
Introduction

Few events in the modern history of Ethiopia have had such a defining influence on future developments in the country as its victory over Italy on 1 March 1896. Commemoration of this landmark event has taken place since its seventh year. Its centenary was occasion for a series of celebratory events both inside the country and outside, including a conference organized in Piacenza by the veteran anti-Fascist Italian historian, Angelo del Boca. The victory was significant not only for Ethiopia but also for the black world as a whole, injecting new spirit and drive into the separatist religious movement known as Ethiopianism and inspiring the pan-African movement in North America and the Caribbean. As the OAU/AU is celebrating its Golden Jubilee this year, these pan-African reverberations of Adwa have come to assume great contemporary relevance. Indeed the climactic celebration on 25 May, ‘Africa Day’, was preceded by a series of international conferences exploring the genesis and trajectory of pan-Africanism and its pertinence for the much-heralded ‘African Renaissance’ as well as the challenge of updating the eight-volume UNESCO *General History of Africa*.

Thus, Raymond Jonas’s elegant account of the Battle of Adwa, or, as he symbolically dubs it, ‘the battle for Africa’, could not have come at a better

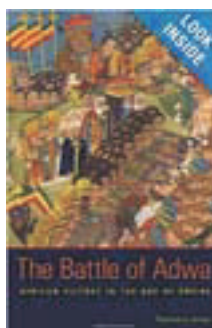
Adwa: ‘A Milestone in the Creation of Modern Ethiopia’

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The Battle of Adwa: African Victory in the Age of Empire by Raymond Jonas

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time. It is a book written after painstaking research and with considerable sensitivity to the drama of the encounter. Jonas considers Adwa a ‘signal moment’ not only for Ethiopia but also for the world at large, of greater import in defining the twentieth century than the Japanese victory over Russia in 1905 and the American victory over Spain in 1898. The book was written, so the author emphasizes, ‘not to explain away the exception of Adwa but to embrace it’ (p. 6). Adwa was not so much an anomaly in the era of partition as a trend-setter of the liberation of Africa that was to come some half a century later.



The Setting

The nineteenth century was characterized by the vigorous expansion of European influence in Africa, symbolized by the trinity of the consul, the merchant and the missionary. Ethiopia was no exception. The standard tools for that penetration were what were somewhat deceptively dubbed as treaties of commerce and friendship. It soon became quite evident, however, that the accent was more on the commerce than on the friendship. The confrontation between Ethiopia and Italy, which culminated in the Battle of Adwa, was traceable to one such treaty, the Treaty of Wechale, signed by the Ethiopian emperor Menilek II (r. 1889-

1913) and the Italian envoy Count Pietro Antonelli on 2 May 1889. The author rightly points out that Article 17 of that treaty, which had conflicting meanings in the Amharic and Italian versions was at the root of the disagreement that ultimately led to the Battle of Adwa. The issue of whether the discrepancy was a canny stratagem of the Italian envoy Antonelli or whether he did it in good faith was the subject of a celebrated debate in the 1960s in the *Journal of African History* between the Swedish historian Sven Rubenson and the Italian scholar Carlo Giglio. The author does not seem to be at all aware of this grand debate but tends to suggest that both Menilek and his de facto foreign minister Ras Makonnen were complicit to the Italian ploy. The author would also have done well to consult arguably the most authoritative reconstruction of the diplomatic history of Ethiopia preceding the Battle of Adwa, i.e. Richard Caulk’s *Between the Jaws of Hyenas*.

Like many others who have written about the Wechale treaty, he is oblivious of Article III, which had defined the boundary between Ethiopia and the soon to be declared Italian colony of Eritrea. This had put a good proportion of the Eritrean highlands under Menilek’s jurisdiction and had even guaranteed the medieval monastery of Debre Bizen, on the edge of the escarpment, as an Ethiopian enclave. It was the steady Italian encroachment on Ethiopian territory, in clear violation of this article,

that had induced Menilek's final mobilization of the Ethiopian forces in September 1895. As the historic edict, which the author would have done well to reproduce at some length rather than just have passing references to it, puts it graphically: 'the enemy has been eating into our territory like a mole'.

Another fateful backdrop of the Adwa confrontation is what historians have come to call the Maqdala complex. This is a reference to the Battle of Maqdala (1868), when a mammoth British expeditionary force marched deep inside Ethiopian territory and chastised the Ethiopian emperor Tewodros II (r. 1855-1868), who had dared to hold hostage a number of Europeans, including two British envoys. The emperor denied the British the ultimate satisfaction of dragging him to England in chains by committing suicide. But the ease with which they had executed their rescue mission had given other Europeans a false sense of superiority over Ethiopian arms.

The Italians fell prey to this illusion and paid dearly for it. Their avid exertions to occupy Ethiopia began in earnest with the occupation – with British collusion – of the Red Sea port of Massawa in 1885. Ethiopia was then ruled by Tewodros's successor, Emperor Yohannes IV (r. 1872-1889), who started his political career as Bezbez Kasa (a name which the author erroneously assigns to Tewodros: p. 15). The task of checking Italian incursions into the Ethiopian highlands fell to Yohannes's governor of the maritime province, Ras Alula. Not even his rout of their expeditionary force in January 1887 at the Battle of Dogali could temper the Italian bravado. The death of Yohannes in 1889 in a battle with the Sudanese Mahdists cleared the way for their occupation of a good chunk of the highlands, which they christened Eritrea in January 1890.

The successes that Italian forces, commanded by General Oreste Baratieri, registered in late 1894 and early 1895 (at Koatit and Sanafe, respectively, both inside Eritrea), when they inflicted a crushing defeat on the forces of Ras Mangasha Yohannes, hereditary ruler of Tegray, emboldened them to go even deeper into Ethiopian territory. The author is thus right on the mark when he writes: '... Baratieri's victories of late 1894 and early 1895 lay the foundation for his defeat at Adwa' (p. 105). For that was what finally prompted the almost incredulously patient Emperor Menilek to issue the famous call to arms.

How was it possible for an African ruler to inflict such a decisive defeat on a European force? What were the factors that helped Menilek achieve the most important military victory in modern Ethiopian history? Jonas points to a number of them, including the fruitful partnership with his Swiss advisor, Alfred Ilg, who served as his dependable barometer to the political pressures of Europe, and the steadfast support, not to say goading, of his powerful spouse, Taytu. Most important,

however, were the resources that he was able to bring under his control thanks to his territorial expansion in the two decades preceding Adwa. The author erroneously gives pride of place to the emperor's Walayta campaign of 1894. Indeed, his focus on that campaign borders on the obsessive (pp. 3, 50, 149). To begin with, the Walayta were neither Muslim nor pastoralist. Secondly, the Walayta campaign may have provided food to Menilek's famished soldiers and plenty of slaves to his commanders. But, it did little to augment his stockpile of modern arms, which was what proved decisive in the final encounter with the Italians. Those arms were acquired thanks to the resources that he could muster and the commercial outlets he controlled in the course of his earlier campaigns. His incorporation of the resource-rich southwestern provinces in the first half of the 1880s represented the former; the conquest of Harar in 1887 the latter.

The Encounter

The Battle of Adwa was actually a fairly long campaign. In the longer durée, it can be traced back to the rebellion of the Italians' erstwhile loyal vassal, Bahta Hagos of Akkala Guzay, in 1894. That triggered the above series of military confrontations between the Italians and Ras Mangasha Yohannes. Those confrontations, resulting in the steady retreat of Mangasha to the south and Italian penetration deep inside Ethiopia, provoked Menilek's famous edict of mobilization in 1895. In the shorter durée, the campaign began with the mobilization in September 1895 and ended with the climactic battle on 1 March 1896. By virtue of its duration and the distance traversed by Menilek's troops, the author likens it to Napoleon's Russian campaign. But such apparent similarities could only be fortuitous. The two campaigns were fundamentally different. Napoleon was waging a war of conquest. The Ethiopians were fighting to defend their sovereignty and independence. The Russo-Japanese war, to which the Adwa campaign could be compared much more instructively, actually lasted 18 months.¹

There were three landmark events in the Adwa campaign: the Battle of Amba Alage, the siege of Maqale, and the final Battle of Adwa. At Amba Alage, on 7 December 1895, the Italians paid the price for the bravado with which they had surged into the Ethiopian interior, as the vanguard column of their invading force was practically wiped out; their commander, Major Pietro Toselli, was among those killed. Jonas gives us a masterly account of the battle but fails to even mention the person with whom that battle is closely identified in the literature: Fitawrari Gabbayahu Gora, commander of Menilek's vanguard force.² Indeed, Gabbayahu was practically disowned by the commander-in-chief of Ethiopian forces, Ras Makonnen, for his daredevil act of storming the apparently impregnable fortress where Toselli had entrenched himself.

The siege of Maqale (1-20 January 1896) proved as protracted as Amba

Alage – and indeed, for that matter, Adwa – was brief. Maqale demonstrated the efficacy of the Italian military strategy of defending fortified positions rather than engaging in open combat. Diplomatic overtures by Makonnen to the Italian commander of the fort, Major Giuseppe Galliano, were in vain. Assaults by Ethiopian forces on the fort of Enda Iyasus, especially by Makonnen's Harari forces, also proved disastrous. Ultimately, the Ethiopians were able to dislodge the Italians from their fortified position not by force of arms but by the stratagem of denying them access to the springs outside the fort. Exhausted and thirsty, the Italians had no option but to surrender. That was a great relief not only to the Italians but also to Menilek, who 'needed to keep his army in motion or lose it to hunger and attrition' (p. 143).

Adwa was a masterpiece in Ethiopian military maneuvering. Menilek seems to have learnt his lesson from Maqale. Rather than engage the Italians in any of the string of forts that they had erected all the way to the Eritrean border, he skirted these forts, particularly their strongest one at Addigrat. Instead, his forces advanced towards the Eritrean border, creating anxiety among the Italian forces of being hemmed in inside Ethiopian territory and having their supply lines cut off. It was this apprehension, as well as a highly critical telegram from Rome about his conduct of the campaign, that moved Baratieri to abandon the policy of strategic retreat to Eritrea that he had been considering and march west to meet Menilek's army. Contrary to Jonas's assertion that 'there was no conclusive evidence to suggest that the Ethiopians had news of the Italian advance' (p. 178), Menilek was well prepared for Baratieri's advancing columns, thanks to the intelligence supplied him by the Eritrean double agent, Basha Aw'alom. Aw'alom's feat has been celebrated with a book and a statue in Adwa honoring him for his great contribution to the Ethiopian victory.

Jonas draws fascinating portraits of the Italian generals who were in command at Adwa – Albertone, Arimondi, Baratieri and Dabormida. He also gives us a masterly account of the tensions that permeated their relations, particularly those between General Arimondi and General Baratieri. At the root of the Italian debacle was the splitting of the columns led by Dabormida and Albertone in the early stages of the engagement. Isolated and with no hope of reinforcements, Albertone's brigade bore the full fury of the Ethiopian forces. By 9:30 am, his brigade was in total disarray and he himself had become the first high prize prisoner. The Battle of Adwa was effectively over.

What remained thereafter were mopping operations and hot pursuit of the retreating Italian forces. This is recounted in graphic and sometimes gruesome detail. Although Menilek did not heed Ras Alula's advice to cut the Italians' line of retreat by sending the

Oromo cavalry, the rout was quite comprehensive. The pursuing Ethiopian troops targeted officers, only 258 of the original 610 managing to escape alive. The punishment meted out to the hapless included castration, although Menilek had reportedly admonished his troops: 'Bring me the man, not his testicles'! The author perhaps belabours the issue, even if he succeeds in showing that it was not a uniquely Ethiopian phenomenon by drawing on experiences from European history. 'The physical emasculation inflicted upon Italian soldiers,' he concludes even more convincingly, 'paled in comparison with the political emasculation of Ethiopia that Italian rule would have entailed' (p. 228). Nonetheless, the cutting of the limbs of the Eritrean askaris, presumably on the strong insistence of Ras Mangasha Yohannes of Tegray, remained a sore point in the whole saga of the vindication of Ethiopia's independence.

The author provides us detailed – perhaps too detailed – accounts of the fate of the Italian prisoners, tracing their itineraries from the moment of their capture to their final liberation in late 1896. This is probably a result of the abundance of sources on the subject, including diaries and memoirs by the prisoners themselves. There were fantastic stories about their fate, one of them dying a hero's death and living to tell it! The problem is that such a treatment ends up giving not only the prisoners but also their custodians more limelight than they would otherwise deserve. Thus, Afa Negus Nasibu Masqalo, who happened to be the custodian of one of the more prolific prisoners, Lieutenant Gherardo Pantano, is given more coverage than his role warranted. The eventual repatriation of the prisoners, which was the subject of an annex to the main peace treaty, is also given pride of place over the treaty itself which guaranteed the country's independence in unequivocal fashion.

The Reverberations

Once the battle was over, the world had to come to grips with the anomaly of an African nation inflicting such a decisive defeat over a European colonial power. A common tendency was to portray the event as 'an Italian misfortune' rather than demonstration of 'Ethiopian military prowess' – a line adopted by the Atlanta Constitution, which only a day before had been ridiculing the 'Back to Africa' movement espoused by some three hundred African-Americans. Others explained away the anomaly by turning Ethiopians into Caucasoids, transmogrifying in the process the far from Caucasoid features of the victorious Menilek! The emperor and his equally remarkable spouse, Taytu, indeed join the celebrity pantheon. The Italian Diaspora in America, which was swelling with the influx of young Italians wishing to evade military call up, was less charitable, calling for revenge.

The reaction where it mattered most – Africa and the African Diaspora – was initially rather muted. This changed

soon, however, with the allure that Adwa gave to the already well-established independent ‘Ethiopianist’ churches in Southern Africa and the Americas. An even more dramatic engagement of the African Diaspora with Ethiopia began with the arrival of the Haitian Benito Sylvain in Ethiopia in early 1897 in the first of the four voyages he was to make to the country. It was perhaps no accident that he came from the first black nation that had defied white domination earlier on in the century. His dialogue with Menilek culminated in his representing Ethiopia at the First Pan-African Congress in 1900. He was followed by another African-Caribbean, Joseph Vitalien, who was to have a more enduring relationship with Emperor Menilek as both his physician and his acquisition of a railway concession on behalf of the French government – concession that was to give Ethiopia its commercial lifeline to the sea.

The author comes from a European history background and is eminently conversant with European sources. That remains his forte. An additional merit of the book is its exceptionally rich and apposite illustration, even if the portrait on p. 41 is of a Fitawrari Alula rather than his redoubtable namesake, Ras Alula. Unfortunately, however, having been written by someone who is relatively new to Ethiopian history and culture, the text is replete with historical, geographical and cultural inaccuracies – inaccuracies that could easily have been averted had the manuscript had the benefit of being read by an Ethiopian or Ethiopianist historian before publication. The author’s obsession with Walayta has already been alluded to above. In addition, Empress Taytu’s light complexion is attributed to her ‘Oromo “Arab” descent’ (p. 20), whatever that jumble might mean. Egyptian forces were in actual fact

checked by Ethiopians at Gundet (1875) and Gura (1876), not at Gura and Sahati (1883) (p. 35). The rendering of the Hewett Treaty of 1884 that was supposed to have ended the Ethio-Egyptian wars also leaves a lot to be desired, giving undue prominence, among other things, to the role of a hitherto unknown Mason in the negotiations. Yohannes did not send his general Alula to subdue Gojjam in 1888 (p. 72); he went there himself. Harar is actually over 300 miles, not 200 miles, east of Addis (p. 74). January 6/7 marks Ethiopian Christmas, not Epiphany (p. 138). ‘Finfinne’, we are also told, ‘was once the name for the Addis region as a whole’ – not one of the Oromo villages such as Gulele, Bole, etc.

These are errors that a future edition will hopefully rectify. Until then, we remain indebted to the author for giving us a masterly account of one of the most dramatic moments in the modern history

of Africa – an account that ‘seeks not to explain away the exception of Adwa but to embrace it’ (p. 6). The accent here is clearly on African sovereignty. For Adwa indeed heralded the beginning of the end of European domination and the era of African independence and dignity.

- Notes**

 1. See my ‘The Italo-Ethiopian War of 1895-96 and the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05: A Comparative Essay’, in Bahru Zewde, 2008, *Society, State and History: Selected Essays*, Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press.
 2. For Fitawrari Gabbayahu, see the entry in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, Volume 2, 2005, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

