

# Ras Alula and Tigray - Revisiting Modern History

*Haggai Erlich*

“History never repeats itself” said once a clever observer, “only historians repeat themselves”. Yet it is important to study past events, and more so - to revisit and reexamine formative periods. The last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was no doubt such a period. Ethiopia experienced success in facing western imperialism, and in facing the expansionism of modern, Islamic Egypt, as well as the Jihadism of the Mahdist state of the Sudan. This unique period of victories shaped much of Ethiopia’s relations with the external world throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It also enabled Ethiopia herself to expand southward, double its territory, and annex new societies and cultures. The entire experience proved formative in terms of the internal system. While many other African and Oriental societies were conquered, and had consequently to adopt changes, Ethiopia could safely recycle her own values and structures. They would hardly be challenged prior to 1974, and indeed—prior to 1991. Interestingly, the region of Tigray and the Tigrayan people played a central role in the earlier formative period, as well as in today’s revolutionary transformation. The aim of this paper is to make some observations about those contributions, and the connection between them.

## 1. Traditional Politics - Strength and Weakness

*Ras Alula’s* military skill and bravery were much behind the victories which ensured the Ethiopian continuity. Alula defeated the invading Egyptians twice - in Gundet 1875, and in Gura’ 1876. He defeated the Mahdist forces twice, in Kufit in 1885, and in Metemma in 1889. He defeated the Italians in Dog’ali in 1887, and had his share in the greatest victory against them in ‘Adwa in 1896. With the exception of ‘Adwa, which was an all-Ethiopian victory, all the others were the contributions of Alula and of the Tigrayns to Ethiopian independence. Tigray ensured this unique grand entrance to the 20<sup>th</sup> century of Ethiopia as a sovereign state. It also freed and enabled the Shoans under Menilek II to conquer the South, accumulate power and regain hegemony in 1889. As Tigray paid the price of costly defensive wars it was to lose the hegemony it had gained in 1872. When I was researching Alula during

the last years of Haile Selassie I, most Ethiopian writers tended to marginalize this legacy of Tigray and Alula.

Haile Selassie's regime used modern tools, but was not much different from the 19<sup>th</sup> century traditional order I was studying. Ethiopia's imperial establishment of the early 1970s was still the making of the ancient *shum-shir* system. Its code was still personal appointments, personal removals, *shum-shir* along hierarchies lacking supra-individualistic institutionalization. Opposition was still mostly shiftnet. Defying individuals waiting to be co-opted, heralding little change. It was quite easy to see Alula's late 19<sup>th</sup> century through the prism of Addis Ababa and of Tigray in the early 1970s.

The more satisfying aspect was to observe the advantages. Alula was a son of a peasant that could make it up to the top by virtue of his talents. He was a skilful administrator and a gifted military tactician. For Yohannes, the humble background of Alula was no obstacle. He lifted the ambitious youngster to commanding positions and removed members of leading families who were less efficient. Upward mobility of the talented and the ambitious was an important dimension of that patrimonial order. Persons of proven ability were either appointed from above, or defied and captured power. This enabled Ethiopia of that time to recruit its best, natural leaders, and to mobilize the masses under them. The newly introduced personal rifle proved perfectly compatible, and the combination of the old sociopolitical system with modern firepower worked smoothly.

As I delved into details the shortcomings became also apparent. The full personification of politics, the lack of modern political institutions, exposed weaknesses. The endless competition, jealousies and grudges forced Alula to be permanently successful. The zero-sum political, personal game forced him to be over-ambitious, ever in need of short term achievements. An accordingly miscalculated military expedition against the Mahdists around Kassala in late 1886 failed. This mistaken diversion enabled the Italians in Massawa to encroach inland. Alula's ambushing and annihilating of an Italian battalion at Dog'ali, a few weeks after returning from Kassala, had disastrous consequences. It moved the Italians to bring a huge, revenge-seeking army to Massawa. Alula—so the documents proved—had initiated the Dog'ali campaign mainly to overcome his rivals in Yohannes' court, who celebrated his failure in Kassala. It was frustrating to see how personal jealousies rather than institutionalized process of decision-making shaped so much of that history.

The ensuing loss of entire Eritrea to the Italians had also to do with this traditional, political culture. Exposed to a smear campaign against Alula, Yohannes ordered him to leave Asmera and join his campaign against the Mahdists. In Alula's absence the chain of personal loyalties around Asmera collapsed, and the Italians could capture the Eritrean highlands without a single shot. Local shiftas played also a role in this collapse and betrayal. Losers in the old game had either to retire to a monastery, live outside society, or collaborate with enemies. It is improbable the Italians could have taken Eritrea had they faced a better institutionalized Ethiopian system.

## 2. Tigrayns and Federalism

No less significant was the role of Tigray and Tigrayns in the home affairs of Ethiopia at that period. Yohannes was the only non-Amhara emperor in modern times, and he led Ethiopia motivated by different concepts. Most Amhara emperors before and after Yohannes worked to fulfil an ethos of unity. Representing their culture they strove to build a centralized political hierarchy, to spread their language, and convert the various elite groups of the empire to their identity. The Tigrayns' concepts of Ethiopia was rather de-centralist. They never tried to impose their language and identity over the entire country. Yohannes was comfortably happy to accept the political autonomies of Shoa and of Gojjam provided his overall leadership was not challenged. He clearly believed in such a federal structure, and recognized the rulers of the other centers as kings. In his vision a politically de-centralized Ethiopia was to be held together by Christian solidarity, and by the Tigrayns' power and leadership. Whenever necessary he did send his army to enforce this combination. Alula, it has to be mentioned, had difficulties accepting his master's federal flexibility. At certain points he advised to humiliate and crush *nigus* Menilek of Shoa or *nigus* Tekle-Haymanot of Gojjam. Yohannes, however, remained true to this de-centralized concept to his end. He would rather defend the country from foreign invaders than unify it by force. Indeed, this policy of his enabled Ethiopia to survive the challenges of that period, and emerge finally victorious under Menilek.

Yohannes deserves less credit for his religious policy. Exposed to wars against Egypt and the Mahdiyya, and committed to Christian unity, he abandoned his early tolerance towards Islam. As of 1876 he began persecuting Ethiopia's Muslims, coercing them to adopt Christianity. His relevant harsh methods can not be detailed here. In Islamic and Middle Eastern historiography on Ethiopia, Yohannes is persistently depicted as the greatest Ethiopian enemy of Islam and Muslims. Alula, was not a partner to this policy. Turning Asmera as of 1884 into his capital he worked to cultivate good relations with the Muslim communities in town and in the Eritrean coast. Such relations were essential for urban development and commercial progress. In Tigray proper Yohannes's alienation of the Muslims prevented the turning of Meqele, 'Adwa, and other centers into prospering towns. In contrast, Alula's Asmera and Menilek's Addis Ababa and Harar were at that very time embarking on the road to urban centrality. Tigray, upon Yohannes' death in 1889, was on the road to marginalization.

## 3. Today's Modernization - "Fronts" and Periphery

Shoan hegemony and the loss of Eritrea to Imperialism weakened and divided Tigray. It went on playing important roles throughout 20<sup>th</sup> century history, which we can not address here. In terms of its internal administration Tigray remained

under the local heirs of Yohannes. In many ways it stayed to 1974 more traditional oriented than other parts of Ethiopia. It was in next door Eritrea that local Muslims and Christians had begun adopting modern modes of politics. As of the 1960s their "liberation fronts" were to become the seeds of political modernization throughout Ethiopia. As institutionalized, modern political frameworks the "fronts" inspired a new generation in Ethiopia proper. New "fronts" mushroomed when Mengistu Hayle Maryam's regime began implementing the old centralizing ethos with sheer brutality. Shedding off the imperial cloak and adopting Marxist phraseology he was still motivated by the old concept of Ethiopia's "*andinnet*", one-ness. Though he spoke of various "nationalities", he really crushed any manifestation of pluralism. The party and other Soviet-modeled institutions he introduced never really heralded political modernization.

The intelligentsia of central Ethiopia proved helpless. Most of those who dreamt of a liberal, democratic system were either murdered or fled away. Some found themselves serving the regime, captive of the seemingly patriotic unity ethos. Most had to watch with frustration how the *Derg* regime twisted the old Amhara culture in order to build a cruel system of repression. Salvation to Ethiopia came not from the center, but from the periphery, from the liberation fronts, and primarily from the TPLF of Tigray.

#### 4. Federalism and the Way to Democracy

Seen from our perspective here, the regime the Tigrayns re-introduced to Ethiopia as of 1991, has to be discussed along two dimensions. One is the de-centralist ethos. We mentioned it stemming from an old Tigrayns' concept of Ethiopia and we saw it implemented under Yohannes. The new reconstruction of Ethiopia as a federation comprising nine states is indeed a modern expression of that set of values. The fact that the new leadership opted on the ethnic criteria has aroused vibrant controversy. However, to my mind at least, the very decentralization is the shorter route to Ethiopia's democratization. It has already begun changing politics from the realm of authority and obedience into that of participation and representation. A returning to the old unity ethos, in whatever guise, would endanger this achievement.

The other dimension is the institutionalization of politics. Ethiopia's new parliamentary system is homemade. It was not transplanted by external factors as was the case in many other countries. It is the result of the collapse of oppressive centralization and the victory of a decentralizing concept. It is also a result of an authentic process of transformation in the peripheries from shiftnet into "liberation fronts", and from these into political parties. This process is far from complete. The old culture of a personal, zero-sum game is still resilient. Losing authority is still conceived like risking everything. Serving in opposition is still an alien concept. Ethiopia's road to institutionalized politics is still long. However, a promising beginning has been made. Never in history Ethiopia enjoyed openness and

pluralism even remotely reminiscent of today's. Paradoxically the stormy debates and riots around last elections prove exactly that. An even clearer indication is the new status of Muslims under the Ethiopian sun. In contrast to Yohannes' legacy the present Tigrayn-led regime is working towards Muslims' full integration as equal partners. Though any openness involves risks this revolutionary redefinition of culture, society, and economy carries the promise of further modernization.

History never conveys one truth. We can toy with the past and learn what we choose. I was fortunate to see that my study on *ras* Alula was read by many who shaped Ethiopia's contemporary chapters. Mengistu Haile Maryam, I witnessed, read Alula as an Ethiopian warrior who crushed western imperialism, local rebels, and "Arab reactionaries" on Eritrean soil. Isayyas Afewerqi and his EPLF men, I was told, saw Alula as an Ethiopian imperialist who oppressed the Eritrean masses. Meles Zenawi saw Alula as a son of a Tigrayan peasant who defied the nobility, and enabled Tigray to lead Ethiopia in a most formative period. He called the force which liberated Addis Ababa from Mengistu "the Ras Alula division". Indeed we shall all learn the past as we strive to build a better future.