

Ethnocentrism Masqueraded as “Intellectual Inquiry”

By Girma Bekele

“The empire Menelik and Haile Selassie constructed was built on sand, without a solid foundation; hence it was always in a trend of progressive decomposition. Is a Shewan-Amhara Ethiopian Empire viable? History answers this in the negative. The Ankoberite insanity will be tempered by the solidarity of the oppressed masses in New Ethiopia and the working unity of New Ethiopia and independent Eritrea¹.”

Jordan Gebre-Medhin, “On the 1993 Referendum in Eritrea”, Ethiopian Review, April 1993.

“These (Mahal Sefaris) are a group of individuals easily identifiable coming mostly from one small area in central Ethiopia along with opportunists from other parts of Ethiopia. They are our greatest obstacles to us all from achieving political and economic advancement. We are far more powerful and numerous than the mehal safaris. We can excise them from power, or bottle them up in their own area of kingdom and see to it that they do not any more use us to promote their hold on economic and political power in Ethiopia².”

Tecola Hagos, “Paradigm of Poverty and Humanism: Understanding Ethiopian Modernity”, July 24, 2003 Washington DC, USA.

The first quotation is from EPLF activist (Eritrean national) and one time Editor of Ethiopian Commentator, a magazine devoted to Amhara bashing. His solution to the “Ankoberite insanity” was the solidarity of EPLF/TPLF to eliminate the Shewan-Amhara. By “New Ethiopia” he meant the ethnically divided and fractured county, according to EPLF/TPLF political program, whereas “independent Eritrea” remains a unified country where there is no room for ethnic or linguistic division. Tecola Hagos, the subject of this article, picks up where Jordan left off and prescribes **“The Final Solution”** to the Shoan-Amhara problem. The targets of both individuals are Menelik, Shoan Amharas, by extension King Sahle-Selassie, Emperors Tewodros, Haile Selassie and the ethnic group they are allegedly identified with.

The purpose of this article is to underscore the real motives for the verbal assault on emperors, Tewodros, Menelik, Haile Selassie and others in a website devoted to Amhara-

¹ Jordan Gebre-Medhin, “On the 1993 Referendum in Eritrea”, Ethiopian Review, April 1993.

² - Tecola Hagos, “Paradigm of Poverty and Humanism: Understanding Ethiopian Modernity”, July 24, 2003 Washington DC, USA.

bashing. It is not an attempt at comprehensive discussion of Menelik, who is the main target of defamation and relentless attack, or his legacy and why he “abandoned” Eritrea, as his critics puts it. Those aspects of Menelik’s achievements and shortcomings have been addressed and put to rest by critical thinking and sober scholars such as professors Getatchew Haile, Harold Marcus, Shumet Sishagne, Theodore Vestal, Sven Rubenson, Donald Levin, Bahru Zewde and Drs. Paulos Milikias, Mesfin Araya, Daniel Kendie, Tsegaye Tegenu, etc. These individuals and the historians Aleqa Atsme Giorgis, Tsehafa Tezaz Gebre Selassie, Tekle-Tsadik Mekuria, and lately Prof. Messay Kebede, Dr. Tseggai Mebrahtu, most of whom lived at different times, have demonstrated Menelik’s challenge to external aggression, his resounding victory at Adwa and the reasons for not ejecting Italians out of Eritrea at the conclusion of the war.

In order to acquaint the reader with the reason that prompted this long article, we would reproduce some of Tecola’s outlandish and vulgar statements filled with hatred hereafter. We start with Sahle-Selassie of Shoa whom Tecola refers to as “The Slave Master”. Quoting from the diaries of British missionaries, Isenberg and Krapf, Tecola states, “Shale Selassie was the first and only full-fledged slave trader king in Ethiopian history.” As the Ethiopian saying goes, ‘Ye ayit miskir dimbit.’ The reference points, Isenberg and Krapf, according to Tecola, “were well educated Europeans not given to exaggerations.” They were in fact racists who despised everything about Ethiopia – including the Orthodox religious practices, religious books and way of life. They were confined to a small area of Ethiopia and had limited knowledge of the country and the leaders in various parts of Ethiopia. The two missionaries had scant understanding of Ethiopian society of the early 1800 and were in no position to make a conclusive statement about Sahle Selassie and the institution of slavery in Ethiopia which was not only unique to Shewa as has been implied by Tecola. In fact, the main preoccupation of Isenberg and Krapf was the teaching of Protestant doctrine and converting Ethiopians into their religion. Furthermore, what they identified as “slaves” were prisoners of war and captives brought to the Sahle Selassie’s court after one of his expedition against Oromos who failed to pay tribute.

No one can be sure but only Tecola knows whether he has read **Journals of the Rev. Messers. Isenberg and Krapf** and understood the contents or simply relied on a specific paragraph that mentioned about slavery to discredit and distort Sahle Selassie’s record. If indeed Tecola read the Journals, one wonders about his intention for not mentioning the following observation of Isenberg about King Sahle Selassie:

“ I must make some remarks respecting the behavior of the King when he is marching. He is as active in the field as at home. Sitting on his mule, he speaks with his officers and other persons, and receives the Governor arriving from Shoa or the Galla tribes, who, on seeing the King, fall down on their faces, as well as their troops. He asks in a friendly way, ‘How do you do?’ after which the chieftain comes near, walks by the side of the King’s mule, and speaks with him apart for about half an hour. The King having rode on his mule for a considerable time descends and walks on foot like his people. He speaks the Galla language pretty well. When he intends to encamp, he goes apart

on a hill with a select number of troops to reconnoiter, till his tents are put up. Indeed, he is a respectable prince, and has intelligence and experience³ .”

To Tecola Shale Selassie was a corrupt slave owner and was responsible for the birth of Menelik, the “bastard son” of Hailemelekot Sahle Selassie. Ad hominem and sadistic attack is the hallmarks of ethnonationalists who are long on hate mongering and short on substance and seasoned arguments in the political debate they conduct. The ethno-nationalist bemoaned the agreements King Sahle Selassie made with the British as if signing a commercial treaty with foreign powers was a crime whereas the collaboration, if unpatriotic act, of Yohannes with the British colonialists who violated the territorial integrity of Ethiopia and marched into the interior of Ethiopia (Mekdela) to capture the Ethiopian emperor Tewodros is seen as a salutary deed. This is typical of the ethnicist psyche of individuals like Tecola for whom truth is dictated by the whims of ethnic affiliation. Contrary to Tecola’s false allegations about King Shale Selassie’s reign, documentary accounts by other British visitors to his court reveal the following facts:

“We find that in 1813 Sahela (or Sella) Selassie, younger son of the preceding ras, Wassen Seged, had proclaimed himself negus or king. His reign was long and beneficent. He restored the towns of Debra-Berhan and Angolala, and founded Entotto, the strong stone-built town whose ruins overlook the modern capital, Adis Ababa. In the terrible " famine of St Luke "in 1835, Selassie still further won the hearts of his subjects by his wise measures and personal generosity; and by extending his hospitality to Europeans, he brought his country within the closer ken of civilized European powers. During his reign he received the missions of Major W. Cornwallis Harris, sent by the governor-general of India (1841), and M. Rochet d'Hericourt, sent by Louis Philippe (1843), with both of whom he concluded friendly treaties on behalf of their respective governments. He also wrote to Pope Pius IX asking that a Roman Catholic bishop should be sent to him. This request was acceded to; and the pope dispatched Monsignor Massaja to Shoa. But before the prelate could reach the country, Selassie was dead (1847), leaving his eldest son, Haeli Melicoth, to succeed him⁴ .”

Tecola’s acceptance of the accounts of the two Missionaries and swift conclusion that slavery was unique to a Shoan King is due to his lack of understanding of the practice of slavery in Europe, North America, South America and Africa itself at the time of Sahle Selassie and long before him. Almost everything recorded in the diary of the two Missionaries was related to the events of each day, the priests they met and discussed religious affairs with, people who came to beg for medicine and the few places they saw during their travel within their confinement in Shewa. Why did Tecola choose

³ - *Journals of the Rev. Messers. Isenberg and Krapf, pp. 199*

⁴ - "ABYSSINIA." *LoveTo Know 1911 Online Encyclopedia*. © 2003, 2004

Sahle-Selassie and singled him out as the only leader who practiced slavery in the 1800? The reason is none other than his hatred of Shoan Amhara. Tecola proves that point:

“It seems the Shoan society of that period was losing its moral grasp, and more so the leadership more than any other group.” Tecola concludes, “Because of Sahle Selassie’s slaving activities brought attention and risk to Ethiopia. After the death of Yohannes IV, those secretive and conspiratorial groups of royal household retainers mostly descendants of Sahle Selassie’s “slaves” and domestics became the king makers, and shakers of Ethiopian politics with devastating results for over one hundred years until they were temporarily replaced by another breed of conspirators from the same stock of people: Mengistu Hailemariam and group. They are now engaged in a life and death struggle with Meles Zenawi’s version of conspiratorial group”⁵.

Tecola Hagos, “Paradigm of Poverty And Humanism: Understanding Ethiopian Modernity”, July 24, 2003 Washington DC, USA.

The translation of such statement may escape a casual observer but to Amharas, particularly Shoan Amharas, it is crystal clear that all those who ruled Ethiopia after Yohannes were slaves and descendants of slaves. Therefore one can safely conclude from the foregoing statement that the pure breed of Tigayran leadership was usurped by Shoan Amhara slaves and their descendants.

It passes belief that an „educated Tigrean professor“ living in the USA in the 21st century has the effrontery to speak in terms of dichotomizing fellow Ethiopians into slaves and non-slaves. Tecola’s uneducated ancestors could have been forgiven for making such archaic and derogatory remarks. What is ironic such a primitive-minded person has to masquerade as a champion of democracy and equality. Hate speech does not have to be flagged and labeled. It speaks for itself. Tecola’s condescending attitude born out of the drive to compensate for the deeply felt inferiority complex vis a vis the Shoan Amhara is very close to Meles’s assertion about the Tigrean people. For Meles Tigreans are like a gold that has been tested by fire (Werq) whereas non Tigreans are like a mere piece of cloth (Cherque). Any one who reads Tecola’s passionate denunciation of Shoan natural proclivity to enslave others is forced to ask the following. How come that Tecola has not uttered a word about the institution of slavery which was an integral part of Tigrean society of that time? How come that Tecola who is ostensibly so concerned with the institution of slavery failed to mention about the Oromo king Aba Jiffar (Menelik’s contemporary) of Jimma who was the greatest slave trader in the whole empire of Ethiopia who was on the Ethiopian historical scene many decades after Sahle Selassie? Or is the institution of slavery the exclusive trade of Amharas?

By the way for any one sensible person, conspiracy and secretiveness are not vices that are unique to a particular people or ethnic group. Let alone in those distant days of Sahle Selassie, even nearly more than 150 years after the death of Sahle Selassie these

⁵ - Tecola Hagos, PART III, “King Sahle Selassie, Emperor Menelik II, and the Betrayal of Ethiopia”, October 31, 2004

vices continue to haunt the Ethiopian society like a specter. Conspiracy and secretiveness are vices that are product of a certain social and political institution which is anathema to democracy. Unfortunately Ethiopia to this day has not got rid of this archaic political culture and which is studded with and shot through by vice and evil. The government of which Tecola was the highest cadre was shot through and through by the pervasive air of secretiveness and conspiracy. The TPLF, of whose exploits and contribution Tecola has been proud of, got to where it is today thanks to the deceitfulness, secrecy, divisiveness and conspiratorial characters it has promoted as arsenal in its anti-Ethiopian crusade. What should we make of emperor Yohanne's cynical ploy in promoting Ras Adal (later named king Teklehaimanot) of Gojjam to a hitherto non-existent title of Negus of Gojjam as a means of promoting deadly rivalry between Menelik and Teklehaimanot in order to check and frustrate the ambitions of the aspiring Menelik who was then king of Shoa? Had not this policy led to the bloody war which ensued at Embabo with considerable loss to both the troops of king Tekle Haimanot and king Menelik and the people living in the area? Why have we not heard Tigrean nationalists denouncing such divisive methods of Tigrean rulers like Yohannes while pointing fingers at others as if vice, deceitfulness, double dealing, conspiracy, etc are the biological attributes of a particular ethnic group by the name of Amhara ?. This says a lot about the ethnicist psyche of the Tigrean nationalist elite for whom truth is the exclusive virtue of Tigreans and vice and conspiracy are the exclusive attributes of Amharas. Tigrean nationalists attribute all that is evil and bad to Amharas.

Every undemocratic power structure necessarily engenders a system whose edifice happens to be conspiracy, secretiveness and repression. Tecola's attempt to cast aspersions on Sahle Selassie and by extension on Shoan Amharas as being inherently conspiratorial or secretive only confirms his obsessive ruminations about the Amharas he dreads like ghosts. We assume that hatred, the dire diet Tecola has been fed upon (by his Tigrean ancestors) as a child growing up in the otherwise liberal Wello (a predominantly Amhara region where Christians and Muslims marry each other and exclusive ethnic sentiments are unknown) has prevented him to think as a rational human being capable of passing good judgement on the records of Amharas he sees as the *bete noirs* of Ethiopia. He no doubt grew up listening to the stories of his Tigrean parents about the allegedly "conspiratorial Shoan Amharas". If anything all this hatred of Tecola says a lot about the psyche of a Tigrean nationalist who feels so inferior vis a vis the Amharas. An inferior creature person projects the hated aspect of his own self (that part of himself which he unconsciously hates) on the Amharas that serve him as repositories of all that he hates about himself. This in a nut shell encapsulates the dynamics of ethnic hatred being exuded by all pathetic, if pitiful, ethnonationalists like Tecola.

Tecola minced no words in his anti-Amhara crusade of demonizing emperor Tewodros. As always, his criticism of Tewodros is motivated by ethnic hatred than principled opposition to the excesses of emperor Tewodros. If he was a principled person, his criticism would not have been limited to heaping abusive pillorying Tewodros and Menelik while extolling the virtues of Yohannes to whom he feels ethnically affiliated.

Let us follow Tecola's judgement on Tewodros:

“I regret to report that I do not hold emperor Tewodros II in high regard at all. In fact, I consider him as one of the worst leaders Ethiopia ever had, even worse than Mengistu Hailemariam in his cruelty, brutality, corruption, and violence. If Tewodros were alive today, he would have been tried for genocide and crime against humanity under the Genocide Convention. Tewodros was truly a very destructive man; he committed some of the worst crimes against tens of thousands of innocent Ethiopians. When I consider some of Tewodros’s punishments inflicted on helpless prisoners, I even wonder about his sanity.”⁶

We have never seen Tecola passing such harsh judgements on emperor Yohannes who is painted by Tecola as a spotlessly blameless and is packaged as a genuine and pious emperor since he hails from Tigray. Has Tecola for example said anything about the deliberate pillage and devastation wrought to Gojjam by Yohannes’s army as a punishment for the alleged conspiracy of Tekelehaimanot and Menelik against him? Is the traditional concept of **“Ethiopian Yilugenta”** known to Tecola and other Tigrean ethnonationalist like himself who have no scruples what so ever? When one passes a judgment on the merits or demerits of a ruler like Tewodros, one has to take into account the political conditions obtaining in Ethiopia at that particular period and the realities informing the policies of emperor Tewodros. The Ethiopia, which emperor Tewodros had inherited, was a country that has been wallowing in a chronic political and social turmoil into which it has been plunged by the deep anarchy of the Zemene Mesafent (Era of the Princes)⁷. The tasks of Tewodros in uniting a deeply fractured nation pockmarked by chronic chaos and anarchy were of mammoth proportion compared with the challenges his successors like Yohannes and Menelik had faced. As such it would be unfair to compare the records of emperor Tewodros with that of Yohannes or all others who came after him as the various rulers were catapulted on the historical stage at different times and were faced by different challenges under different circumstances. But such rational considerations are alien to an ethnicist like Tecola and Co. for whom ethnic affiliation count as the only viable yardstick of truth.

Emperor Tewodros was the first ruler who attempted to put an end to slavery and slave trade. His reign witnessed a time of literary renaissance, distribution of land to farmers, and justice to the disposed. His effort for far-reaching reforms of the empire has no parallel. What made him imprison foreigners was not insanity, as Tecola would like us to believe but his unrelenting quest for technical know-how of the civilized world. He repeatedly contrasted the ‘darkness of Ethiopia with the ‘light’ of Europe⁸. Let’s not forget that the Emperor whom Tecola called a “drunkard” was a visionary. His plan for restoring Ethiopia’s greatness was short cut by the collaboration of Kassa Mircha of Tigre (who was later crowned as emperor Yohannes) with the British. Tecola could not

⁶ - Tecola Hagos, PART TWO. “Emperor Tewodros II, Yohannes IV, Menelik II and Myth of Colonialism”, October 17, 2004.

⁷ - For a detailed account of this period, the reader is referred to Abir, Mordechai’s book entitled : Ethiopia: the Era of the Princes. London, 1968

⁸ - Bahiru Zewde, History of Modern Ethiopia

find anything good to write about the great emperor Tewodros except his usual veiled hate for anything done by an Amhara. Tecola's goal of rubbishing Tewodros is related to his effort to justify Yohannes's role as a collaborator with the British. This collaboration and foreign intervention brought about the downfall of emperor Tewodros. This is not to say that Tewodros was a blameless or spotless leader who did not commit mistakes. Nor do we deny the fact that the frustration Tewodros felt at not being able to realize his grand goal of radically changing his country had not translated into severe and repressive measures against the Ethiopian people. But all that said, nothing would have justified the collaborationist role of an Ethiopian like Kassa Mirtcha (Yohannes) who was only too eager in serving as a guide to the British colonialist forces that pillaged priceless historical and cultural treasures of Ethiopia which, the British, have to this day refused to return to Ethiopia. One should not forget the burning of Mekdella on the fourth day after the fall of Magdala to the British forces during which time "the Royal engineers torched and destroyed Magdala. Fanned by the wind, three thousand houses with their content perished in the flame"⁹. Stanley stated the following: "The intense heat created from the loaded guns, pistols, projectiles and shell thrown in by the British batteries exploded with a deafening reports and projectiles whistled ominously near us. Not one house could have escaped destruction in the mighty ebb and flow of that deluge of fire"¹⁰.

By way of summarizing Emperor Tewodros's merits the following observations are in order:

1 – Emperor Tewodros pulled Ethiopia out of the fragmentation and inter regional strife that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. Unlike all those regional warlords before him, he tried to see Ethiopians as one people and Ethiopia as one country that need to be united for the benefit of all its people. Such visionary was lacking in the Ethiopia of Tewodros. Hence our admiration for him as a pioneer of modern united Ethiopia.

2 – He tried to do away with the destructive effects of billeting whereby peasant households were required to support soldiers. He tried to create a national army with a central command and less dependence on the rural population. He has tried to do away with the rapacious behavior of armies of regional lords and tyrants who could everything by way of exploiting the rural population. This was a revolutionary and novel move.

3 – He tried to do away with the onerous burden that weighed heavily on the peasants by the obligatory demands of the land owners, the church and the state. In fact he is believed to be the first Ethiopian monarch who tried to change the relationship of the peasants and land owners.

4 – Realizing the dangers Ethiopia had been exposed due to lack of modern knowledge and technological progress, emperor Tewodros tried to introduce modern technology into

⁹ - Kidane Alemayehu & Konjit Meshesha, The Last Days of Emperor Tewodros II's Life and the Loot of Magdala, Addis Tribune newspaper, March 28, 2003

¹⁰ - As quoted by Kidane et Konjit from Henry M. Stanley's account in his book entitled "Coomassie and Magdala", 1874. Stanley traveled with general Napier's forces as a correspondent for New York Herald.

his country. Partly the frustration he was met with in his attempt to get support for this attempt and the consequent retaliatory measure he took against the British who he felt slighted him, proved his undoing at Magdala.

5 – He tried to do away with the excessive dependency of Ethiopian priests on the rural population. This earned him the wrath of the powerful Ethiopian Orthodox church which was at loggerheads with him and his project.

All that said about the positive legacy of emperor Tewodros, the violent methods he chose to deal with the problems he faced at the end of his reign were unacceptable and very harsh to say the least. It is reasonable to assume that a series of personal tragedies such as the death of his dear wife W/o Tewabetch, the death of his best ally and confident Gebriye, the death of his trusted British advisor Yohannes Bell, etc might have the added effect of pushing him into harsh and irrational acts that hastened the downfall of his regime.

In fact one negative consequence of Yohannes's collaboration with the British colonialist forces is the precedent such violation of Ethiopian territorial integrity by a foreign colonialist power had set thereby encouraging Ethiopia's historical enemies like Egypt to subsequently violate Ethiopian territorial integrity. This collaborationist role of Yohannes has strengthened the impression among Egyptian rulers that Ethiopia is an easy target, which, by recruiting local collaborationists, can be overrun without much resistance. The other negative consequence of Yohannes's collaboration with the British and the subsequent reward he received in terms of modern weaponry is the fact that it strengthened his unwarranted trust in the British thereby eluding him (years later) into signing the Hewett Treaty at Adwa by which Ethiopia was forced to fight unnecessary and unjustified war against the Mahidists on behalf of the British and their Egyptian surrogates stationed in the Sudan. This has forced Ethiopia to incur the enmity of the Sudanese Mahdists who, before the Hewett Treaty, had no reason to consider Ethiopia as their enemy and violate its territorial integrity. Another untoward effect of the Hewett Treaty was that the British, who had tricked Yohannes into signing that Treaty, reneged on their promise and encouraged the Italians to occupy and carve the Eritrean colony out of the northern part of Ethiopia that was hitherto known as the Mereb Mellash . Thus due to the close relationship that was forged between the collaborationist Yohannes and the British colonialists and the subsequent trust Yohannes has put in the British (who helped him to power), Yohannes's Ethiopia was forced to eventually face two enemies i.e. the Italians in Eritrea and the Mahidists in north western Ethiopia. This was how the historic city of Gonder was ransacked and pillaged by the Mahidist. It was also as a consequence of this incursion by the Mahidist forces, who felt provoked by Yohannes's uncalled-for declaration of war on them (in support of the British colonialists & Egyptian forces which occupied Sudan), that the tragic death of emperor Yohannes had come about at Metema. Today Tigrean ethnonationalists unjustly blame Menelik for the death of Yohannes at Metema.

Ethnic nationalists of all shades and colors (i.e. Tigreans, Eritreans, Oromos, Somalis, Southerners, etc) thrive on hate and have to constantly hark back on the past and

obsessively ruminate about the alleged suffering their people went through in order to justify their claim to ethnic representation in contemporary Ethiopia. They hate individual right, which is an inherent aspect of democracy and cling to the very obfuscating concept of group right in their desire to determine the fate of the ethnic group they claim to represent. They hate the very idea of the individual who thinks outside his ethnic enclosure and deny the individual his/her inalienable right to fashion his life in a way, which suits him/herself. While ethnonationalists uphold the right of self-determination for what they call nations and nationalities, they dread the very inalienable natural right of the individual to determine his/her political destiny in a manner that he sees it fit. Ethnonationalists are anathema to the very idea of the individual who can and should take his/her own destiny into his/her hand. They cannot accept the fact that every human being is free to organize his/her life outside his ethnic enclosure.

Ethnonationalists always invoke their alleged victimization to justify a group right or ethnic entitlement. They fear competition based on individual merit as they feel inferior in a political system which promotes the individuals on the basis of their merits than on the basis of ethnic quotas. Apparently they champion democracy but in practice they hate the very essence of democracy i.e. the right of the individual to determine his destiny in a free and democratic environment where one is not dictated by ethnic warlords or nationalists to vote for this or that group according to the dictates of one's biology or ethnicity. For the ethnicists anything pan Ethiopian is Amhara as can be gleaned from the public utterances and publications of ethnicists like Beyene Petros of Southern Coalition, Merrera Gudina¹¹ of ONC. That is why ethnicists of all hues and cries have recently unleashed a hate campaign against the newly emerging Rainbow Coalition which upholds the banner of democracy based on the primacy of the individual rights over group rights.

The Obsession of Ethnicists with Menelik & Character Assassination:

Consider the following toxic smear against Emperor Menelik by Tecola Hagos:

“At any rate, Menelik had several defects that would not have allowed him to be consecrated and anointed as “King” or “King of Kings” of Ethiopia at the great Cathedral of Mariam Tsion, the Mother-Church where all Ethiopian Emperors sought at some point the legitimizing acceptance through the anointment ritual. Menilik might not have been acceptable to be Ethiopia’s anointed Emperor because of three important reasons: 1) he was a “leper” (lemtsam), 2) he was “unclean” with a life of debauchery, and 3) he was born outside of marriage, i.e., illegitimate. And to a lesser extent an additional challenge to his anointment would have revolved around his claim to the Solomonic Line, which was questionable¹².“

¹¹ - for a detailed account of this see Merrera Gudina's PhD thesis entitled : Ethiopia Competing Ethnic Nationalisms and the Quests for Democracy, 1960-2000

¹² - Tecola Hagos, PART THREE. “King Sahle Selassie, Emeror Menelik II, and the Betrayal of Ethiopia”, October 31, 2004.

The nauseating sentences written by Tecola have four factual errors:

1 – Menelik was not a leper and even if we were to assume that Menelik was Lemtsam (a condition called vitiligo in English, vitiligo is not the same as leprosy). The self-styled “professor” cannot even discern the distinction between a leper (a disease caused by a bacteria) and a person who is suffering from vitiligo (a pathological dermatological or skin condition that is caused by the depigmentation of the skin due to inadequate pigment production).

2 – Tecola could not tell us evidence which substantiates Menelik’s uncleanness or debauchery. We can only assume that this is a mere figment of a hate-mongering Tigrean ethnonationalist like Tecola whose anti-Amhara passion is fired by hatred for giant historical figures like emperor Menelik whose achievements have proven an eye sore to him and his likes.

3 – Only Tecola and Tigrean ethnicists like him can tell us by what criteria they were able to establish the illegitimacy of emperor Menelik. Such arguments say a lot about the extent to which Tigrean ethnicists go in bad-mouthing great historical figures and their achievement. They ooze hatred that is born out of the inferiority complex they harbour vis a vis the Amhara ethnic group with whom they identify Menelik.

4 – The myth of the Solomonic dynasty is something which does not have any historical basis and has been declared by erudite historians as being no more than a myth.

The nauseating piece quoted above and coming from a Tigrean ethnicist says a lot about the psyche of the Tigrean nationalists who, egged on by such moribund and outdated thought, have started their struggle of “national liberation” from alleged Shoan Amhara national domination at Dedibit in February 1975. It is all the more depressing to come across individuals like Tecola who, in the 21st century (the age of the internet and unheard of knowledge) harbour such abhorrent views that are anachronistic to say the least.

Sober Ethiopian scholars and historians like professor Tadesse Tamirat reject the very myth woven around the queen of Sheba and the Jewish king Solomon to which erstwhile Ethiopian rulers, including Haile Selassie, were clinging to by claiming descent from king Solomon. Any one who has a rudimentary or smattering knowledge of Ethiopian history understands that in Ethiopia once some one has forced his way into a position of power by subduing his rivals, the next step is to just call the priests who were ready to create a genealogical map tracing the new ruler’s alleged ancestors to king Solomon of Jerusalem. This, it was hoped, could confer on the new Ethiopian king a God-given legitimacy that would establish his undisputed suzerainty over his subjects. Does Tecola believe that blameless Yohannes IV of Ethiopia, who was no more than a self-made Shifta or rebel and made his way to the throne by the barrel of a gun, had any legal or even genetical claim to the Ethiopian throne than say Menelik or Tewodros? Is it not the case that any disgruntled person rises up, took up the gun and capitalized on the then existing social dissatisfaction among the Ethiopian people to ensconce himself in power

and subsequently legitimize his power by claiming descent from the line of king Solomon? How can some one like Tecola, who claims to have a modicum of modern education fails to shade such philistine and anachronistic views (handed over to him by his Tigreian ancestors who unlike him can be forgiven for the their ignorant and uniformed views) as to dismiss Meneilik's claim to the Ethiopian throne? What does this say about the general psyche of the Tigrean ethnonationalists who have not smarted from the alleged wound they have sustained by the alleged transfer of power from Tigray to the south (Shoa) which has been brought about by a new socio-economic reality which was dictated by the inability of the northern part of Ethiopia to sustain the growing needs of the Ethiopian state?¹³. This socio-economic reality and not the conspiracy of Shewan Amharas as is alleged by Tigrean ethnonationalists necessitated a new political economy that made the shift of power further south to what is now Shewa.

Today we are not opposing the TPLF because political power has been assumed by people who hailed from Tigray. We oppose the TPLF on account of its divisive and ethnicist anti-Ethiopian policies it has been promoting as a government by way of benefiting the Tigrean ethnic group at the expense of 95% of the non-Tigrean population of Ethiopia. It is not the ethnic origin of Ethiopia's rulers (Meles or who ever that may be) that should matter as the policies they promote and the differential effects of those policies on the people of Ethiopia. A democratic minded person would judge a government not by the ethnic origin of those who are at the helm of power but by the kind of policies this government promotes and the effect thereof on the population at large. In fact unlike TPLF's Ethiopia, in Menelik's or Haile Selassie's Ethiopia, the major actors were not promoted to key government positions on account of their ethnic origin (as TPLF has been doing during the last 13 years) but on the basis of their merit or personal loyalty to the king. The most powerful personalities in Menelik's Ethiopia such as Fitawrari Habte Giorgis, Dejazmatch Baltcha Aba Nefso, Ras Gobena, etc were not promoted to higher positions by virtue of their ethnic origin but on the basis of their merit. This is not to say that in Menelik's Ethiopia every Ethiopian ethnic group was equally represented in the central government nor to deny the fact that those who initially failed to submit to Menelik's rule were not harshly punished. But these possible blemishes and warts of Menelik's policies have to be analyzed within the context of the then prevailing conditions which were alien to the very ethos of democracy and rule of law. The same kind of caution need to be taken when passing judgement on Tewodros, Yohannes, or their predecessors.

Even notwithstanding the above blemishes and warts of Menelik's regime, what in fact distinguishes the Ethiopian polity of that time from many in other African societies is the fact that people in the power position were promoted on the basis of their merit¹⁴. That

¹³ -Christopher Clapham, Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia, 1988

¹⁴ - Haggai Erlich, Ethiopia and the Challenge of Independence (Haggai is a historian who cannot be accused by Tigreans as being sympathetic to Menelik. But that has not prevented him from pronouncing Menelik's Ethiopia as a country where those in the higher echelons of power in Menelik's Ethiopia were recruited on the basis of their individual merits than on the merits of their ethnic origin. This is also the most unique aspect in Africa that distinguishes the Ethiopian polity from those of other pre-colonial African nations who have succumbed to the traumatic blow of colonialism.

is also what explains the cohesion of Ethiopia as a nation in spite of the many disintegrative socio-economic factors and the concomitant centrifugal forces which such factors have engendered. The fact that today more than any other time in Ethiopia's long history, the very existence of Ethiopia as a united country is under threat is explained by the great sense of alienation felt by millions of Ethiopians (save for TPLF and its ethnic constituency) who have come to believe that they have hardly any stake in a united Ethiopia. And this is one of the greatest and unforgettable historical wound that has been inflicted on the body politic of Ethiopia and on the psyche of Ethiopians. Not only the TPLF but also its fanatic ethnic constituency and all those who have happily embraced TPLF's ethnicist and anti-Ethiopian policies of divide et impera (Bantustanization on ethnic lines) would bear responsibility for the consequences of these divisive policies.

Tecola's Judgment on Meles and Menelik in regard to Eritrea

In his book which was published in 1995 and is studded with mumbo-jumbo anecdotes and genealogical anecdotes related to the TPLF leaders, Tecola writes the following astonishing piece:

“There has been some attempt to draw a parallel between Menelik's signing away of Eritrea in 1896 and Meles Zenawi's agreement to the independence of Eritrea in 1994. The focus of this argument is the separation of Eritrea from Ethiopia rather than the effect on the people of Eritrea because of such an occurrence. The comparison between Menelik's action and what happened in 1994 is inappropriate since Menelik's action sent people into bondage and slavery while Meles's recognition of Eritrea had quite the opposite result”¹⁵.

Tecola adds the following:

“There is not point in crying over spilt milk. A number of Ethiopians are preoccupied and are still fuming over the unfairness of the procedure adopted by the EPLF and the UN in the referendum leading to the independence of Eritrea ¹⁶”.

I ask readers to compare these statements of Tecola quoted above with the shrill noise he currently makes (about the loss of Assab, Ethiopia's lack of access to the sea etc) in his effort to beguile and misguide Ethiopians by posturing as a super-patriot and political activist in Diaspora. How many of Tecola's current admirers have delved into the background of Tecola or ventured to probe into his checkered political past or background?

As any one sensible person may judge, the perception of Eritreans having been sold into slavery by Menelik is something which is a figment of the imagination of Tigrean and

¹⁵ - Tecola Hagos, - Tecola Hagos, Democratization? Ethiopia 1991-1994, a personal view, 1995

¹⁶ - Tecola Hagos, Democratization? Ethiopia 1991-1994, a personal view, 1995

Eritrean ethnonationalists as represented by the TPLF, ELF and EPLF cadres and their leaders. The attempt to blame Menelik for Eritrea's sad fate as a colony of Italy is baseless to say the least. The status of Eritrea was sealed long before Menelik was on the scene as emperor of Ethiopia. A cursory look at Haggai Erlich's book "Ras Alula and the Scramble for Africa"¹⁷ clearly illustrates the internal struggle that was conducted between Alula and the Eritrean dignitaries like Ras Wolde Mikael Solomon (a traditional ruler from Hamassien). As far back as 1869, this Hamassien chief has been justifiably suspected of conspiring against the future emperor Yohannes and encouraging foreigners to invade the country¹⁸. This chief of what was then Mereb Melash had been (now Eritrea) was "encouraging foreign powers to invade Mereb Melash"¹⁹ which was later carved out by Italy as its colony with a new name i.e. Eritrea. The subservient, if mercenary, activity of Dejazmatch Bahta Hagos of Segeneyti (Akele Guzay), who was collaborating with Egyptians and Italians, was not any different either. Bahata Hagos was a person who served Egyptians and Italians for most of his life until he was later forced to make the following famous pronouncement for which he is now remembered. The following sentence was uttered only long after he and his Eritrean followers have tasted the bitterness of Italian colonialism and the Italians had expropriated the best lands of the Eritrean highland for their Italian colonialist settlers.

Bahta Hagos then said: "**There is no medicine for the bite of a white snake**"²⁰. The despicable collaboration of Bahta Hagos and his followers with the Italians and their subsequent disillusionment is best captured by the Amharic adage: "**Ye wededeshiw kita setet bilo weta**". How about Dejazmatch Gebre Selassie's letter to Commandatore Martin, Italian colonial minister in Eritrea, in which the former expressed and swore his undivided loyalty to Italy and his willingness to assist Italy against Ethiopia? It is one of the most damaging pieces of document that any Tigrian aristocrat wrote to serve Italian interest against his own country. How come, Tecola who was able to dig dirt about Menelik, overlook Dejazmatch Gebre-Selassie's letter²¹ (father of Dejazmatch Zewde Gebre Selassie former vice prime minister and foreign minister of Ethiopia till the end of 1974)? Copies are available with me should Tecola doubt the authenticity of such a letter.

¹⁷ - Haggai Erlich, Ras Alula and the Scramble for Africa, a Political Biography: Ethiopia & Eritrea, 1875-1897

¹⁸ - A.B. Wylde – In the Soudan, London 1885, Vol I, pp 324-326

¹⁹ - Haggai Erlich, Ras Alula and the Scramble for Africa, a Political Biography: Ethiopia & Eritrea, 1875-1897

²⁰ - Tekeste Negash, No Medicine for the bite of a white snake: notes on nationalism and resistance in Eritrea, 1890-1940

²¹ - Letter of Dejazmatch Zewde Gebre Selassie to -----