

Ethiopia: A Lesson in History

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[Reprinted 29 years later, for having stated that only an emerging Amara nationalism could check TPLF and OLF fascism](#)

By Dr. Araya D. Negash and Dr. Afrasa M. Zamanel

In his sour and vile commentary (Ethiopian Review, August 1991) projecting his parochialism and ethnocentric resonances, Ato G.E. Gorfu displayed his difficulty in distinguishing between fact and fantasy. He accused Menelik and the Shoans of treason and deceit. Surely, if he is a historian even without the credentials and the gift of masterfully narrating his subject as does Dr. Getachew Mekasha, one might forgive him. However, not only is his essay malicious but every word he wrote is untrue. Hence our urge as students of Ethiopian history, to wield our pens in dissent, both to delineate the “truth” in public interest and as a duty to our conscience. And if we may add, the remains of some seven of our ancestors and their brothers from Borana, Gojam, Menz, and Selale lie beneath the arid earth of Adowa, having fallen defending the forbearers of Ethiopia’s present tormentors. In the veins of one of us also flows abundant patriotic Tigrean blood, for that matter.

A Misplaced Assault on Menelik

Gorfu portrays Menelik as a villain who did everything for sordid motives. He implicates him in the assassination of Emperor Yohannes and charges him for trading Bahr Midir (Eritrea) in exchange for arms. He is entitled to his views. But judgment requires rectitude and a critical faculty of discernment. It is dangerously easy to look for and discover links between otherwise isolated incidents and one’s own figments of hostile imagination if one is struggling to establish or support a theory in which one has more than a passing interest. Should Gorfu, with the advantage of hindsight attack Menelik for crimes of treason, it is merely a misplaced assault that rather befits the Tigrean king, Yohannes. Was it not Yohannes who found it expedient to serve the enemy flag for gadgets and gold when Britain invaded Ethiopia and breached the nation’s sovereignty for the first time? Was it not his venality and humiliating servility that prompted him to spearhead the British invasion? Did he not give the British his blessings when they looted Ethiopia’s invaluable relics and emptied the national treasury? Above all, did he not facilitate the untimely demise of Tewodros, the valorous emperor who chose to defiantly turn his gun on himself rather than surrender to the enemy?

Menelik was a magnanimous monarch who led a consensus government. His cabinet included gallant men such as Balcha, Gobena, Habte-Giorgis, Mekonnen, Mulugeta, and his wife Taitu, to name but a few of the proud and patriotic mortals who could not be accused of treason. Wheeling and dealing is rather in character with the Tigrians whom Gorfu implicitly adores, at least judging by their own description of themselves. Without sounding irreverent to Tigrinya-speakers, the literal meaning of the word “Tigre” is after all “trader.”

Casting Aspersions on Amaras

However much Gorfu dislikes him, it was Menelik who having trounced Italian aggressors and their Tigre-speaking mercenaries at the battle of Adowa, that guaranteed Tigray’s freedom. In falsely accusing Menelik of treason, Gorfu is enviously casting aspersions on Shoans perhaps to redeem the contemptible mercenaries of the North.

Menelik's alleged submission to Yohannes is a frank delusion too. The latter, an ex-bandit who had emerged emperor by brute force, was disposed to fits of jealousy and suspicion. He had never, for instance, entrusted a single non-Tigrean to high office. He saw potential enemies even among the rank and file of his own long-serving army. A case in point is the fear Alula's victory at Dogali evoked. Yohannes replaced the legendary commander with his own cousin. Yet, eager to test a solo triumph and outdo Alula, he marched towards the remaining Italian forces. But the sheer size and force of the Italian force prompted the Emperor's unceremonious retreat. Thus, Italy occupied the coastal province unchallenged.

Instead, he set out to harass his loyal subjects whom he conveniently accused of "defiance". Emboldened by the arms he received from the British for his errand duties, Yohannes unleashed terror by plundering and burning Begemdir, Gojam and Wollo in 1988. He personally tortured and blinded Wollo's king by plunging a red-hot knife in his eyes. The following dirge of aggrieved men and women from Gojam just about sums up the callous conduct of the supposedly pious guardian of his country:

ጎጃም ተቃጠለ፣ ከአባይ እስከ አባይ

ትግሬ ቅጠል ዩዞ ሊያጠፋው ነው ወይ?

በቅዱስ ሚኪያኤል በጋሻ ጃግሬዎ፣

በጽዮን እመቤት በልበ ቤዛዎ፣

ጎጃምን ይማሩት ፈሪም አንልዎ”።

(The abovementioned is a poetic plea for mercy as the Emperor Yohannes's famished Tigre troops were ruthlessly plundering the region and massacring tens of thousands of innocent men and women in Gojam.)

"Pious", he was. But for no other reasons than his unrelenting prayers even while he was in his killing fields and the missionary zeal with which he aspired to convert the "infidels", the Jews and Muslims, whom he rendered landless by decree: "ሰማይ አምድ የብሉን፣ ወደ እስላማይ መሬት የብሉን ". Roughly, meaning: 'As the sky is bereft of pillars, so is a Muslim devoid of land'.

He then moved southwards to also lay Shoa waste. But his advances were halted by the forces of Beshah Aboye, Menelik's rather junior army officer. Against the better judgment of his brilliant advisers (Mekonnen, Habte Giorgis, and Balcha) who had opted to rudely rebuff the challenge, Menelik went along with the Archbishop's intervention to arbitrate. The negotiated settlement between Menelik and the bullying Yohannes hence averted a bloody civil war. It was with the following well-chosen reconciliatory phrase that Menelik concluded the treaty with Yohannes with these magnanimous words: 'ሲታጠቡ ከክንድ፣ ሲታረቁ ከሆድ". Roughly translated, 'as a thorough hand wash should begin from the elbow, a genuine reconciliation must emanate from the bottom of the heart'.

Without any domestic excuses available to him now, Yohannes could no longer defer the external challenges he had hitherto evaded. Abandoning the hope of driving the Italians out, he accepted their incursions in Eritrea as *fait accompli*. Instead, he sought victory against the Mahdists whom he had considered an easy prey. As fate would have it, he was made to take his last breath in the hands of the Dervish, the “infidels” that he had hoped to beat.

Menelik Inherited Occupied Eritrea

So, Menelik in effect had the misfortune of inheriting an occupied Eritrea which Yohannes had relinquished to Italy lacking the nerve to pursue Alula’s victory at Dogali. At Adowa, Menelik competently performed the homework his predecessor had not even dared to venture. He devastated the Italian army and its Tigrean Shumbash and Buluqbash contingent (well over 300,000 strong), frustrating the enemy’s grand design of colonizing the rest of Ethiopia.

A man of noble character, Menelik was devoid of the nepotistic and ethnocentric dispositions of the ‘pious’ emperor. Most of Menelik’s illustriously brave commanders, Balcha, Gebeyehu, Gobenna, Habte, and Mekonnen, all came to the highest positions on merit. Not only were they not related to him, but they were men from three distinct linguistic groups. Adowa endeared Menelik in both liberated Tigray and occupied Eritrea. The high frequency of his name among the forbearers of the generation that today vilifies him, certainly could not have been a reflection of a hostile sentiment.

If the ungrateful lot lampoon Menelik for not having purged Eritrea of its white masters, the allegation is unfounded. For not only did Britain and France threaten to attack Menelik if he did not stop at Adowa, but they had already made incursions on Ethiopia’s southern regions. Replenishing the supply of food in arid Tigray and combating epidemics which had already left the army enfeebled, were the other formidable problems which stood in Menelik’s way to reclaim the occupied coastal province. Why accountability is shifted from the ‘culprit’ to the blameless king amply reveals the fine sense of justice of the likes of Gorfu.

A Quantum Leap into Ethnology

Gorfu then makes a quantum leap into ethnology, deriding Mengistu and Fisseha Desta’s regime as “Shoan” in direct reference to the alleged trade of Felashas for money. However, Fisseha Desta is a Tigre, and whatever else Mengistu may well be, he is not a Shoan either. At any rate, brutality, betrayal, cowardice, and venality have no nationality, and neither have nobility of spirit and courage. The fact that the region that had the dubious distinction of producing Africa’s most ruthless mercenaries also bred Alula Aba Nega, Lorenzo Tazaz, and Zerai Deres, to mention only a few patriots who died defending Ethiopia, proves the point.

Like the current Ethiopian “rulers”, the learned commentator is as well unleashing insult against “Shoans”, a veiled term to mean Amhara. It is an irony of fate that Tigreans who refer to Amharas as “adgi” (donkeys) and other Ethiopians as “baria” (slaves), are today heard championing equality and fraternity. Judgment is reserved to the Ethiopian people.

Shoans certainly differ from Gorfu’s heroes. They are like great oaks who have fought a long and testing battle for the unity, instead of the fragmentation of their country. Like their kins inhabiting the heart of Ethiopia and beyond, the fiercely independent lot have resisted and conquered the storms of enemies from within and out. They have bowed out never broken

even before seemingly insurmountable forces. By subordinating their ethnic interest to that of Ethiopia, Amharas have singularly borne untold suffering and humiliation. Over the last 17 years, thousands of peasant Amharas in the South have been brutally murdered by the Derg. Only two years ago, the Eritrean Liberation Front in conjunction with its instruments in Wollega, burned alive over 300 fugitive Amhara peasants in a resettlement camp for being native Amharas. Having subdued their legitimate indignation, Amharas still refused to be seen to be drawn in an ethnic strife.

The flirtation of the OLF with the TPLF is profoundly humiliating for those Ethiopians who by blood and nurture consider Oromo culture their own. The people of Balcha and Abdisa Aga have never been known to betray their country.

Today, the Tigrean oligarchy calling itself EPRDF to elude the gullible Westerners and appease its foreign pay-masters, is waging a relentless campaign of malice to divide Ethiopians along ethnic lines. A third of the nation's population, the Amharas, are objects of media insults. Not surprisingly, the majority of Ethiopians have rejected the call for ethnic strife. True, as a result of EPRDF-incited anti-Amhara propaganda many unarmed peasants have been killed and violently evicted from their ancestral homes in the South.

Glory be to all brave Ethiopians who transcend vile ethnocentrism and fight it tooth and nail, despite its dignified status as an official ideology of the EPRDF, more correctly the TPLF. Playing one group against another is perfectly within the scheme of things of the foreign-sponsored EPRDF.

However much we wish to differ, many believe that Amhara liberalism will doom itself to impotence until such time as it acknowledges itself to be Amhara and nationalist. Historically, Amhara liberalism was a richer and more radical tradition than is admitted by the current tribal potentates in Addis Ababa. We trust, however, that the indomitable Amhara spirit would stand above the temptation of using national sentiment to punish the traitors and their equally contemptible accomplices by tarring them with the same brush in revenge.

Dr. Araya D. Negash is an Associate Professor of Aeronautic Engineering, Maarsen, The Netherlands. Dr. Afrasa M. Zamanel is an Anthropologist, London, Great Britain.

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