the legitimacy of the Gonder dynasty. The religious upheavals of the early seventeenth century had left a bitter legacy. The apostasy from Orthodox of two emperors violated the immemorial tradition according to which the Solomonic throne is the symbol and guarantor of Ethiopian Christianity. As a result, apostasy not only brought ruin to the converted emperors, but also weakened the authority of the throne.

In Tigray, the centre-periphery relationship was intensified by a process of political and cultural marginalisation of the region throughout the 20th century. For instance, the people of the region intensely resent the systematic way in which the historical and strategic significance of the region was played down, as observed below:

Despite its historical and strategic importance, the entire Northern part of Ethiopia has become increasingly peripheralised over the last century. The Southward shift of the empire's centre of gravity, from its foundation at Aksum to the medieval centre of Lalibela and the late nineteenth century capital of Addis Ababa, is common knowledge in Ethiopian history. The death of the Tigrean Emperor Yohannes in 1889 and the division of the Tigrinya speaking area with the creation of Eritrea altered Ethiopian history.

The blame for the Balkanisation of the North, which is linked with the consolidation of Shoan dominance in the post-Yohannes period, is seen as the cause of the current Eritrean problem and of the continued peripheralisation of the North.

This led to a resistance which was fanned by the manner in which post-Yohannes leaders deliberately played down the region's nationalist resistance, which had dissipated great energy and resources to safeguard the sovereignty of Ethiopia. This history, which led to the weakening of the region in contrast to Shoa, which had peace and stability to grow strong, is summed up below:

As long as Tigray feudal warlordism still remained a potent fighting military force against Italian colonialism, the expanding Shoan empire-state was spared the dissipation of its military resources and therefore assured of a positive respite in which to consolidate its political system. As soon as Tigray feudal warlordism became a spent force, after 1889, Menelik's Northern front was threatened, and this, above anything else, impelled him to fight Italian colonialism, which was out to roll back and possibly even to swallow the Shoan empire into a larger Italian colonial empire. The years between the battles of Metemma and that of Adwa represented a period of barely disguised preparations for a final military denouement.

Another factor which contributed to the weakening of the region was the desire of the Tigreans to resist colonialism together with their Ethiopian compatriots. But equally significant were the divisive policies introduced by the Italians and the post-Yohannes rulers:

Within the ranks of Tigray, feudal warlords at this time became phenomenal. It was encouraged by Italy's so-called 'Tigrean policy', aimed at fanning contradictions between Tigray and Shoan feudalists by appeasing the former; and by the loss of the lands that the Tigray feudal warlords had on the other side of the Mereb (for example, between 1893 and 1895 about 314,792 hectares of land were alienated, convents like Debre Bazen saw the confiscation of their lands, etc). In short, as the encirclement of the highlands by Italian colonialism, the alienation of land and the Italian policy of settlement became a reality in the five years before the Battle of Adwa, we find Tigray feudal warlords helplessly shuttling between different 'options' without creating a common front on any one of these 'options'.

As noted earlier, the anti-colonial resistance was very much enhanced by the decline of the region, whose human and material potential was spent in the

preservation of the territorial integrity of Ethiopia. It was the case of a candle that consumed itself while giving light to its surrounding.

In particular, the Tigreans resented the unfair historical process through which the Tigrean over lordship of Emperor Yohannes IV was lost to Menelik II, leading to the gradual decline of the region from the citadel of the Empire to a quasi-autonomous one. Hiwett has succinctly summed up the stormy history which led to this loss.

One of the early expressions of this fragile alliance between Yohannes and Menelik was the treaty concluded between them in March 1878. According to the treaty, Menelik acknowledged the over lordship of Yohannes, made payment of regular tributes, and promised to come to the military assistance of Yohannes whenever the latter felt threatened. Yohannes in return acknowledged Menelik as the Negus of Shoa whose boundaries were roughly defined as the Bashilo River in the north, the Abbai to the west, and the Awash to the east and south. Wello was to remain as buffer zone between the spheres of influence of these two warlords.

An aspect of the early alliance between Emperor Yohannes and Negus Menelik of Shoa is that the latter took advantage of the Abbai bend which demarcated the spheres of influences of Menelik and the then Ras Adal of Gojjam. Thus the 1878 alliance gave both Menelik and Yohannes the necessary respite to consolidate their respective powers - Yohannes to fight his unfinished wars for the territorial definition of his empire against the Egyptians and later against resurgent Mahdism in the West, and to convert his claims over the coast into effective military and political control; Menelik to settle the scramble over Oromo territories with his rival warlord across the Abbai, Ras Adal, and indeed to displace the latter from the South-west altogether.

The fact that Menelik's victories in the Oromo territories gave him power to assert some authority over Tigray is a resentment shared by Tigray and Oromo nationalities. Both resent it, but what the Tigreans resent most is that the Shoan principality consolidated itself while Tigray waged a two-pronged campaign of common concern against expansionist Mahdist Islam and colonialism.

Within a decade the whole balance of forces between the two warlords --for that matter between the three --was decisively reversed. Yohannes' forces were dissipated in an intermittent war on two fronts, against Mahdism in the west and European colonialism in the east. Despite the brilliant military victories of Ras Alula, one of the most redoubtable of feudal patriots of the time, by 1888 Yohannes was a long way off from even a fragile empire. The situation with Menelik was completely different. By 1888 the Shoan feudal principality had consolidated itself, and more, it had grown into a veritable empire-state. Menelik's newly acquired and growing military and political power was evident from the overall outcome of the Battles of Chelenqo and Embabo. The extensive export of commodities gold, ivory, civet, hides, coffee from the newly incorporated areas enabled him to acquire large quantities of

firearms and ammunition, and also enabled him to build up a substantial royal treasury.

The decade-long contest over power was not even resolved through a form of partnership of the Empire: the marriage of Yohannes' son Araya Selassie to Menelik's daughter, Zewditu. Subsequently, although Yohannes defeated the Mahdists at Metemma in 1889, he also fell in the Battle. It is said such history has served as a source of inspiration and anger. However, whereas the radical youth did not want to ingratiate the anachronistic values of a fading imperial heritage, they were reluctant to overlook or ignore the injustice being done to a people who had so zealously fought for the country's territorial pride and integrity. Further, they could not put up with the kind of bias with which the heroes of their history were treated in a bid to strip them of their credentials. This reaction was stimulated by what foreign historians have written praising the role of Tigray in Ethiopian history. For instance, the Israeli historian Haggai Elrich has written:

Under Yohannes, Tigray had been the centre of power in Ethiopia. Following his death and the establishment of neighbouring Eritrea as an Italian colony (on 1 January 1890), internal hegemony was transferred to Shoa emperors.... Neither Menelik II nor the Shoan establishment that ruled Ethiopia in the time of Zewditu (1916-1930) managed to deprive the leading Tigrean families of their centuries-old dominance in the province. Tigre's sub-regional chiefs and warlords, ever competing with each other over the whole province, were able to maintain their autonomous position vis-à-vis Addis Ababa and strengthen their hold and influence over their followers partly through cooperation with the Italian authorities in Eritrea.

Although the Tigrean chiefs wasted time competing with one another, and Eritrea was lost without a bullet fired, Tigray did not become any more governable after Yohannes. While this in fact served as a source of additional inspiration, it also showed how the succession to Yohannes was prevented through the rivalry of the warlords.

The Shoans for their part, unable to impose their administration over this province, preferred to promote and encourage the traditional local rivalries. They did what they could to achieve an internal balance of power among the leading chiefs and succeeded in preventing any of Yohannes's descendants from becoming negus of Tigray.

In the 1930s Tigray became a pivotal factor in the deteriorating Italo-Ethiopian relations. Caught between Haile Selassie's selective modernization and centralization of Addis Ababa on the one hand and the rising aggressive imperialism of fascist Italy on the other, the province remained a seething pot of Medieval Ethiopian politics. The development of these traditional politics between 1930 and 1935 contributed most significantly to the escalation toward the Abyssinian Crisis and to Ethiopia's defeat in the ensuing war.

The outcome of such ploys was often counter-productive. It prevented a genuine integration based on equality and accentuated the sense of isolation of the region. Further, it left Tigreans offended, more introspective and potentially vindictive. Such a reaction was undoubtedly felt by the Tigrean youth.

The connivance and intrigue directed at Tigray was so complete and uncompromising that it had wide currency even within Shoan politics. It characteristically stemmed from the centre-periphery relationship, which in turn resulted from fear of the loss of power, as was the case of the attitude toward Tigray. But its wider ramifications can also be found elsewhere. For instance, the manner in which Empress Taitu tried to maintain power by appointing people close to her is illuminating. Here is one telling excerpt:

Doubtless because she had born Menelik no children, the Empress tried to keep complete control over the country through promoting members of her own family, most of whom live in Northern Ethiopia, and she had built up a powerful court party through matrimonial alliances and friendships. She was supported by Ras Wolie, her brother, and his son, Ras Gugsu Wolie, who had married Zewditu, Taitu's own step-daughter; by most of the lords of Tigray; by Leul-Ras Hailu Teklehaymanot of Gojjam, whose marriage to the widow of Dejazmatch Yilma she engineered; by Dejazmatch Ayelu, the commander of her guard; by Dejazmatch Kebede and others.

The ultimate objective of such ploys was the centralization of power by vesting power in the protégés of the rulers. The key factor was loyalty and its violation was not pardonable. Even family members were not exempt from the conspiratorial web. Emperor Menelik and his wife were, for instance, divided on the issue of succession. But what is more breathtaking is the manner in which people were discredited through character assassination and mud slinging when it was felt they should be gotten rid of. The contrasting attitudes held by Empress Taitu and Menelik toward Zewditu and Eyasu and the strategies which Taitu took to achieve her objectives are interesting.

The Empress Taitu had born the Emperor Menelik no children and he was reluctant to acknowledge a girl, Zewditu, whose mother was the daughter of an Oromo balabat from Wello, as his daughter. He is said by some to have consulted priests as to his failure to produce an heir. The priests are said to have advised him to enquire into his early liaisons lest unknown to him an heir might exist. This he did, and there was 'recognised' another daughter, Shoa Rega, said to have been a child bride in Harar. Be that as it may -- and it is almost certainly apocryphal and an attempt to discredit the heir Lij Eyasu was the son of this daughter and Ras Michael of Wello, her second husband. The Ras, formerly Muhammed, had, it will be recalled, been forcibly converted to Christianity by the Emperor Yohannes.

Later the same year, 1908, Menelik was paralysed, losing even the power of speech, and he indicated that the young prince should be committed to the care of the bishops and razes and that his former general, Tesemma, should become Regent. The

latter took over the government, his seal reading 'Ras-Betwoded Tesemma, Regent Plenipotentiary of the Ethiopian Realm.' The struggle for power continued to obscure all else and even to undo much of what had been done.

At the centre of it all was power. It was the essential factor which shaped alliances and determined relationships. Even marriage was used as an expedient weapon for realising power. Love did not really matter in the traditional game of power politics. Again Empress Taitu's arrangement of complex matrimonial contracts give a revealing picture of how politicking superseded martial loyalty and all other considerations:

Taitu had been born in Gonder in 1844 but she was from Yejju, Oromo country to the North of Shoa. Her family had connections with the Gonder line Emperors and was powerful throughout the whole North. Needless to say she was not at all popular with the Shoan nobility. Taitu's first husband, before he was poisoned, had been a commander in the army of the Emperor Theodros. Her second had been Dejazmatch Teklegiorgis but she had left him to marry a richer and more powerful noble who she had persuaded to revolt against Emperor Yohannes. This intrigue was discovered and she had been forced to marry a simple soldier who she had followed on foot and whose grain she had dutifully ground for some time before she had left him for a non-commissioned officer in Menelik's army, and him for Fitawrari Zekargachew, the brother of Menelik's wife Bafena. However, later she left the fitawrari for Ras Wolde and him for Menelik, while Bafena took refuge in a convent in 1883.

The Tigreans have historically resented the cynical schemes through which their leaders were set against one another to prevent them from forming a common front. Many elders in Tigray remembered and narrated stories to their youth of the conniving and conspiratorial genius of the Shoan power-brokers who played on the naivety and religious innocence of some of the Tigrean leaders. For instance, the story of the religious emissary sent to Yohannes by Menelik has wide oral circulation. It is even recorded by foreign historians:

An interesting tale is told in Ethiopia about the preliminary negotiations between Menelik and Yohannes. Menelik paid a young man--or some say three genuine hermits -- to journey to the mobile court of Yohannes in the guise of a priest. Yohannes is said to have asked the impostor whether God would permit him to destroy Shoa. 'Yes' was the reply, 'you may conquer Shoa but if you destroy it also you will not go to heaven.' This warning is said to have made a deep impression on the Religious Emperor and he came to an agreement with the Negus Menelik of Shoa. Inevitably Yohannes and Menelik arranged a dynastic seal to this settlement of their rivalry. Ras Aria [sic] Sellassie, the only legitimate son of Yohannes, was to marry Zewditu, Menelik's daughter from an early Oromo liaison--both Aria and Zewditu were young children.

But even the alliance of matrimonial rapprochement did not last long, as Ras Araya died at a tender age without leaving offspring to cement the alliance. With the death

of Yohannes in 1889, Menelik was to intensify his grip on Tigray, which he wanted to weaken once and for all. Haile Selassie shared Menelik's view of keeping Tigray a humiliated weak buffer between Eritrea and the rest of Ethiopia. Even when relations were cordial, there was no question of making mistakes when it comes to power sharing. In fact, matrimonial alliances were developed just to ensure loyalty without extending power. This was what Haile Sellassie tried to achieve by marrying off his two daughters to two grandsons of Emperor Yohannes. Ironically, however, he also had to send spies to keep an eye on them.

The emperor married two of his children to the children of these two razes, thus creating a mutually neutralizing balance between them, frustrating the hope of both to become Tigre's negus. At the same time, however, this arrangement also meant avoiding the imposition of even token centralization and modernization on the province. This was to prove disastrous in 1932, when the Italians turned actively towards subversive policy. Their task was facilitated in 1933 following the death of both Ras Gugsa and the Emperor's daughter who had been married to his son, Dejazmatch Haile Selassie Gugsa. Thus the balance was destroyed and the traditional power struggle in Tigray was resumed. Seyoum, pursuing a policy of loyalty and obedience, was now considered the sole candidate for the strongman position in the province, and so the Emperor, characteristically, did his best to spy on him and weaken him.

The interesting point is that even marriage did not strengthen loyalty; even when blood relationships were created through marriage, no time was wasted in nurturing healthy relationships. For instance, although Ras Seyoum was reinstated as governor, after the marriage nothing changed. The ultimate aim was to break the morale and confidence of the Tigrean nobility and reduce the region to sheepish docility. This was probably why Haile Selassie had to send his emissary to spy on Ras Seyoum:

The Emperor's distrust of Seyoum continued to grow. On 14 March 1935 another special envoy arrived in Aksum from Addis Ababa. This was Negadras Wadajo Ali, the former consul to Asmara and now the mayor of the capital. Wadajo, a sworn enemy of Seyoum, was to settle in Adwa itself and assume imperial responsibility over a whole range of matters. These included political affairs connected with relations with Italy; the telephone and other communications with Addis Ababa; imperial taxes; management of local schools; propaganda in Eritrea among Tigreans and in Tigray itself in order to promote understanding with Shoa; command over the Shoan soldiers who were to arrive later; control of war materials; and finally, general supervision over internal affairs including receiving complaints of the population.

Wadajo Ali was even instructed to modernise some sectors of the economy. But, even the Emperor's attempt to modernise some sectors of the administration, like customs management, was part of a ploy to project himself as the enlightened

modernise and put himself in contrasting light with the Tigrean lords. The truth is, however, that Haile Selassie never really had the interest of modernising Tigray at heart. In fact, his famous policy of controlled expansion of education was nowhere as successfully applied as in Tigray. During his rule, the region relatively had the fewest first and second level institutions of education and no institution of higher education. The image of a modernizer which he at times tried to project was, therefore, a mere ploy which the elders of Tigray laughed at and the youth very much shunned.

Yet, despite his distrust, Haile Selassie had to enlist the support of Tigrean *razes* in crucial battles for the elimination of critical adversaries. For instance, the regent Ras Teary would scarcely have paved the avenue toward Emperorship without the support of Ras Gugsa Araya, who captured Eyasu and handed him over to him. The support of Ras Gugsa, who was married to Teferi's niece, was also decisive in his struggle against Gugsa Walle.

Thus, the reward or punishment of Ras Teferi was predicated more on trust than excellence. One revealing incident is the decision of the emperor to keep the two Tigrean lords and several others who were invited to his coronation in Addis for a long time. Ras Seyoum, who Haile Selassie trusted less than Gugsa, was appointed to the 27-man Senate just to prevent him from returning to Adwa. Wedajo Ali was given authority to organise the customs administration and its monopoly of alcohol.

Ras Gugsa Araya was later allowed to return to Tigray via Asmara and Ras Seyoum was prevented from returning to Adwa, his capital, for some more years. This act of holding the Tigrean lords in virtual captivity angered their followers in the region. Besides, it did not help cement a genuine alliance with the region.

Ras Seyoum, knowing the Emperor's suspicion, went out of his way to prove his loyalty. However, having realised the Emperor's centralising tendency, Gugsa, who was trusted more than Seyoum, developed friendly relations with the Italians. Later, Ras Seyoum was given the title *Luel Ras* and his wife *Lielt*. Even this was no indication of the Emperor's change of heart, because in reality he never trusted him fully. This was to become increasingly evident during the Weyane uprising of 1941-43 as we shall see later.

Not until the Emperor was faced with the growing danger of active Italian invasion did he try to reach a rational rapprochement with the Tigrean nobility. This was consummated through an inter-marriage between the houses of Tigray and Shoa.

Excess of Intervention: Victory and Defeat in the Anti Italian Battles

One of the consequences of the deprivation of Tigray, and another testimony to the myopic manipulatory politics of the 1920s and 1930s, was that the Tigreans unlike their active involvement during the battle of Adwa, were not consulted equally in the preparations to resist the second Italian war of aggression, which Haile Selassie lost. The Ethiopian defeat was, by and large, attributed to the Emperor's excesses of intervention in the affairs of Tigray. It aimed to weaken the local leadership but it backfired:

The presence of the Emperor's envoy in Adwa clearly undermined Seyoum's position in Tigray. An example to this effect was a dispute over taxes that occurred between Seyoum and the people of the region of Damo. Because they were supporting an important monastery they had traditionally paid only the tax of "fifth". This was now collected by the Emperor's envoy. When Seyoum demanded an increase in their payments because of the new expenditures over defence they complained to the Emperor through Wedajo. The matter was still unsettled when hostilities broke out in October but meanwhile caused much bitterness against the Ras in Western Tigray, which seriously affected the effectiveness of his leadership during the war.

Emperor Haile Selassie even trusted foreign emissaries more than the Tigrean rulers. Even worse, he disregarded the proven experience of Tigreans as brave fighters. He did not even respect their knowledge of the sort of warfare tactics suited to the terrain of the region.

In late July 1935, Colonel Konovaloff, a veteran of the Imperial Russian Army and Haile Selassie's Military Advisor, arrived in Adwa. The Emperor had charged him with controlling and advising Ras Seyoum of Tigray, and Konovaloff stayed with him till a month after the commencement of hostilities. Konovaloff's memoir, and a long report of his activities as told later to the British Military Attaché in Addis Ababa, provide first-hand information about Seyoum's preparations. They were very poor. Seyoum tried to follow the Emperor's instructions concerning trenches and tank traps but it was a system totally alien to him or his officers and they were badly constructed and badly located.

Sometimes good natural positions on hills had not been utilized and trenches had been dug in the valleys below from which it was neither possible to see nor to fire.... The chiefs seemed to understand little when Konovaloff made suggestions for the improvements of the works and it is unlikely that anything was altered after he had passed on. Following no system, the Ethiopians had merely distributed their men along the frontier...

According to Haggai Elrich, who cites Konovaloff, Seyoum could not read a map and knew nothing of modern warfare. "During this period, at the Gibbi at Adwa, a small

number of Tigreans were being trained on the use of machine guns by some Ethiopian instructors... A military school had to be started in Adwa and a series of courses given. On one pretext or another, this school had never opened. Ras Seyoum looked upon the coming of a military school as another of the foolish innovations in vogue in Addis Ababa and it was, therefore, not worth bothering about."

Even when the Emperor's position was relatively secure, he did not trust even his loyal cronies when he went abroad. It did not matter that many of them went out of their way to show their loyalty and respect. Here is one episode:

In January 1932, for example, when the Emperor had to go to Djibouti for health reasons, he cared to force both Seyoum and his most persistent opponent, Ras Hailu Teklehaymanot of Gojjam to accompany him. Four months later when Hailu was punished severely by the Emperor for having allegedly mis-administered his province the British Minister was convinced that Seyoum would shortly receive similar treatment.

These decisive ploys which ultimately proved counter-productive stemmed from the lack of political vision predicated on power sharing. The continuing malaise of wanting to keep the entire power cake was maintained even in the days of Mengistu. But it did not make Tigray any more governable than it was during the years of Menelik or the early years of Haile Selassie. If anything, it hardened the resilience of the liberation fighters and made the people of the region receptive to accusations of intervention from the centre.

As rightly noted by Haggai, it was, therefore, plausibly argued that Eritrea was lost by Menelik, and the Battle of Maichew lost by Haile Selassie, largely because of the attitude toward Tigray and the Tigreans. Yohannes had valiantly fought and defeated the Ottomans, Egyptians, Sudanese and Italians, while Menelik was preoccupied with the subjugation of his own people. In particular, he was obsessed and preoccupied with the exploration of various strategies of keeping Tigray weak by minimising the risk of its ascendancy to a position of power and prestige in Ethiopian politics.

Another interesting thing is that these monarchs wanted the humiliation and submission of Tigray to be complete and irreversible. This was applied by Menelik who prevented Yohannes' son, Ras Mengesha, from assuming the title of *negus*, although he himself had been crowned king of kings.

The style of leadership of Menelik manifest in his great reluctance to extend autonomy to Tigray, even when homage was paid to him, contrasted very much with the liberal style of Yohannes who was generally willing to recognize the rights of tributary kings. This, for instance, was what he did after his decisive victory over Menelik in 1873.

Informed observers of Ethiopian history regret the manner in which Northern leaders like Ras Alula were presented with the difficult choice of abandoning their own Northern claim of sovereignty in the interest of the territorial unity and integrity of the country. Yet, for a long time such heroes were accorded a shabby treatment, in life as well as in history. Only recently has a positive rendering begun to emerge as Dawit Woldegiorgis observes below:

In the latter part of the 19th century, as Germany and Italy developed the same colonial interests as France and Great Britain, all the Western imperialist nations mapped out strategies to conquer Africa. Later, virtually the entire continent was divided among the colonial powers. Ethiopia alone fought off the invaders, and most of the battles were fought in the North.

In 1886 the Italians, in an attempt to occupy all of Ethiopia, landed in Massawa and started moving toward the highlands. The Eritrean [sic] hero, Ras Alula Aba Negga, led the Ethiopian forces that routed the Italian army 40 Kilometres inland at Dogali. Two years later when Ras Alula and his forces were called by Emperor Yohannes (1872-1889) to lead the battle against invading Sudanese Mahdists in Western Ethiopia, the Italians seized the opportunity to push into the interior and were able to take over the entire region now known as Eritrea. With conquest of the entire empire as their goal, they pushed on past the Mereb River, the current boundary between Tigray and Eritrea. Then Emperor Menelik launched his offensive at Adwa on March 1, 1896.

Another source of pride to Tigray is that it had successfully withstood many invasions. This testifies to its strategic significance:

Numerous battles have been fought in the North and hundreds of thousands of men and women have fallen protecting the country from invasion. As the bridge to the hinterlands of Africa, Eritrea has always taken the brunt of invasions aimed at the highlands, during the Aksumite period and later on when the Ethiopian empire tempted foreign conquerors. The Eritreans are still the coast guards of the mainland. The major battles in Ethiopian history were fought in Eritrea. The battlefields of Debarwa, Gundet, Gura, Kufit, Saati, Dogali, and Koatit are testimonials to the resistance against Egyptian, Sudanese, Turkish, and Italian invaders. Eritrean leaders such as Bahta Hagos became heroes of Ethiopian history in the Battle of Segeneite against Italy.

Tigreans resent the voluntary or involuntary Balkanisation of the North for the express purpose of weakening the Northern claim to the throne earlier, and to a share in power later. This strategy was consistently followed by Menelik, Haile Selassie and Mengistu. In fact, while many Tigreans recognize the Adwa victory as significant because it shattered the morale of a metropolitan power, others are not too happy about its consequences due to the legacy of problems it has left behind. It is worthy to note that this problem is recognized by many today. Dawit Woldegiorgis

has elaborated on the implications of the problems which resulted from the Adwa victory:

To this day Adwa is a symbol of Ethiopian heroism and national pride. It is part of our self-definition. While this victory was important in asserting our independence and demonstrating the strength and resilience of the Ethiopian people, it was not a total victory. Ironically, it marked the beginning of the most serious threat to the unity of Ethiopia. For if Italy had won the battle and occupied all of Ethiopia, there would be no Eritrean problem today. The entire region, including Italian Somaliland, though conquered, would have been united and after decolonisation might have emerged as Greater Ethiopia.

Emperor Menelik did not attempt to drive the Italians back to the sea. He had just defeated one of the most technologically advanced European military powers, but at great cost. He was poorly equipped and had suffered great losses. To have attempted to pursue the Italians might have been suicidal. He quit while he was ahead and signed a treaty recognizing Italian possession of Eritrea.

The view, which Major Dawit expresses, is confirmed by foreign scholars. But regardless of whether what Menelik did was done out of pragmatism or expediency, to keep the North weak, the fact remains that Tigreans believe that his legacy has bedevilled not only the North but Ethiopia at large to this day. The following excerpt on the post-Adwa developments strengthens this argument. Paul Henze comments:

In the subsequent peace treaty, Italy abandoned all pretence of a protectorate over Ethiopia in return for Menelik's recognition of the Italian retention of Eritrea. Tigreans accused Menelik of forgetting the importance of this historic North Ethiopian territory whose highlands traditionally formed part of Tigray and giving higher priority to consolidating his conquests on the SE, South, and SW Marches of the empire. There is validity in this accusation.

The above attitude toward Menelik and the Adwa victory for which he is largely credited is even a source of consternation for the Eritreans, who have struggled for the liberation of Eritrea on the basis of the colonial argument. This general attitude of Eritreans toward the Adwa victory is confirmed even by their reactions to this day. Dawit observes:

Although Adwa was an event of great historical importance, Eritreans are a bit uncomfortable about this period. During my years in Eritrea, I noticed that, of all the national holidays, fewer people turned out for the Adwa celebrations. Adwa was a reminder of the beginning of Italian colonization.

The Italians remained in Eritrea for 50 years. The Eritrean suffered severely under their rule, especially from the racist policies of fascism.

Another consequence of the Adwa victory is that it led to further imperialist conspiracy in the North. It subsequently led to secessions and insurrection which

was promoted by the British after they defeated the Italians and took over Eritrea in the early 1950s:

The British considered this form of struggle a challenge to their authority. They feared that if the movement caught on, it would deny them a future in Eritrea. It did not take them long to encourage the establishment of separatist and opposition movements to counter the Emperor's campaign. Dejazmatch Tesemma, an Eritrean dissenter, was promoted to Ras by the British and aided in expanding the separatist movement, the Liberal-Progressive Party.

Britain did everything possible to suppress the Unionist Movement. The most destructive idea they introduced was that of dividing Eritrea in two: handing over the Western lowlands to the Sudan (at the time a British colony), and joining the highlands with Tigray to form a separate autonomous state under British administration. This plan would have made Great Britain dominant in the region.

But the Emperor did not behave any better than the British. In fact, he emulated the same strategy as the British by trying to "buy up" opponents of unity through senior appointments in the administration of the region.

A number of mistakes were committed after reunification. The Emperor attempted to neutralize the opposition by appointing opponents of unity to high political positions. One such appointment was Tesfa Yohannes Berhe, close relative of the famous Dejazmatch Tesemma, founder of the separatist movement during the British occupation. Tesfa Yohannes followed in his relative's footsteps as a strong opponent of unity. His appointment as deputy governor was a surprise to members of the Unionist Party. Those who had been fighting for unity under the banner "Ethiopia or Death" were suddenly forgotten. My personal observation was that most highland Christians felt betrayed by such appointments which undermined unification through intrigues and even by persecuting members of the Unionist Party. How Unionists felt is shown by the fact that General Tabela Ekubit, the police commander who had helped ensure a unanimous vote on reunification, rebelled with his police force against the government. One of his grievances was that opponents of unity against whom he had been struggling, like Tesfa Yohannes, were now being appointed as his superiors. It was too much for him to take. A short time later he committed suicide with the same pistol Haile Selassie had awarded him for his contribution to reunification.

Another error was appointing Amharas and other non-Eritreans as governors. This created resentment because it was interpreted by many as "typical Amhara chauvinism". The Amhara can be extremely arrogant. Because most of the recent kings of Ethiopia have been Amharas.

The situation got worse with the degeneration of the Ethiopian revolutionary situation after the ascent of Mengistu to power in 1976 and the inevitable entrenchment of Garrison Socialism in Ethiopia. The tragedy was that Mengistu, with his

military mould of mind, did not suffer 'the Northern traitors and secessionists' as he referred to them at different times. Dawit Woldegiorgis has made another interesting comment on the situation:

The problem in Tigray was born out of the same mistake that Haile Selassie and Mengistu made in Eritrea. They underestimated the potential of the people to rebel against unjust authority.

The TPLF (Tigrean People's Liberation Front) was established in 1975 and has grown rapidly in the last 12 years. The movement has a considerable following among the Tigrean people. This is an endorsement of the movement's legitimate demand for self-determination within the framework of a united Ethiopia, and not for secession. Even though the TPLF started with a secessionist policy, the leadership soon realized that this was neither achievable nor acceptable to the majority of the people of Tigray. Since then they have adopted the more sensible position of making their struggle against the policies of the Ethiopian regime in the context of the struggle for self-determination.

Dawit further comments:

There have been rebellions in Tigray for centuries. Ras Alula rebelled in 1889-1894 to make Tigray independent of King Menelik, who was then attempting to centralize his power. But Ras Alula later swore allegiance to Menelik and stood beside him against the Italian offensive in 1896. In 1941 Ras Seyoum, grandson of Emperor Yohannes, broke his allegiance to the Emperor and allied with the British to become Tigray's governor. Both rebellions were considered high treason against the Emperor, but each time the problem was solved through the tolerance and accommodation that has characterized Ethiopian politics in the North.

But echoes from the Mengistu epoch reverberate to this day. Days after his departure, Goshu Wolde, a long time cabinet member in the Military Government, made a statement tantamount similar to some of Mengistu's classical ones. The resonance of his hate and spite was unmistakable, when he referred to the Tigrean rebels as "chirak", a diminutive and insulting word attributed for quacks or social outcasts. Such characterisation was not uncommon among the power crazed and politically inept in the Mengistu establishment. It was a politically suicidal statement from an ambitious man who aspires to lead the country to a "democracy based on equality" if he thinks equality can be guaranteed through such abusive epithets.

The ruling establishment had difficulty even coming to grips with the notion of the existence of the region. Tigray was almost a taboo word during the early years of Mengistu and the TPLF was referred to as a movement of a handful of bandits. It was used sparingly only to undermine Eritrean nationalism, by putting it in contrast with the commitment of the Tigrean Ethiopian aspiration. In fact, it was not until

1989 that the term Tigray gained currency in routine political parlance and the jargon of the mass media. By then, the government had entirely lost the region to the rebel movement, in which the TPLF is an important actor. From this period to the fall of Mengistu, the term Weyane and rebel were interchangeably used to refer to the TPLF.

Here it is worthy of note to add that the use of the term 'Weyane' was considered politically expedient. It has its roots in the uprising of 1941-1943, briefly outlined next.

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