

CONTEMPORARY ETHIOPIA IN THE CONTEXT OF THE BATTLE OF ADWA, 1896

Mesfin Araya

York College, CUNY
New York, NY

INTRODUCTION

It was 1 March 1896, a Sunday, about 4 o'clock in the morning. The night was black and the silence profound. The camp, between Adwa and the mountains, slept. The emperor and empress were up, having left their tents without ceremony, to go to divine services. Everyone was deep in prayer and contemplation when a courier ran in and threw himself on the ground before the emperor. There was a rumbling, a muffled thunder of troops on the move ...More messengers arrived and finally the emperor realized that danger was imminent. Trumpeters sounded assembly and in very short order the troops were readyThe green-yellow-red flags were dipped before the crucifix. As dawn illuminated the scene, the army got underway with its customary shoutingAt exactly 6:10a.m. General Albertone ...heard a fusillade ...The battle of Adwa had begunThe fighting was intense in every sector, but the war was essentially over by 12:30 p.mAs The Spectator commented ...: 'The Italians have suffered a great disaster ...greater than has ever occurred in modern times to white men in Africa'Adwa was the bloodiest of all colonial battles.² Colonel Piano's perception of Ethiopia as "Colossus with feet of clay"³ was dramatically proven wrong.

What is the historical and contemporary significance of that fateful event in the history of Ethiopian people? Adwa's significance goes well beyond Ethiopian borders. There were many African Adwas in the history of colonial incursions. The short-lived victory of the Zulus, the great resistance of the indomitable Matabele, and the Shona revolt, are a few examples. What makes the Ethiopian Adwa unique is, as a success story, it is able to invoke and sustain a sense of PanAfricanism among the Slack race. Beyond its PanAfricanist content, it was a major cause for the political crisis within the homeland of the enemy: Francesco Crispi, the architect of the war, fell; and the Commander of the Italian troops at Adwa, General Saratieri, was brought to trial. Finally, the *victory* at Adwa gave Europeans a clear signal never to provoke Ethiopia again. I do not intend to dwell on the international significance of the battle of Adwa, as it has been retold many times. What I try to do here is something quite different.

In Western tradition, death is terminal. In the African tradition, on the other hand, to die, to use Ali Mazrui's phraseology, is "like changing your address"⁴: the dead continue to participate in the lives of the living - hence, the African tradition of Ancestor WorShip. Underlying that philosophy is the inseparable link between the past and the present: the past as the present and the present as the past. That is why history, especially oral history, occupies a significant place in African tradition. The centennial celebration of the Adwa victory, therefore, ought to be an occasion to recall our ancestors for consultation, to engage them in discussion, in our time of national crisis; or if you will, to have an open therapy session with our ancestors, confronting them as they confront us. This would require on our part a profound reflection, honest and intense participation. My discussion will move from the present to the past, and vice versa, through comparison, imagined dialogue, and anecdote.

I advance two arguments: Adwa, as I will try to show, represents a bold critique on the current ethnic politics in Ethiopia- be it from the point of view of a history of a people in general or from that of a ruling class in particular. Adwa, as I will also try to show, has its own contradictions which still plague Ethiopia; contradictions whose resolution is also contained in Adwa itself.

ADWA AS A HISTORY OF A PEOPLE

In his breakfast meeting with American scholars on October 20, 1995, Meles Zenawe is reported to *have* said that "Ethiopia's peoples had to sort out their identities before mobilizing their energies to build a new Nationalism."⁵

That statement by the current Prime Minister of Ethiopia is in stark contradiction to the real, lived, experience of Ethiopian people. Ethiopia's victory at Adwa would never have been possible if the people had indeed a crisis of identity. It is not difficult to imagine how the history of Ethiopia would have turned out if the people were locked in their respective ethnic particularism in the face of foreign aggression. On the contrary, they mobilized their energies and collectively descended on the enemy like "an infernal whirl."s Adwa was a country-wide upheaval, as George Berkeley describes, -- "every tukul and village in every far-off glen in Ethiopia was sending out its warriors."? The long and arduous march signifies a remarkable experience in the collective memory of a people.⁸ Adwa was truly a people's war where women's participation was no less significant: they carried on their backs military supplies; harassed the enemy; and those who had access to the Italian camp supplied information. Quoting an anonymous source, Christ Prouty vividly describes the role of women in the battle:

The empress collected the ten or twelve thousand women in the camp and issued water jugs to all of them. This army of another kind filled their jugs at the river and were ready to carry water to those who fought, wherever they stood. Hundreds of women remained in camp prepared to care for the wounded.⁹

According to Sven Rubenson, there was even a "resistance in the Eritrean rank and file against entering the battle. The Italians are reported to have surrounded their 'basha'buzuks' before the battle to prevent desertion," as the latter was reported to have said "...though we eat their money, we will not fight our country and our King,"¹⁰ an interesting historical commentary on EPLF nationalist arguments.

Indeed one can imagine countless peasant men and women, Adwa's veterans, from various ethnic backgrounds, defiantly replying to Meles 'You may have a crisis of identity, as for us, we fought for freedom as a united people, we could not do otherwise!' What would Meles say to a collective struggle of a people for self-determination, symbolized by "one individual, a poor man with a crippled hand who on his own initiative" according to local tradition, "went to Baratieri" to spread false information on the condition of the Ethiopian army.¹¹

Equally pertinent to the Prime Minister'S statement is that the Ethiopian resistance movement during the Fascist occupation could not have sustained itself without the spirit of Adwa. The history of Adwa certainly served the patriots as self-reference - a reservoir from which to draw national pride and courage.

Viewed as a history of a people, therefore, Adwa signifies a single inescapable truth which the current ethnic politics tries to undermine: Ethiopia may be a mosaic of nationalities, but its people also have a collective, shared, history that binds them together. Adwa represents a supra-ethnic and supra-regional consciousness in search of collective freedom.

The current divisive politics of ethnicity is indeed largely the making of our contemporary political elites whose self-reference seems alien to the spirit of Adwa. If we closely observe the regionalist and ethno-nationalist politics of the last twenty years, a single truth emerges: none of them began as a grass-roots movement; all of them were movements from above to create separate identities; and those who succeeded were largely aided by the repressive machinery of Mengistu Haile

Mariam.¹² Indeed, time will tell whether such artificial creations will have permanence, or the collective history of Ethiopian people will once again forcefully reassert itself.

ADWA AS A HISTORY OF A RULING CLASS

The history of the battle of Adwa can also be analyzed at the level of the Ethiopian ruling class. Here, again, we can observe an interesting comparison, and perhaps a lesson for our contemporary political elites.

Adwa signified the role of leadership. The battle could never have been won if there had been internal divisions within the ruling class - an internal division that has made a critical difference in the history of colonial incursions in the rest of Africa. Indeed, the victory of Adwa was partly due to the internal unity of the ruling class, whose members closed ranks in the face of foreign aggression. A good example is that of Ras Alula and Menelik. If Alula had been a Trigrean nationalist first, he could have easily struck a deal with the Italians. Yet despite his hostility to Menelik's newly found power, he was able to see the larger picture and close ranks with the latter. As Alula recounted to Augustus Wylde:

I...turned to King Menelik as the only man who could restore order, and since that time I have thrown all my influence on his side, in order to unite [Ethiopia] once more.¹³

A remarkable consciousness and vision, especially from the point of view of a ruling class.

Menelik was an exceptional leader, as Augustus Wylde says, "Emperor Yohannes was like a child compared to him."¹⁴ His diplomatic skills, "...spinning out in his mind", as David Lewis says, "a politics for all comers and for all seasons,"¹⁵ and his remarkable ability of building consensus within his multi-ethnic ruling group, of co-opting the dissatisfied member through marriage and reward, are indeed indicative of effective leadership. The Italian attempts at provoking divisions within the Ethiopian ruling class were effectively preempted, as Rubenson writes, Menelik's call to arms had been obeyed throughout the realm. All his vassals, except those who had received security tasks elsewhere, had either preceded him or joined him in his march to the North.¹⁶

It must also be recalled that the defection of former Italian allies, Ras Sibhet and Dijzmach Hagos Teferi and their subsequent agitation inside their districts in Tigray are indicative of class solidarity. Baratieri had to admit that "he really did not know at all who would be with him, neutral, or against him."¹⁷ Indeed, the internal cohesion of Ethiopian ruling class at Adwa was striking, especially in the context of the current political crisis in Ethiopia.

Contemporary Ethiopian political elites show every characteristic of a weak class, fatally undermined, as Frantz Fanon would say, "by its...incapacity to think in terms of all the problems of the nation as seen from the point of view of the whole of that nation."¹⁸ Internally they are divided by regionalism and ethnicity. The ruling elites set out to form a firing squad to defend what they call the "New Ethiopia" and ended up in a circle. Today their guns are aimed at each other: the conflict between EPRDF and OLF, and EPRDF and the Liberation Front in the Ogaden area are good examples. The opposition forces are no less internally divided, as their mode of struggle is defined by the political discourse of EPRDF. With the exception of CODEF, all are organized on either ethnic or regional basis. At a more general level, Dr. Beyene Petros' simultaneous official position as the president of the Alternative Forces and as the chairman of the Southern Peoples' Coalition -- two loyalties in one person -- is no less an indication of internal fragmentation.

The fragmented vision of Ethiopian political elites may give foreign powers an opportunity to fish in troubled waters. Esayas and Meles have opened their doors wide to U.S. and Israeli interests in *the Horn of Africa*. Ignored as they are by the latter two, the Oromo nationalists may invite German interest; the Moslem group may attract petro-dollar interests; and the Amhara nationalists may approach the Russians.¹⁹ Indeed, Ethiopia may well end up becoming a playground for foreign interests: a direct assault on the spirit of Adwa.

In this centennial celebration of Adwa's victory, one can imagine a brief confrontation between Ras Alula, the venerable Ethiopian nationalist, "The husband of Kassala and lover of the sea"²⁰ and Meles, the champion of ethnic politics. 21

Alula to Meles: 'I lived, fought, and died as Ethiopian. Tell me, are you first an Ethiopian or a Tigrean Nationalist?'

Meles: 'I am a proud Ethiopian.'

Alula: 'But why did you start your struggle as a Tigrean, and not as an Ethiopian?'

Meles: 'To resolve the nationalities question, the legacy you and your ruling group left behind.'

After listening quietly, the Adwa veterans, peasant men and women, interject: 'Are we to believe that that problem could not have been resolved in the context of a united Ethiopian state? In your own generation there were political movements which were willing to address your concern in the context of a multi-ethnic Ethiopian state.'

For seconds Meles is frozen, and then responds, 'If Ethiopia is not meant to be, so be it!'

Alula defiantly walks out, angrily shouting at Meles, 'I shall return with the full spirit of Adwa.'

Alone, Meles ponders on his Ethiopian ancestors and the unsettling questions they pose to him. As he ironically begins to celebrate the Adwa centennial, he hopes that his original sin - the politics of ethnicity - 'will evaporate with economic growth in Ethiopia,' an apparent admission of his past political miscalculation.

Ras Alula would not bid us farewell without a message to the opposition forces in exile. He would say, 'The battle of Adwa was fought on the ground, inside Ethiopia, together with our people, and not from comfortable places in exile'; and following Frederick Douglass, he would conclude, "Those who profess to favor freedom and yet [refuse to struggle at home] are men who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightening. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters."²²

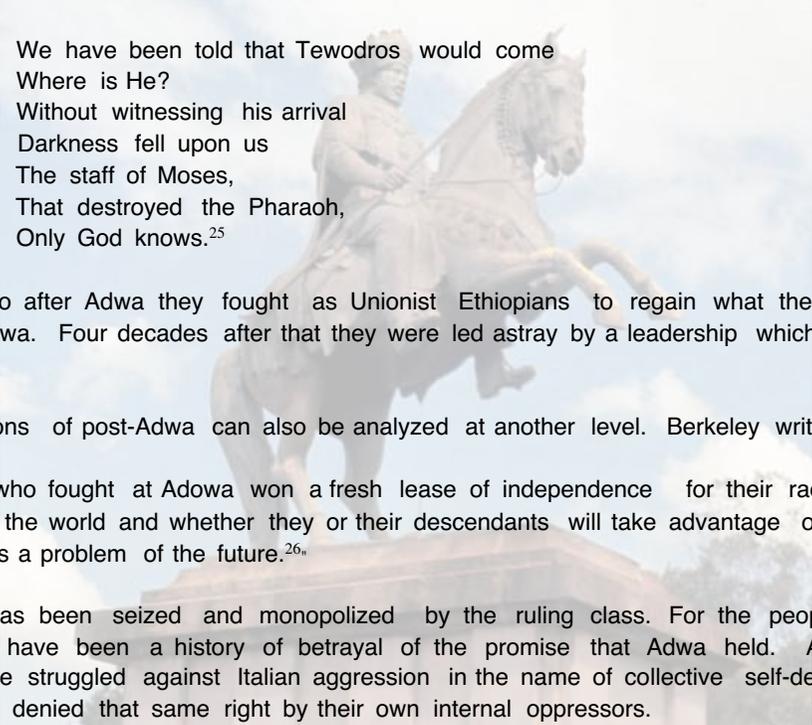
POST-ADWA

Although Adwa's victory marks a high point in the collective struggle of Ethiopian people, we ought not to forget that it had also its own contradictions from which present day Ethiopia has yet to extricate itself meaningfully. The era that Adwa's victory initiated needs to be confronted for what it is, with a sober and critical mind.

At the battle of Adwa, Ethiopian people fought collectively, with great determination, to defend their freedom from external domination, but they also lost part of their collective identity when Eritrea remained colonized. The Eritreans, particularly the highlanders, had hoped that the victory of Adwa would also deliver their salvation.

Forced by a combination of circumstances -- the specter of pre-Adwa famine, the fear of colonial war of attrition, and his own concern of power consolidation in the South and Southwest - Menelik did not heed the advice of Ras Alula who advocated the extension of the war to Colonial Eritrea.²³ The difference between the two was a difference between a realist and a dreamer.

The point here, however, is: what was a sound strategy for Menelik was a disaster, a tragedy, for highland Eritreans, especially when we recall that the prelude to the battle of Adwa had begun in Eritrea with the anti-colonial revolt of Bahta Hagos in 1894. In their own words, this is what highland Eritreans said, in their hour of desperation, as King Menelik signed the treaty with the Italians: "We, the people of Hamasein, were doomed forever."²⁴ They helplessly longed for the mythical Tewodros who could deliver their salvation:



We have been told that Tewodros would come
Where is He?
Without witnessing his arrival
Darkness fell upon us
The staff of Moses,
That destroyed the Pharaoh,
Only God knows.²⁵

Fifty years or so after Adwa they fought as Unionist Ethiopians to regain what they lost in the aftermath of Adwa. Four decades after that they were led astray by a leadership which has its own private agenda.

The Contradictions of post-Adwa can also be analyzed at another level. Berkeley writes,

"The Warriors who fought at Adowa won a fresh lease of independence for their race - whether this is a gain to the world and whether they or their descendants will take advantage of the chance thus obtained is a problem of the future."²⁶

That chance has been seized and monopolized by the ruling class. For the people, the last hundred years have been a history of betrayal of the promise that Adwa held. Although the Ethiopian people struggled against Italian aggression in the name of collective self-determination, they have been denied that same right by their own internal oppressors.

Ethiopia may not have been colonized, but it has never escaped the European influence that wrought havoc on the African continent: the modern state and money economy - signifying Ethiopia's steady integration into the international capitalist process. Under Menelik's reign, the ruling class consolidated its power, and increasingly began to "shed its martial character of pre-Adwa days and developed business instincts. A series of profitable partnerships were struck between its members and the expatriate merchants and concessionaires,"²⁷ and the process of privatization of land began in earnest. For the ordinary Ethiopian people who directly and indirectly participated at the battle of Adwa, the modern state and money relations brought the intensification of both class and cultural oppression, more glaringly in the South, the newly incorporated region. The collective misery of the Ethiopian people was indeed articulated by Gebra-Heywet Baykadagn, "the intellectual pace-setter of his age,"²⁸ when he called for reform. As we come closer to our period, we see the same pattern of collective misery of a people, largely caused and sustained by a tiny, greedy, ruling minority.

Haile Selassie's reign only accelerated, at both political and economic levels, the era initiated by Adwa's victory. At a time when the people needed to have a sweeping but meaningful social change, Mengistu Haile Mariam emerged. After terror, wars, and famines, the people longed for peace, reconciliation, and democracy only to discover that history has once again played its tricks on them when it produced Esayas and Meles.

The era initiated by Adwa has yet to be transcended, and the resolution is contained in Adwa itself. The people voted with their feet as they marched to fight at Adwa - a noble act of supra-ethnic and supra-regional consciousness. Their desire to fight foreign domination at Adwa inherently contains a desire to fight any oppression. Indeed, ~embodies a critique on their own condition of existence. That collective desire for freedom, therefore, can be activated against their own internal oppressors. To that effect, Ethiopian intellectuals committed to public causes can play a catalyst role by advancing an alternative social discourse anchored in the collective history of the people - an alternative social discourse aimed at building a new and democratic Ethiopia where the various cultural groups can enrich their collective history in freedom and equality. That task must remain central as we enter the Twenty-first Century.

NOTES

- 1 An expanded and edited version of a speech given at Adwa Centennial Celebration in Washington, D.C. and East Lansing, Michigan, March 1-2, 1996.
- 2 Chris Prouty, *Empress Taytu and Menelik II*, (Trenton, NJ, The Red Sea Press, 1986), pp.155 & 157.
- 3 Sven Rubenson, "Adwa 1896: the Resounding Protest" in Robert \. Rotberg and Ali A. Mazrui (eds.) *Protest and Power in Black Africa* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1970), p.139.
- 4 Ali Mazrui, *The Africans, a Triple Heritage*, (Boston, Little Brown & Co., 1986), p.45.
- 5 Harold G. Marcus, "A Breakfast Meeting with Meles", *Ethiopian Review* (December, 1995):33.
- 6 David Levering Lewis, *The Race to Fashoda: European Colonialism and African Resistance in the Scramble for Africa* (New York, Neidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987), p.103.
- 7 George Berkeley, *The Campaign of Adowa and the Rise of Menelik* (New York, Negro Universities Press, 1969), p.126.
- 8 Menelik's army is said to have marched 1,000 kilometers, according to Sven Rubenson, *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence* (London, Heinemann, 1976), p.406.
- 9 Prouty, Taytu and Menelik , p.156.
- 10 Sven Rubenson, "Adwa 1896", p.126.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p.121.
- 12 For details, see Mesfin Araya, "The Eritrean Question: An Alternative Explanation", *The Journal of Modern African Studies* (March 1990):79-100, and Robert D. Kaplan, *Surrender or Starve: The Wars Behind the Famine* (Boulder, The Westview Press, 1988).
- 13 Haggai Erlich, *Ethiopia and Eritrea During the Scramble for Africa: A Political Biography of Ras Alula, 1875-1897* (East Lansing, African Studies Center and the Shiloah Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel-Aviv University, 1982),p.188.
- 14 As quoted in Lewis, *The Race to Fashoda*, p.12.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p.128.
- 16 Rubenson, "Adwa", p.117.
- 17 Rubenson, *Survival of Ethiopian Independence*, p.405.
- 18 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York, Grove Press, 1968), p.154.
- 19 Interestingly Russian Embassy's political Counselor in Addis Ababa is said to have visited the AAPO's head office and held talks with the First Deputy President. See *Ethiopian Register* (MarCh 1996):5
- 20 As quoted in Erlich, p.196.
- 21 The words in Meles' answers are collected from the various interviews he has given.
- 22 From Philip S. Fomer (ed.) *The Voice of Black America* vol\1, (New York, Capricorn Books, 1975) p.222.
- 23 Erlich, pp.188-195.
- 24 Johannes Kolmodin, *Traditions de Tsazzega et Hazzega, Textes Tigrigna* (Rome, 1912), p.263. The translation is my own.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p.263.
- 26 Berkeley, *The Campaign of Adowa*, pp.259-260.
- 27 Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855-1974*, (Athens, Ohio University Press, 1991), p.9S. For creeping modernization under Menelik's reign, see pp85-1 *OB*. Bahru seems to contradict himself when he writes that "The relatively more progressive elements of the feudal ruling class also sought to reconstitute feudalism on a new and more solid foundation"(p.92), On the contrary, Menelik's state of post-Adwa signified the gradual decline of the traditional "feudal state" and the emergence, albeit staggeringly, of a variant of capitalist state. The ruling class may have been traditional in its origin, but its members were

fast adapting to the changing circumstances, i.e., the steady process of Ethiopia's integration into international capitalism .. the logic of international capitalist process exerting a determining pressure upon Ethiopia's development and form.

28 Bahru Zewde, "The Intellectual and the State in Twentieth Century Ethiopia," *New Trends in Ethiopian Studies. Papers of the 12th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, vol.II, Michigan State University, 5-10 September 1994 (Red Sea Press, Lawrenceville, N.J., 1994):483.

