

THE BATTLE OF ADWA AS A "HISTORIC" EVENT

Donald N. Levine

Department of Sociology, The University of Chicago
Chicago, IL

There are three reasons why we commonly refer to some happening as a historic event: either it occurs for the first time; it has significant consequences; or it is symbolically important. As a *first time event*, Emperor Menilek's cession of the Bogos highlands to Italy in 1889 has been described as historic, as the first time that an Ethiopian ruler ever voluntarily ceded territory to a foreign power. In the same vein, Abebe Bikile's victory in the marathon race in the 1960 Olympics at Rome was historic, as the first time that an Ethiopian won a gold medal.

We also designate events as historic when their *consequences significantly alter* the shape of subsequent *history*. The conversion of King Ezanas to Christianity in the middle of the fourth century was historic in this sense because it redirected Ethiopia's entire cultural development. Similarly, the protection given to disciples of the Prophet Muhammad by the Ethiopian king in the seventh century was a historic event. It led Muhammad to advise his followers to spare Ethiopia from the jihad of Islamic expansion that took place soon after. Likewise, the killing of Emperor Yohannes IV by Sudanese Mahdists in 1889 was historic because it opened the way to the ascendance of an emperor from Shoa.

Even when events have no significant direct consequences, we tend to call them historic when they *symbolize* important national or universal human ideals. The suicide of Emperor Tewodros I had little political consequence--his rule was over, whether or not he was captured alive by the British--but it came to symbolize a sentiment of preferring death over demeaning captivity. The speech of Emperor Haile Selassie I to the League of Nations in 1937 is often called a historic address, even though it did nothing to change the course of history, because it came to symbolize the moral weakness of Western democracies in the face of fascist expansionism and the need for a stronger world organization empowered to provide collective security.

The Battle of Adwa in 1896 qualifies as an historic event in all three senses of the term. As a historic "first," it represented the first time since the beginning of European imperial expansion that a non-white nation had defeated a European power.

The Battle of Adwa in 1896 also had two fateful consequences--the preservation of Ethiopia's independence from Italian colonization, and the confirmation of Italy's control over the part of the country Italy had named Eritrea in 1890. Both consequences had repercussions throughout the twentieth century. Italy experienced her defeat at Adwa as intensely humiliating, and that humiliation became a national trauma which demagogic leaders strove to avenge. It also played no little part in motivating Italy's revanchist adventure in 1935. On the other hand, Italy's continued occupation of Eritrea gave her a convenient springboard from which to launch that invasion. A generation later, tensions stemming from the protracted division of historic Ethiopia into two parts--one under European governance, one under the Ethiopian Crown--culminated in a long civil war, and the eventual secession of Eritrea as an independent state in 1993.

In addition to these actual historic consequences, the Battle of Adwa was historic because it acquired symbolic significance of many kinds. In some instances this symbolism itself came to exert a certain influence on the course of events.

ADWA'S SYMBOLISM IN OTHER COUNTRIES

In Europe, the short-term symbolic significance of the Ethiopian defeat of Italy in 1896 was that it served to initiate a process of rethinking the Europeans' image of Africa and Africans. During the nineteenth century Africa had come to be viewed in increasingly pejorative terms, as a continent of people so primitive they were fit only for European rule. Ethiopia did not escape such swipes, British officers called Ethiopia a nation of savages and Italian officials described it as "a nation of primitive tribesmen led by a barbarian." The British Foreign Office supported the provocative move of ceding Zula to Italy, expecting that Yohannes would protest by attacking them and then easily be punished for imagining that Ethiopians were equal to white men. Kaiser Wilhelm responded to Emperor Menilek's announcement of his accession to the throne with insulting language. The stunning victory at Adwa required Europeans to take Ethiopia and Africa more seriously. It not only initiated a decade of negotiations with European powers in which nine border treaties were signed, it made Europeans begin to reconsider their prejudices against Africans. It came to symbolize a rising awareness among Europeans of African political resources and yearnings and an increasing recognition of indigenous African cultural accomplishments.

In Japan, Ethiopia became appreciated as the first non-Caucasian power to defeat Europeans, an achievement the Japanese were to duplicate in warfare against Russia in 1904. This appreciation led to a sense of affinity that bore fruit for decades thereafter. Ethiopian intellectuals looked to Japan as a model for modernizing their ancient monarchy; the Meiji Constitution served as a model for the Ethiopian Constitution of 1931. When Italy invaded Ethiopia again in the mid-thirties, many Japanese citizens (if not the regime formally) expressed solidarity with Ethiopians, sending shipments of many thousands of swords to help Ethiopians in their plight.

In Africa, the Battle of Adwa inspired other kinds of symbolism. For a number of colonized Africans, the Ethiopian victory at Adwa symbolized the possibility of future emancipation. Black South Africans of the Ethiopian Church came to identify with the Christian kingdom in the Horn, a connection that led South African leader James Dwane to write Menilek for help in caring for the Christian communities of Egypt and Sudan. The victory at Adwa made Ethiopia visible as a beacon of African independence, a position that inspired figures like Nnamdi Azikiwe in Nigeria, Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, and Jomo Kenyatta in Kenya in the early years of the African independence movement, as well as leaders in the West Indies like George Padmore and Marcus Garvey from Jamaica.

ADWA AS A SYMBOL OF ETHIOPIA'S TRADITION OF INDEPENDENCE

Within Ethiopia itself, Adwa symbolized many things, some of which had positive consequences for her development while others did not. Internally as abroad, it symbolized Ethiopia's proud commitment to freedom from foreign domination of the many emblems of Ethiopia's historic independence, Adwa is perhaps the most visible and the most dramatic. The spirit of Ethiopia's defiant protection of their land from outsiders manifests itself in many forms. There is the apocryphal story of Emperor Theodore, who is said to have ordered the boots of some visitors washed before they embarked on a ship back to Europe, saying: "Far more precious than jewels is a single drop of Ethiopian soil." There was the refrain I used to hear young braves chant at festive times, jabbing dula sticks up and down as they danced and sang:

"Min aile Teqel, min ale? Agaren le-sew, agaren le sew, al-setim ale,"

("What did Teqel [Haile Selassie's horse-name] say, what did he say? I won't give my country to foreigners, that's what he said.")

With respect to Menilek's reputation, it partly overcame the resentments he had stirred up by ceding Bogos to Italy in exchange for help against his competitors in Tigray,

As a historic assertion of Ethiopia's independence, Adwa also reverberated with memories of Ethiopia's experience as a long-lived independent polity, its symbolism thereby encompassed a layer of meaning that alluded to the historic depth of the Ethiopian nation. It revived memories of earlier achievements and yearnings,

At the same time, Adwa may have served to give Ethiopians a false sense of confidence about their position in the modern world. In showing themselves and the world that they could defeat a European invader with their own resources, the 1896 campaign may have led them to think that their traditional resources could be adequate in an era in which war would be waged with tanks and airplanes. It gave encouragement to isolationist and conservative strains that were deeply rooted in Ethiopian culture, strengthening the hand of those who would strive to keep Ethiopia from adopting techniques imported from the modern West, resistances with which both Menilek and Ras Tafari Haile Selassie would have to contend.

ADWA AS A SYMBOL OF MULTIETHNIC COOPERATION

The symbolism of multiethnic collaboration evoked by the Battle of Adwa has been less visible than its role in symbolizing Ethiopia's tradition of independence. Yet in some ways the former was the most remarkable and meaningful aspect of the entire episode. Although members of different ethnic, religious, and regional groups had been interacting regularly in Ethiopia for more than 2,000 years through trading, intermarriage, common ritual observances, pilgrimages, and political competition from the perspective of Ethiopian history, Adwa offers the most dramatic instance of multiethnic collaboration before the 20th century. This is because it gave expression to a great outpouring of national patriotism, foreshadowing the great patriotic struggles of 1935-41. Even from the perspective of modern world history, Adwa represented a relatively rare struggle for national independence waged by a coalition of diverse ethnic groups.

Twenty-five years earlier, Adwa had been the scene of a protracted battle between Dejazmatch Kasa, who would become Emperor Yohannes IV, and the reigning emperor, Tekla-Giyorgis II, formerly Wag Shum Gobeze. What the 1871 Battle of Adwa symbolized was the age-old struggle among different regional and ethnic groups for dominance. Yohannes, like Tewodros II before him, came to the throne determined to reunify the empire, which had been fragmented following the invasion of Ahmad Gragn and subsequent divisive developments. Although Yohannes did not live to see it, the 1896 Battle of Adwa was a tribute to his vision and to the thoughtfulness and determination with which he sought to unify Ethiopia while respecting the local jurisdiction of regional kings and lords so long as they remained faithful to the national crown.

Those who would deny Ethiopia's long existence as a multiethnic society must be embarrassed by the facts of the Adwa experience. If the empire consisted of nothing but a congeries of separate tribal and regional groups, how then account for the courageous collaboration of 100,000 troops from dozens of ethnic groups from all parts of the country? How then explain the spirited national patriotism of such diverse leaders as Ras Alula, Ras Mengesha, and Ras Sibhat of Tigray, Dejazmatch Bahta of Akale Guzai, Wag Shum Guangul of Lasta, Ras Mikael of Wallo, Negus Takla-Haymanot of Gojjam, Ras Gobena and Dejazmatch Balcha of the Mecha Oromo, Ras Wele of the Yeju Oromo, Fitawrari Tekla of Wollega, Ras Makonnen of Harar, as well as Ras Gebeyehu (who died fighting at Adwa) and Ras Abate of Shoa? Of course, deeply rooted antagonisms and persistent rivalries among different factions beset Ethiopia throughout the 19th century. And yet, as historian Sven Rubenson has written, "at the crucial moment, Menilek commanded the loyalty of every important chief in the country." The battle of Adwa became and

remains the most outstanding symbols of what, a half-century later, a British colonel would describe as the "mysterious magnetism" that holds Ethiopia together

