

EUROCENTRIC AND ETHNONATIONLIST INTERPRETATION OF ETHIOPIAN HISTORY

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At the celebration of the centennial of the battle of Adowa today the configuration of the world politics and causes of wars are different from the era of imperialism. Today Ethiopians are not fighting imperialism but its multifarious legacies. Despite Ethiopia's repeated victory over foreign aggressors, threat to its sovereignty never abated. Each year the danger to its independence and national integrity appeared under different guises. For years Europeans encouraged the ruling elite of the north to secede from Ethiopia. They provided not only money but ideological rationale for breaking up Ethiopia. Such views are propagated by Eurocentric perspective and interpretation of Ethiopian polity. Ethiopianists of the Eurocentric perspective, portray Ethiopia as a colonialist state akin to the imperialistic European state of the early 1900. They present Ethiopian polity as a collection of forcefully held ethnic groups. Ethiopia's repeated battles with European colonizers was redefined as collusion for colonial territories. Every page of Ethiopian history is subjected and reinterpreted or deconstructed to fit their erroneous view of a black colonialist. This a historical view is not only palatable but captivating to ethnonationalists, whose political agenda is breaking the Ethiopian state and create their own ethnic state. The mantle of ethnonationalism which was professed with a religious zeal has passed from Eritreans to their Tigrean elite. The Tigrean elite are now the mantle bearers of ethnic ideology. They started ethnic war and succeeded to capture state power, not because of their military strength but sheer coincidence of favorable factors. We will neither dwell here on the causes nor the proliferation of ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia. It is worth pointing, however, two fundamentally contradictory principles. The historical evolution of a nation state or a civic state and the Tigrean ethnic policies. In building nation state, the two policies are mutually exclusive and negates each other. To illustrate this contradiction, we will briefly discuss the process of creating and maintaining a nation state.

THE PROCESS OF STATE FORMATION IN HISTORY

Historically states are the product of violence. Like all other contemporary states the Ethiopian state is the product of conquest, incorporation and assimilation of heterogeneous ethnic groups, independent kingdoms and autonomous regions. Its territorial boundaries, and effective control over these lands waxed and waned depending on the strength of the imperial power over his subordinates or vassals. Political control was exercised by the symbolic submission and payments of tributes. The internal administration of the region is left to the local rulers. Where ever central authority declines the regional rulers withdraw their allegiance and tribute. If they succeed they develop into another center of power or quasi-states. The saga of Ethiopia is full of this type of episodes.

The Ethiopian polity is characterized by a strong sense of narrow provincialism. There was a continuous push for centralized administration and uniform bureaucracy. Provincial elite fought disparately and resisted any attempt of centralization or loss of their power. Each province wanted to remain politically dominant within the empire, if not maintain its autonomy from the direct control of the Negus Negest (King of Kings). But each province strongly resisted centralizing policies of the state. The obligation of the state to its vast subjects was very minimal. The notion of citizenship and responsibility of the state for its people is a recent phenomena. Notions, such as democracy, equal rights, balance of powers etc. are new concepts, like all other social phenomena that develops with societal evolution particularly with the emergence of nation-states. What makes Ethiopia's history unique is that; 1) none of the contestants for the imperial power disavowed the notion of the existence of the Ethiopian state or Ethiopianism. They wanted to maximize their position of power within Ethiopia; 2) neither of the regional contestants nor warring faction evoked ethnicity. The struggle for power revolved around the importance of regional autonomy.

THE EMERGING PHENOMENON OF ETHNONATIONALISM

Ethnicity is a social construction. Social actors constantly define their ethnic identity according to the social settings. Thus the meanings of ethnicity is constantly created and recreated to serve existing political and economic agenda. Ethnic identity, "... at the bottom is a subjective selfconcept or social role; it is often variable, overlapping and situational ... "We" is defined in part by "they"; the relevant other in a social setting is central in shaping role selection" (Young, 1976:65). A call for ethnic solidarity does not make a distinction between the oppressed and the oppressor members of the ethnies. This broad inclusion gives the elite or the cultural entrepreneurs an opportunity of leadership, who base their mobilization on appeals to kinship connections, blood and family ties.

Ethnic elite create or resurrect ethnic nationalism. They work on recreating and reinterpreting what is in the realm of ideas, until it was firmly imprinted on the consciousness of the masses. Ethnic elite project their particular interest as the agenda of the ethnic groups. Issues that are raised in ethnic politics such as language, culture and distribution of employment are issues that affect more the professional, the intellectuals and the elite more than the rural people. Dissatisfaction and grievances of ethnic communities had to be articulated in ideological discourse. Cultural entrepreneurs become the vanguard of these ideas. Ethnic discontent has to be subsumed in a universalistic language and principle such as self-determination, cultural independence or autonomy.

Cultural brokers or entrepreneurs provide ethnicity with an ideology that transcend parochialism, regionalism and village mentality. It is not uncommon to find ethnic conflicts among some ethnic groups in Ethiopia. It was common practice among agro-pastoralists to raid each others community for cattle, women or other culturally valued materials. These types of ethnic conflict, however, are different from the current one, which is lead arid articulated by elite who espouse ethnic hostility using the state ideological apparatus.

In Ethiopia, proponents of ethnic domination can not provide evidence of state sponsored policies of ethnic domination. The cause of ethnic polarization is rooted in the frustration of ethnic elite over limited resources both in economic and political realms. Unlike the masses, it is the elite who feel the brunt of competition in urban areas. The elite are the most significant social segments of the society that nurture and develop the feeling of ethnonationalism. They, however, succeed in this project where there is administrative abuses, lopsided development. Such abuses could be the work of any social segment that control the state and its political machinery. In Ethiopia the state had never been under the exclusive control of a single ethnic group until 1991.

ETHNICIZATION OF THE ETHIOPIAN STATE

The ideological apparatus of the state is staffed by Tigrean ethnies. They have effectively excluded and marginalized other political and ethnic groups from either participating or contending for state power.

To put events in historical perspective, it is worth noting that the Tigrean administrative region was by far much better off in terms of cultural and political autonomy, compared to the people of the southern provinces. The provincial administration remained in the hands of the Tigrean aristocracy. The Tigrean peasantry did suffer neither land alienation nor surplus extraction like that of the peasants of the south.

The TPLF success was simply a random event never anticipated by the social actors. They began their guerrilla war in their own region of Tigray to break it from other parts of Ethiopia. However unexpected endogenous and exogenous political factors, contributed to their military strength. The structural crises of the state coupled with the increased impoverishment of the peasantry helped the TPLF to get quasi support of the peasantry. Ecological deterioration, repeated

drought and famine had subjected the Tigrean peasantry into a life of hardship. The Tigrean peasantry interested in the improvement of their impoverished conditions were willing to support the guerrillas. The Tigrean elite exploited the situations by blaming the "Amharas" for the plight of Tigrean peasants. Besides the local populace, TPLF got all the necessary material support from the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front. In May of 1991 the national armed forces disintegrated mainly due to inept leadership of Mengistu and his cliques. This gave the opportunity for the EPDRF/TPLF to emerge as the only formidable and militarily organized force. It became the logical successor of the Ethiopian State.

The victory of EPDRF/EPLF, drastically changed the political landscape of Ethiopia. It created state administrative machinery and a legal system that favors distribution of national resources along ethnic lines. Such policies will foster and exacerbate ethnic differences. It created institutions and policies that encourage ethnicization. It transformed ethnic communities into political entities. It is instructive to learn from the nationalities policies of the Soviet Union that contributed to its collapse. The former Soviet Union created federal states but these boundaries of the state followed ethnic lines. The politics of each state was left to the ethnic cadres who presumably professed Marxism. Movement from one state to another was restricted. These structures which resembles the Kill of today contributed to the speedy break-up of the Soviet Union.

Unlike the EPDRF/TPLF, previous Ethiopian states never fostered ethnicity as its major administrative policies. Contrary to the claim of the EPDRF/TPLF ideologues, Ethiopia is not unique in having heterogeneous ethnic groups. Among the entire member states of the UN only a handful of states can claim ethnic homogeneity. Most of its policy decision created the condition for the imminent bantustanisation of Ethiopia. Ethiopia, is a nation of ethnic mosaic. There is no single ethnic group that inhabit a specific geographic region probably except some districts in Tigray. Most of all ethnic boundaries are not permanent fixtures, they constantly shift historically, continually redefined, constructed, articulated over time by numerous factors ranging from conquest, religious absorption, migrations, to biological blending. Therefore, many individuals have multiple ethnic identities or they have transformed into what may be termed as Ethiopic national identity. Although such transformation may not be at the same level of intensity for all individuals.

It was disregarding this reality that the EPDRF produced a new ethnically based administrative regions called Kille!. Because of the scattered settlements of ethnic communities in parts of the country, such a map cannot demarcate the home of a distinct linguistic, religious or ethnic group. Creating ethnic enclaves opens the doors for negotiating ethnic territories.

Because of EPDRF/TPLF's ethnic policies the state cannot transform its rule into legitimate and hegemonic power. Its structure and fostering ethnic politics will preclude it from developing a moral and intellectual leadership. The fragile nature of its political base will eventually lead to the emergence of absolutism or authoritarianism.

For the EPDRF/TPLF, its ideology of championing Tigrean nationalism and its claim of keeping the Ethiopian state together are two contradictory goals. It equates Ethiopian nationalism with Amhara domination. Numerically the Tigreans constitute a small fraction of the Ethiopian population. Historically they have been the junior partners of the Ethiopian cultural elite. Thus, they lack the legitimacy or the moral authority to carry the mantle of liberating ethnic groups which presumably are under Amhara cultural and political domination.

The politics of ethnicity vacillate between two extreme poles; from extreme populist and progressive force to that of extreme narrow chauvinism. Like the Dergue, the survival of EPDRF/TPLF depends on the effective use of coercive power. Ethnic democracy cannot tolerate diversity. Whoever does not share or belong to the collective past of the ethnic is a stranger. Ethiopianism or Ethiopian nationalism is identified with Amharic speaking segment of the population. To EPDRF/TPLF, Ethiopianism is an embodiment of evil as are the Amharas.

Ethiopia's existence over the millennium coupled with the repeated warding off of foreign intruders, especially those in the 1900 had contributed to the development of a unique Ethiopian psyche which includes collective self pride and the development of pan-Ethiopianism among the diverse ethnic groups. The identity of a nation is rooted in its collective memories embodied in its history which is the saga of its glories, defeats and sufferings. Besides, there are many social threads that are shared by many ethnic groups to dismiss Ethiopian social polity as the home of ethnic strangers. At this point, it is fitting and appropriate to critically review the collective experience of Ethiopians at Adowa to illustrate our points.

THE VICTORY OF ADOWA: THE MAKING OF COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUS OF ETHIOPIAN ISM

Adowa was a rare moment in history that created collective effervescence among the polyethnic Ethiopian polity. The effervescence or collective exaltation affects deeply the structure of a given society. It provided a renewed opportunity for cementing the collective conscious of Ethiopians which was Ethiopianism or Ethiopian nationalism. March 1, 1996 marks the centennial of Adowa. On this memorable occasion, it is important to ponder on the significance of Adowa to the contemporary politics in Ethiopia. Adowa was a victory over racism and colonialism that poised to take over Ethiopia. It was also an affirmation of an unprecedented unity of polyethnic society to defend its common national identity of Ethiopianism that transcended local and ethnic identity. Rallying for the defense of the mother land was not new to Ethiopian polity. But what makes Adowa different from previous wars was the deep scar it created on the European pride of racial superiority and its repercussion on Ethiopian politics. Despite its victory, Ethiopia continued to suffer from the victory of Adowa syndrome. A syndrome that obsessed Europeans to retaliate their humiliation at Adowa. European obsession for revenge manifested by their secret diplomatic protocols that undermined the interest of the Ethiopian state. Some of these policies included treaties such as the 1906 Tripartite agreement that partitioned Ethiopia among the three powers. The Italian invasion of 1935 was thus a distortion of facts that portrayed Ethiopia as a black colonialist that need to be broken into tiny ethnic states. Such a break up of the nation would have made it easier for colonial power to control the country.

Today, the colonial legacy of dismantling the Ethiopian state has passed to ethnonationalists who with a religious fervor are engaged in negating the historical existence of Ethiopia. In their ethnicization policy of the Ethiopian state, ethnonationalists are transforming the polity from civic based to decent based society. Because of the immense historical legacies and the statesmanship of Menilik II, Adowa remains the edifice of the Ethiopian history. Consequently, it has become the basis of discourse and controversy of Ethiopian history, politics and national identity. As a historical note for ethnonationalists, it is useful to briefly review some of the historical highlights of the treaty of Wuchalle and the victory of Adowa to dispel ethnonationalist distorted view of Ethiopian history.

THE GENESIS OF THE TREATY

The famous treaty of Uchalle was signed on May 2, 1889 between Italy and Ethiopia. It was a treaty of trade and friendship signed between two unequal sovereign states. It appears that the signatories of the treaty had different purposes in mind when they signed the treaty. For Ethiopia, the purpose of the treaty was to cultivate the friendship of an European power. Such a friendship was necessary to ward off possible European colonial aggression. Besides, it was common practice among the Ethiopian emperors to create a link with Europeans to facilitate access to their technology. For Italian policy makers, however, the treaty was a tool to achieve their hidden colonial ambition over Ethiopia. Italy as a late comer to the game of the partition of Africa, was aggressively determined to assert its place as a colonial power and as co-equals among the European family of nations. In pursuit of uncolonized country, unclaimed by Europeans, Italy found Ethiopia a suitable prey.

The treaty of Wuchalle remains a scar on Ethiopian history. For the Italians, it paved the way for the

acquisition of their first colony. From Ethiopian perspective, it ceded for the first time parts of Ethiopia to a foreign power. The treaty was a birth certificate to Eritrea.

For Menilik II, probably Wuchalle was a strategy of protecting larger parts of Ethiopia by slicing part of it. It was necessary to amputate the part for safety of the larger body. Most of all, it was a combination of the following factors that compelled Menilik to conclude the treaty of Wuchalle. Some of these factors include; a) vulnerability of the northern front; b) bad economic conditions; c) entrenchment of Italians at the coastal regions; d) unsettled political situations in the south. A brief discussion of these points are in order.

SITUATION IN THE NORTHERN FRONT

Since the early 1900 Ethiopia was a target of the expansionist policy of Ismail Khedive of Egypt. The Khedive wanted to extend his empire from Cairo to Mombasa. He repeatedly sent expeditionary force against Ethiopia. His army, however, was repulsed twice, on September 1875 at Gundet and on March 7, 1876 at Gura. In 1882, Egyptian expansionist policy collapsed when Egypt was occupied by Britain. The Ethiopian state, however, failed to exploit the Egyptian collapse. Emperor Yohannes IV did not pursue his victories of Gura or Gundet nor occupy Bogos which used to be part of Ethiopian territory. With the collapse of Egypt, the Mahdists surrounded the Egyptian garrison in the Sudan. Under an agreement known as Hewett Treaty, the British made a deal with Emperor Yohannes IV to help them rescue the beleaguered Egyptian garrison. In return they promised Ethiopia free transit of goods through the port of Massawa, which was under Egyptian control since 1846. Ethiopia faithfully implemented her part of the agreement. Ethiopia defeated the Mahdist at Kufit on September 5, 1885 and freed the beleaguered Egyptian garrison and escorted it to Massawa. The Hewett Treaty was very costly to Ethiopia. It infuriated the Mahdist, who retaliated by invading Begemeder and burning down the city of Gonder. It is not clear why Emperor Yohannes IV, who never abandoned his claim of Massawa settled for a mere free transit of goods.

ITALIAN COLONIAL Foothold OF THE COASTAL REGIONS

While Ethiopia was executing her part of the Hewett Treaty, the British were stabbing her from the back. Britain made a secret deal with Italy that allowed her to occupy Massawa. Italy's colonial flag was hoisted in Massawa on February 7, 1885. They reinforced their positions with more troops and warships. The Italian army quickly moved to the hinterland from Massawa and occupied Arafali, Arkiko and Sa'ati. Ras Alula the governor of Hamssen repeatedly warned Italy to withdraw from the Ethiopian territory. When his repeated plea was ignored he was forced to attack the Italian army. At the battle of Dogali on January 26, 1887 Alula totally routed the enemy army. Italian colonialism suffered its first defeat. Italy was forced to abandon Sa'ati and Wia, but not her colonial ambitions. Their defeat at Dogli made their determination even stronger than before. "The feeling of national pride and dignity which was so bloodily outraged pushed all Italy, irrespective of party or class, to hold on to Africa: after the sacrifice at Dogali, we could no longer abandon it" (Zagi, 1934:34). The Italian parliament voted and passed a five million lire budget to reinforce their armies at Massawa and reoccupy the places they left.

On April 20, 1888 Emperor Yohannes IV mobilized 80,000 peasant army to stop Italian incursion and dislodge them from Sa'ati. But after parading his force for weeks the emperor abandoned the idea of ousting the Italians. Instead he decided to march south and push out the Mahdists out of Ethiopian territory. Besides his decision to quit fighting the Italians, he also removed Ras Alula from his post of governorship of Mereb Melesh. The decision of the Emperor signaled a weakness in the Ethiopian defense. It encouraged Italy to occupy more territory. Had the Emperor with his superior force fought Italy at Sa'ati his victory could have made Adowa unlikely. On the Metemma front, Emperor Yohannes IV won almost a brilliant victory. However, he was struck by a stray bullet and died at the battle field on March 1889. In spite of the victory, the Ethiopian army failed to pursue the enemy. The death of the Emperor sent a shock wave and resulted in the total collapse of the Ethiopian defense.

ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

The regions of Begemeder and Gonder were devastated by Mahdist attack. In addition to Mahdist plunder, Emperor Yohannes angry at the behavior of his vassal king Takla Haymont scorched the entire region. The Emperor's soldiers were given free reign to loot the peasantry (Ahamd, 1991 :3). Peasants hated both their king and the Emperor who offered nothing except misery. The misery of the peasantry worsened by the spread of rinderpest, introduced to the country for the first time by infected Italian cattle. The introduction of the plague was the first unintended biological warfare. The epidemic spread to many regions. It wiped out about 90 per cent of the country's cattle population. For peasants, the loss of oxen meant a total destruction of the means of production. The consequence was wide spread famine and starvation. For pastoralists the loss of cattle, their principal source of wealth, brought total economic destruction. In addition to these, the country was ravaged by swarms of locusts, caterpillars and other pests. It destroyed crops in many regions and caused the famine of 1888-1892. As if all this was not enough, a cholera epidemic swept the country and killed many people. The effect of these cumulative catastrophes are summed up by professor Rubenson who succinctly wrote, "In a conversation with one of the survivors at Adowa 25 years ago, I asked what they had done after the battle, if they had celebrated, and his reply was: "We had no food." My own assessment is that "the great famine" was a contributing factor if not one of the main reasons why the Italians succeeded in establishing their colony of Eritrea" (1991 :86). Thus at time of the death of Emperor Yohannes IV, the northern front was weakened and the situation can be summed up as total economic and political shamble.

The death of Emperor Yohannes created a succession of struggle among the Tigrean contestants to the crown. Ras Mengesha, the declared heir to Yohannes was challenged by Debebe Araya, Dejazemach Sebehat and others who refused to recognize Ras Mengasha as the heir to Emperor Yohannes IV. In Shewa, Menilik who was confident of his large army declared himself Emperor of Ethiopia. On the other hand, Menilik, was wary of a possible Italian support for Mengasna or other dissidents of Tigris. In the meantime, Italian army firmly strengthened its hold at the coast.

THE SOUTHERN REGIONS:

In the south and south eastern regions, the re-incorporation of autonomous regions was not completed. Besides, the peasantry of these regions were to carry the burnt of heavy taxation, which Menilik in an anticipation of possible war with Italy needed cash to buy arms. Consistent with the traditional Ethiopian politics when the power of the center is threatened, it was a common practice for the peripheries to declare their autonomy or independence. Thus Emperor Menilik had to assess the whole political repercussion of going to war with Italy or signing the treaty of Wuchalle.

THE WUCHALLE TREATY: THE BEGINNING OF THE IMBROGLIO

When the treaty of Wuchalle was about to be signed the Italians had built chains of military forts to defend their control of the Red Sea coasts. They have secured recognition of their territorial possession from the Tigrian nobility, particularly Ras Mengasha. The treaty of Wuchalle of May 1899 legally recognized the defacto Italian occupation of the Red Sea coastal lands. It could have been militarily impossible for Menilik to dislodge the Italians entirely from the coast.

The sources of the notoriety of the Wuchalle treaty, was linked to article 17, the Italian version of which was totally different from that of the Amharic version. The English version of article 17 states that, "His majesty the king of kings of Ethiopia consents to avail himself of the government of His Majesty the king of Italy for all negotiations of affairs which he might have with other powers or governments ". According to the Italian government's reading and interpretation of this article, Emperor Menilik had waived his foreign policy power to the Italian government and had put Ethiopia under Italian protectorate. There is not a single word or phrase in the article that gave

such interpretation and conclusion. To the Italian colonial policy makers the word "consent" in the treaty was enough to claim a position of a protectorate. The Amharic version of the treaty does not have the word "consent". It simply stated: "The government will use the good offices of Italy in its communication with European Governments". The Italian foreign office took diplomatic action to reinforce their version of the interpretation of article 17 of the Wuchalle Treaty. On October 11, 1889, Italy notified European powers of its fraudulent claim of a protectorate over Ethiopia based on article 17 of the Wuchalle Treaty. While Dejazemach Mekonnen was in Rome as Ethiopia's emissary to sign the treaty, the Italian government pressured him to sign an additional clause that stipulated recognition of Italian boundary based on effective occupation. The purpose of the additional clause was to include additionally occupied territories between the signing and ratification of the treaty. To Menilik, it became clear that no amount of concession will stop Italian expansion. Menilik learned about the protectorate designs from his correspondence with European powers.

Menelik exhausted all diplomatic channels to resolve the Wuchalle crises peacefully. Neither the Italian or European government, however, willing to listen to Menelik. Although Menelik knows the significance of diplomacy, he is aware of the European response. Ethiopian sovereignty will be defended only by Ethiopians, not by appeal to European diplomacy. On February 27, 1893, he notified the Italian government that the treaty will be null and void and would cease to be effective on May 1, 1894. He wrote to many European powers:

For it was with much dishonesty that he (Umbeto), pretending friendship, has desired to seize my country.... I should protect the land of my forefathers, I terminate and nullity this treaty. I have not, however, nullified my friendship. Know that I desire no other treaty than this. My kingdom is an independent kingdom and I seek no one's protection (Rubenson: 1991, 394).

Italy's bogus protectorate claim and its refusal to retract its position was the causes of the battle of Adowa. The battle began at dusk on March 1, 1996. Against an overhauling odds Ethiopia scored a resounding victory over Italy.

PREPARATION FOR WAR

On September 17, 1895 Menilik ordered a general mobilization. Compared to Ethiopia, Italy had the material as well as the financial resources. Italy enjoyed an overwhelming technological superiority over Ethiopia. It manufactured its own war armaments including the warships that transported large number of troops. Where as Ethiopia was a medieval state par excellence with no semblance of modernity, Italy was a modern state.

In its quest for colonies, Italy was given moral and diplomatic support from the European colonial powers. Whereas, Ethiopia for many years has been bleeding from a series of successive and devastating warfare and ecological destruction. Besides the internal conflict, Ethiopia was at war defending its territory from expansionist states like Egypt and the Sudan. Ethiopia was a very fragile state that barely began the process of structural transformation into a modern nation state. It did not have a standing army but only peasant militia armed with spears and few rifles. The rifles and the few cannons that were in Menilik's war arsenal was acquired under difficult conditions because of an embargo on arms sale put in place by Europeans to African states.

The battle of Adowa remains famous in the annals of African history against European imperialism and their racial superiority. Its historical significance comparable to Hannibal's crossing of the Alps to punish Rome about 2000 years ago. The protracted and collective struggle of Ethiopian polity against imperialism and the resounding victory at Adowa is an irrefutable historical testimony against Euro-centric and ethnonationalist negation of Ethiopian history.