

A Glimpse of History of Power, Treachery, Diplomacy and War in Ethiopia 1889-1906

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1. Tigray: the Birth Place of the Ethiopian State

Aksum, the Seat of the earliest Ethiopian kingdom with one of the holiest grounds, the Church of St. Mary of Tsyon, is located in what is now known the Regional State of Tigray. The earliest monasteries in Ethiopia, established by the “Nine Saints” who spread the gospel, are also found in Tigray. It was also during the Aksumite period that the first group of Moslems that migrated from Arabia and sought refuge in Ethiopia. Thus, it is properly considered the birthplace of Ethiopian state, religion, culture and civilization. As the area through which all trade and communications passed to and from the ports of Adulis and subsequently Massawa, Tigray was the gateway of the Ethiopian Empire.

During the last quarter of the 19th century, there had been constant internal and external warfare and famine in Tigray. August Wylde who came to ‘Adwa right after the Italo-Ethiopian war in 1896 pointed out that when he had visited ‘Adwa during his earlier visit in 1884:

“It was a flourishing town of about 15000 inhabitants, the commercial centre of the district. Now it is a ruin and a charuel-house. War and pestilence have done their work, leaving their mark in ruined houses and blackened walls. I do not think there were a thousand people left in ‘Adwa”.¹

2. The Calamity of the Late 19th and Early 20th Century

The great famine of 1888-1892 began with the spread of rinderpest from Indian cattle unloaded at Massawa by the Italians to feed their troops. The disease spread

1 A Wylde, “An Unofficial Mission to Abyssinia” - The Manchestear *Guardian*, 17th May, 1897.

instantly all over Tigray, Begemdir, Gojjam and Shoa. It deprived the peasant of working animals to till the soil. Because of lack of grain, cattle, goat, and sheep, one third of the population is reported to have perished.²

The suffering in Tigray was aggravated by the constant external and internal wars which took place in that province. The successive external wars against the Egyptians in 1875 and 1876; against the Mahdists, in 1884 and 1889; against the Italians at Dog'ali in 1887, Sahati 1888, Koatit, Sen'afe, Debre Hayle, Amba Alage, Meqele and 'Adwa in 1894 to 1896.

After the death of Emperor Yohannes IV, in March 1889, at the Battle of Metemma fighting against the Mahdists, the power centre shifted from Tigray to Shoa. King Menelik was proclaimed Emperor of Ethiopia. *Ras Mengesha Yohannes*, who was nominated heir to the throne, retreated from Metemma to Tigray. The internal wars were incessant due to rivalry and differences in political motivation among Tigrayan leaders.

3. Emperor Menelik and the Wuch'alé Treaty

In May of the same year, Menelik concluded the Treaty of Wuch'alé with Count Antonelli, the representative of the Italian government. In Article III of this Treaty, Menelik conceded part of Hamasén and Bogos (Keren) to Italy. In August 1889, the Italians moved their headquarters from Massawa to Asmera and subsequently declared their colony as Eritrea. Italy did not waste time before it expanded its colonial territory by absorbing Seraye and Akkele Guzay which eventually was formalized by treaties concluded in 1900 and 1902 which drew the frontier along the Mereb-Belesa-Muna line. In another treaty concluded in 1908, Italian occupation along the Red Sea coast from the border of 'Agame and Akkele Guzay at the Bada swamp to Rahayta bordering Djibouti was stretched 60 kms inward.

4. Menelik's Campaign to Tigray and Submission of Mengesha

In May 1889, Emperor Menelik sent to Tigray *dejjazmatch* Siyyum Gebre Kidan, a nephew of Emperor Yohannes IV, as the Emperor's representative to challenge *ras Mengesha Yohannes*. *dejjazmatch* Siyyum together with *dejjazmatch* Debbeb Ara'ya, a cousin of Yohannes, and *dejjazmatch* Sibhat Aregawi, supplied with arms, ammunition and finance by the Italians, fought several battles successively against *ras Mengesha* and *ras Alula*. Debbeb died in one of these battles.

2 Pankhurst, R. "The Great Ethiopian Famine of 1889-1892" University College Review, Addis Ababa, Spring, 1969.

Soon after his coronation in November 1889, Menelik marched to Tigray with a large army to secure the submission of Mengesha. Mengesha felt he was in no position to defy Menelik, and against the advice of *ras* Alula, made his submission at Ḥawzén while Alula retreated to his native district in Tembén.

While Menelik was in Tigray, the mission led by *dejjazmach* Mekonnin (later *ras*), accompanied by Count Antonelli, arrived in Menelik's camp at Ḥawzén in February, 1890. At this time, Menelik made the following appointments: *Dejjazmach* Siyyum Gebre Kidan was given command over 'Agame, although he was removed after a while for being turbulent and was imprisoned in Harer. *Ras* Mengesha Yohannes was appointed as governor over a large part of Tigray.

The Italians were utterly surprised by the appointment of Mengesha. They induced Menelik, however, to give them assurances that *ras* Alula, who as Haggai Erlich puts it was, "the most offensive culprit in the Italians' eyes, would be excluded from any command in Tigray".³

Antonelli, during his stay at Menelik's camp in February 1890, may have influenced the Emperor to appoint his close friend *dejjazmach* Meshesha Worqé as governor of the region adjacent to the colony. As a result, Meshesha was appointed as governor of Seraye, Akkele Guzay and whatever was left of Ḥamasén which had not been incorporated to the Italian Colony; and was to reside in 'Adwa with the additional responsibility of ensuring a peaceful coexistence between the two enemies, namely the Italians and the Tigrayns, as well as between Mengesha and Siyyum Gabre Kidan.

Mengesha was disillusioned and his pride was touched by the fact that he was made to share the government of Tigray with his cousin and antagonist Siyyum Gebre Kidan, and Meshesha Worqé. When he made his submission, he must have expected the same kind of treatment which Yohannes accorded to Menelik when the latter made his submission in 1878.

The choice of Meshesha Worqé, must have caused annoyance, particularly as Meshesha was made to reside with his soldiers at 'Adwa together with Mengesha. The objection to *dejjazmach* Meshesha by Mengesha and his entourage was deep-rooted.

Meshesha was sent on several occasions as an envoy of Menelik to Yohannes, notably in September 1887 with *bejirond* Atnafe (later *bitwoded*) accompanying *abune* Mattewos, the Bishop of Shoa, when the latter was summoned by Yohannes while he was planning his campaign against the Italians to Saḥati.

Later on, the relationship between Menelik and Yohannes deteriorated to such an extent that they were almost on the brink of war. They positioned their respective armies facing each other on the banks of the Abbay (Nile). At that time, Yohannes was corresponding not directly with Menelik but through his uncle *ras* Dargé, although both Dargé and Menelik were responding to his letters. In one of these letters, Yohannes referred to Meshesha Worqé as:

3 Erlich, Haggai: *Ethiopia and Eritrea During the Scramble for Africa: A Political Biography of Ras Alula, 1875-1897*, NJ, USA, 1996, P. 153.

“The person who has played the role of the devil in causing differences between us [Yohannes and Menelik]; who tries to disrupt the empire; who is skilled in all the languages of the world; and who loves to study the languages of devils, is Meshesha Worqé. It is from him ... that flows so much evil thought”.⁴

Yohannes’s view undoubtedly was shared by his heir and son Mengesha and by the close counsellors in the court of Yohannes, such as Alula. It was, therefore, a blunder on Menelik’s part to appoint Meshesha and Mengesha simultaneously in Tigray. It was also a mistake to leave *ras* Alula without any kind of command. After all, Alula was regarded as a national hero for his defence of Ethiopia’s patrimony against the Egyptians, Italians and the Mahdists, not only in Tigray but all over Ethiopia.

Dejjazmach Meshesha after his return to Addis Abeba, posing as a loyal patriot and Menelik’s man who was victimized at the hand of the Tigrayns and the Italians in Eritrea, exacerbated the alienation of Menelik from Mengesha, thus, inadvertently fulfilling the principal objective of the Italians. But, before long, Meshesha, whom Massaja referred to as one who spoke English and French which he learnt from the captives at Meqdela; and described him as: “*E un faccendiere, o meglio, un imbroglione matricolato*”⁵ (meaning a celebrated intriguer and mischievous man), became embroiled in high treason for attempting with *aleqa* (later *nebure ed*) Admasu to assassinate Menelik and to replace him by his cousin, *fitawrari* Gulilat (Tekle Maryam), son of *merid azmatch* Hayle Mik’ael Sahle Sillasé.

Meshesha was condemned to death on March 8, 1893. The sentence, however, was commuted to life imprisonment. In 1896 on the eve of the expedition to the Battle of ‘Adwa, Meshesha was pardoned, and eventually restored to his former position.

5. Menelik Denounced Article XVII of the Wuch’alé Treaty

During 1890, Menelik received the response to his letters to the European powers announcing his coronation and requesting their recognition. Notably, Britain and Germany responded that according to Article XVII of the Wuch’alé Treaty concluded with Italy, Menelik’s communication ought to have been made through Italy. Angered by this response, Emperor Menelik at once wrote to King Umberto on Meskerem 17, 1883, or September 26, 1890, denouncing Article XVII of the

⁴ Encampment at Damot (Gojjam), 18 Hidar, 1881 (November 26, 1888), Yohannes to Dargé-reproduced in Heruy Wolde Sellassie: unfinished, *History of Ethiopia*, p. 81-88, and in my own book, Zewde Gabre-Sellassie, *Yohannes IV of Ethiopia - A Political Biography*. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1975, Appendix C, p.263-269.

⁵ Massaja, Guglielmo: *I Miei Trenta Cinque Anni Di Missione Nell’ Alto Etiopia*, Roma, 1893, Vol XI, pp. 26-27 and 73.

Treaty of Wuch'alé pointing out that he had only agreed if he so desired, and not that he would be obliged, to employ Italy in his foreign relations and negotiations.

Antonelli was then sent to Ethiopia and arrived in Addis Abeba on December 17, 1890, with instructions to give way on the question of the frontiers, provided that he could secure the maintenance of the protectorate. Fruitless negotiation continued, Menelik remaining adamant that he would not entertain placing himself under obligatory protection of another nation.

The Empress T'aytu, Menelik's consort who had taken part in the deliberation reprimanded Antonelli when he lost his temper. Finally, Antonelli was obliged to leave with Salimbeni on February 11, 1891, without accomplishing his mission.

Menelik wrote to Umberto complaining of the rude behavior of his envoy [Antonelli] and sent a circular to all the European powers on *Miyazya* 14, 1883, i.e., April 21, 1891, describing the boundaries of his Empire and concluded by saying:

"I have no intention of being an indifferent spectator while far distant powers make their appearance with the intention of carving out their respective empires in Africa, Ethiopia having been for fourteen centuries an island of Christians amongst a sea of pagans. As the Almighty has protected Ethiopia to this day, I am confident that he will protect and increase her in the future. I have no doubt that he will not let her be divided under the subjection of other governments."⁶

This circular is very similar to the letter written to the European powers by Menelik's predecessor Yohannes dated Samera (a place near Debre Tabor), 11 *Yekatit*, 1873 i.e., 17 February, 1881, outlining the extent of Ethiopia's territorial claims.⁷

6. 'Divide et Impera'

The Italian response was indecisive and ambivalent. Up to then, the government in Rome supported Antonelli's view that they should continue to support Menelik with the objective of gaining the protectorate over all the Ethiopian empire. In protest against this policy, Baldissera and his successor Orero resigned from the governorship of the Eritrean Colony, since, in their view, the only true course for Italy to pursue was one of "*Divide et Impera*", namely to play off the Tigrayn

6 PRO-FO 95/751, Doc.No.100: *Miyazya* 14, 1883 (April 21,1891) Menelik to Queen Victoria; Archives Diplomatiques (AED) (Reserved) du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Paris, Protocole C 41: April 21, 1891, Menelik to President Carnot; Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts [A.A.A], Bonn, A. Italienisches Protektorat über Abessinien 4: April 21, 1891 Menelik to Kaiser Wilhelm II; Archivio Storico del sopresso Ministero dell'Africa Italiana. A.S.M.A.I. 36/13-109: April 21, 1891 Menelik to Umberto I.

7 German Government Archive, Bonn: A.A.A., IB.9 (ABESSINIEN) Bd2:Samera (a Place near Debre Tabor), 11 *Yekatit*, 1873, which corresponds to February 17, 1881, Yohannes IV to Kaiser Wilhelm I.

against the Shoan and increase the territory of the colony. Now, in desperation, the green light was given to the new governor Giuseppe Gandolfi, who replaced General Orero in June, 1891. Dr. Cesare Nerazzani and Dr. Angelo de Martino were sent to join Tennente Benedetto Mulazzani who was resident in 'Adwa, on October 23, 1891, with a letter from Umberto, to convince *ras* Mengesha that he should meet General Gandolfi.

The principal motive of the Italian government in allowing Gandolfi to conclude the so called "Mereb Convention," undoubtedly was to exert pressure on Menelik by alienating Mengesha from him and creating a hostility between them in the hope of inducing Menelik to accept the protectorate clause of the Wuch'alé Treaty.

The colonial authorities in Eritrea, on the other hand, may have regarded the new policy as a prelude for the expansion of the Italian colony and for establishing a paramount influence or even hegemony over the rest of Tigray, rather than the effect it would have on the protectorate issue.

The new policy, for whatever motive, was a clear departure from the policy pursued by Italy since 1889 which regarded Mengesha and Alula as arch enemies and were persistent in supplying arms ammunition and finance to their principal adversaries, *dejjazmach* Siyyum Gebre Kidan, *dejjazmach* Debbab Ara'ya, and *dejjazmach* Sebhat Aregawi.

The relation between the Tigrayans and the Italians was so bad that Menelik had as stated earlier, placed Meshesha Worqé at 'Adwa with the additional responsibility of ensuring peaceful coexistence between the two enemies, namely the Italians and the Tigrayans.

This arrangement, however, did not last long. The Italians in Eritrea found out Meshesha was ineffectual in Tigray; and that Mengesha, subdued by constant wars, epidemics and especially by cattle disease which decimated the farm animals and in turn produced widespread famine, which resulted in the dispersion of his army, was no longer a threat to them. Under the circumstances, they chose to ignore Meshesha, who was placed as a buffer between the two enemies (Italy and Tigray) and to deal directly with Mengesha. Meshesha eventually was obliged to leave Tigray with his five thousand men and settled at Gudo Felasi, in Seraye, as guest of the Italian government in Asmara and Massawa.

When the Italian governor of Eritrea prevented him from levying taxes in Seraye and Akkele Guzay, and subsequently denied him the financial and food supply which he had been receiving, his army began to loot the villages, which resulted in the confiscation of their arms. Finally, the Italians handed him over all the confiscated arms, and he returned to Addis Abeba.

7. The Mereb Convention

Mengesha, on his part, was responsive to the overture made by Italy when he received a letter from King Umberto suggesting that "he could ask the governor of Eritrea, residing at Massawa, for whatever assistance he may desire," He responded

positively in a letter to Umberto, dated August 1, 1891, both for economic and political motives.

In this state of affairs, with the Tigrayan economy in shambles, it was a question of survival which partly persuaded Mengesha to seize the opportunity offered to him by the Italian overture to import food and ammunition, both of which were exhausted by natural calamities and the series of wars. Mengesha hoped eventually that the blockade imposed by the Italians, immediately after they occupied Massawa in 1885 and which had been continuously in effect since 1887, would be lifted.

Mengesha and his counsellors appear, therefore, to have contemplated breaking their tie with Menelik, now that his main ally, the Italians, had abandoned him on account of the dispute that had arisen concerning the protectorate clause of the Treaty of Wuch'alé.

The attempt of Mengesha to be regarded as an autonomous ruler of Tigray, rather than as a vassal of Menelik; the granting of titles and decorations to Gandolfi and his aides, and subsequently conferring the title of *ras* on *dejjazmach* Sebhat Aregawi, certainly indicate the aspirations that Mengesha might have had at least for kingship of Tigray, if not for the crown of his father as Emperor of Ethiopia. But it was unrealistic since it was an ambition which was not backed by force, and the Italians made it absolutely clear that they would only treat him as governor appointed by Emperor Menelik.

Ras Mengesha, accompanied by *ras* Alula, *ras* Hagos and other Tigrayan personalities met General Giuseppe Gandolfi on December 6, 1891, and concluded the "Mereb Convention". "The Mereb convention", so called by the Italians, was simply a ceremony held at Mereb for an exchange of an oath between *ras* Mengesha and the prominent personalities of Tigray with General Giuseppe Gandolfi, the Italian governor of Eritrea.

There was no written formal agreement. The only document produced was a letter from *ras* Mengesha to King Umberto, written at Mereb, on 29 Hidar, 1884 (December 8, 1891) confirming that he and the Italian governor met at Mereb and concluded an oath which declared, "My enemies shall be thy enemies and my friends shall be thy friends."

After the Mereb Convention, the Italians allowed the import for a while of food purchased in the Eritrean markets and about 35,000 cartridges were sent by Gandolfi which was urgently required for security reasons. Dr. Nerazzani, who negotiated the terms of the Mereb Convention, on behalf of Italy, and had given an advance warning that Italy would only supply a limited amount of arms and ammunition and that it would do so only in the event that Tigray was attacked by the Mahdists who were their common enemy.

Mengesha's act in concluding the so-called "Mereb Convention", was regarded by Menelik a treachery. There is no doubt that Mengesha after his first submission to Menelik at Aguedi, near Meqele, in February 1890, should have obtained permission from the Emperor prior to negotiating and concluding whatever kind of agreement. On the other hand, the so called "Mereb Convention" was in no way comparable to the two secret treaties which were concluded between Menelik and the Italians in 1883 and 1887. During the two months after the so called "Mereb

convention” was concluded, General Oreste Baratieri replaced General Giuseppe Gandolfi as governor of Eritrea, on February 15, 1892, a change which marked a shift of policy on the part of Italy. The *entente cordiale* between Mengesha and the Italian Administration in Eritrea was destined to be of short duration. Baratieri denied Mengesha even the 20,000 sacks of grain which he had purchased earlier from the Eritrean markets for the consumption of his army.

The new Pro-Tigrayan policy was doomed to failure for two fundamental reasons: First, the colony which Italy had occupied and the territory which she aspired to add to her colony was the home-base of Mengesha and Alula, regardless of whatever ambitions they might have entertained to regain the crown of Yohannes.

Second, the Italian government was still uncertain what policy it wished to follow. Antonelli after his unfortunate last mission to Ethiopia was sent to Argentina as minister of the Legation, and from there he continued advocating his view that Italy should continue to pursue its former policy of winning Menelik to her side.

On June 1894 Mengesha together with Alula, Hagos and other Tigrayan dignitaries came to Addis Abeba and made his second submission to the Emperor. Mengesha was received with great pomp and ceremony. After a short stay, he was allowed to return to Tigray with his entourage. Alula, however, preferred to remain at the Imperial court.

The relation between Ethiopia and Italy rapidly deteriorated. The territorial and the protectorate issues were destined to be settled only by the use of force. Prime Minister Crispi did not take heed of Prince von Bismarck’s sound advice during his visit to Friederichsruh as early as 1887 during the reign of Emperor Yohannes IV, that he [Crispi] should beware of getting involved in conflict with Ethiopia, despite Germany’s basic interest of shifting Italy’s preoccupation elsewhere away from the Adriatic which had been the cause of conflict with Austria.⁸

8. Ethiopian Victory at Amba Alage, Meqele and ‘Adwa

In December 1894, Bahta Hagos who was one of the first allies of Italy revolted in Akkele Guzay with Mengesha’s encouragement, and was killed in the encounter. At this juncture, General Baratieri advanced as far as ‘Adwa and retreated. Mengesha marched to Eritrea and fought indecisive battles from 13 to 15 January 1895 at Koatit and Sen’afe without sufficient preparation on the Ethiopian side. Famous heroes such as *dejjazmach* Tedla Ayba, *dejjazmach* Gizaw Hayle Maryam, *dejjazmach* Teferi Ara’ya fell on the battlefield. Soon after Mengesha’s retreat, Italian forces advanced into the heart of Tigray as far as Amba Alage. Despite the gallant attack made on them from October 7 to 9 at Debre Hayle in Inderta. Italian annexation and partial occupation of Tigray in March-April 1895 led to the mobilization of

8 German Government Archive - Bonn IBiA, Bd, 2, No 6 Berlin 6 October 1887, Bismarck to Solms (Count Solms was, at the time, the German Ambassador in Rome).

Ethiopian forces. An advance party led by *ras* Makonnin and aided by *ras* Alula, *ras* Mikael of Wollo and *ras* Wollé of Yeju as well as a number of other commanders was dispatched to join Mengesha. On 7th December 1895 Ethiopia gained her first victory at Amba Alage. After the arrival of the Emperor with the Empress and King Tekle Haymanot of Gojjam, the Ethiopian forces successively defeated the Italian army at Meqele on 21 January and at 'Adwa on 1st of March, 1896.⁹

In all these encounters Tigray was the battleground. Over 100,000 armed men with their entourage and minimum supply of food from elsewhere ravaged the province of Tigray. In a country where adequate logistics and infrastructure are lacking, the sacrifices sustained by the peasantry were immense. Their grain and cattle were consumed by the vast army as it passed through and especially in places where it was stationed for a considerable time.

After the victory of 'Adwa, Mengesha was married to *woyzero* Kefey Wollé, the niece of Empress T'aytu, and remained nominally as the overlord of Tigray. But in actual fact, *ras* Alula was given the command of western Tigray and *abba* Wolde Giyorgis, a native of Gojjam and formerly a confessor of King Tekle Haymanot and subsequently a confidant of the Emperor, was appointed as *nebure ed* of Aksum with the responsibility of keeping an eye on Tigray. Mengesha was deprived the counsel of his former mentor, *ras* Alula who had switched his allegiance to his sovereign master and became his rival.

Ras Mengesha in distress asked the permission of the Emperor if he could come for a visit to Addis Abeba. Menelik responded that he can come for the Ethiopian Christmas in 1897. While Mengesha was on his visit, a fierce battle took place in Shiré between *ras* Alula and *ras* Hagos. Hagos was killed after he was captured on 19 January, while Alula died on 15 February 1897 from a wound received at the battlefield.¹⁰

Mengesha returned to Tigray when he heard the tragic news without accomplishing anything, his aspiration to gain the crown as king of Tigray never materialized. It was alleged that in his departure, he had sworn never to return again.

9. News of Mengesha's Rebellion and the Division of Tigray

In the meantime Mengesha was accused by *nebure ed* Wolde Giyorgis that in his correspondence and seal, he styled himself as "son of Yohannes King of Zion Emperor of Ethiopia", and after the battle of Debre Hayle, he had written to Queen Victoria seeking the assistance of the British Government to regain the throne of

9 Berkeley, George F.H. "The campaign of Adowa and the rise of Menelik", London 1902. Rubenson, Sven: *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence*, London 1976, p. 399-406.

10 Erlich, Haggai, *Ras Alula and the Scramble for Africa – A Political Biography: Ethiopia –and Eritrea 1875-1897*. NJ. USA 1996, p. 196.

Yohannes. In actual fact, the letter written to Queen Victoria, on 23 *Nebasé* 1887 (August 28, 1895) only states “ ... Now, the Italians have come and occupied my country [dominion]. Do not forget your friendship with Emperor Yohannes.”¹¹ As this letter was written soon after the Italians occupied virtually the whole of Tigray before the national army arrived and fought at Amba Alage, it does not necessarily constitute disloyalty to Menelik. Mengesha was desperately soliciting the assistance of Her Britannic Majesty’s Government to liberate his territory from foreign occupation. It was also a common custom, at the time, for important personalities in the realm to state their fathers’ names with their titles and there was no restriction to correspond with foreign powers.

The widely spread news that Mengesha had rebelled led to his recall to the capital with which he did not comply. On October 1898, Menelik appointed *ras* Mekonnin as governor general of Tigray, while retaining Harer. Makonnin was sent together with *ras* Mika’él and *ras* Wollé in a campaign to Tigray in November 1898. After a series of skirmishes and negotiations *ras* Mengesha and *ras* Sibhat finally submitted. They were handed over to the Emperor who was awaiting the outcome at Dessie on 18 February 1899. Sebhat was incarcerated at Meqdela and subsequently detained in Harer, while Mengesha was held in custody at Dendi and later at Ankober where he died on 29 December 1906.

Mekonnin returned hurriedly from Desé to Tigray and stayed there up to May 1900. During the eighteen months of his governorship, a relative peace was established. Among the notables of Tigray, Mekonnin found a reliable ally in Gebre Sillasé Barya Gabir who had kept law and order at ‘Adwa.

Gebre Sillasé had rebelled against the authority of *ras* Mengesha and played a significant role in siding with *ras* Alula during the combat with *ras* Hagos. Before he died, Alula conferred the title of *dejjazmach* on Gebre Sillasé and left him his arms and followers in gratitude for his devoted services.

On behalf of *ras* Mekonnin, Gebre Sillasé fought and defeated *dejjazmach* Abreha Hagos of Shiré. His fluency in Italian was also an additional value in order to communicate and reach a peaceful co-existence with the neighbouring Italian colony of Eritrea.

When *ras* Mekonnin requested to be relieved from the governorship of Tigray in order to attend to his primary responsibility in the province of Harer he strongly recommended Gebre Sillasé to replace him in Tigray.

This did not materialize, *ras* Wollé Biṭul, the brother of Empress T’aytu, was appointed as Governor General of Tigray.

Ras Wollé, accompanied by *wagshum* Guangul Birru, arrived in Meqele in June 1900. After a brief stay, Wollé returned to Yeju. Tigray was governed by his deputy. The province became rampant with rebellion led in the names of *dejjazmach* Siyyum Mengesha and *dejjazmach* Gugsu Ar’aya, young grandsons of Emperor Yohannes IV. It was during this period of anarchy that the two border agreements of 1900 and 1902 between Ethiopia and Italy were negotiated and concluded.

11 PRO, London-F.O78/4784:23 *Nebasse*, 1887 (August 28,1895), Mengesha to Victoria.

In July 1902, Wollé's command over Tigray terminated when Menelik divided the province into four zones. Aksum remained under *nebure ed* Wolde Giyorgis. Gebre Sillasé was appointed as governor of Western Tigray comprising 'Adwa and Shiré. *Dejjazmach* Abreha Ar'aya, a cousin of Yohannes IV, as governor of Eastern Tigray and *shum 'agame* Desta Sebhat as governor of 'Agame.

In May 1903, Gebre Sillasé was given in marriage *woyzero* Amarech Walelu, a daughter of the Emperor's niece with allotment of guns and cannons. After a meeting at the monastery of *abba* Gerima, Gebre Sillasé received the submission of *dejjazmach* Siyyum Mengesha on 27 December 1903.

Gebre Sillasé was also empowered by Menelik to deal with the Italian authorities in Eritrea on Muna, in the East, and Setit borders on the western side. Although it was rather too late to achieve a major breakthrough on the border issue, by persuasive diplomacy he managed to maintain the *status quo* by retaining Irob on the eastern front and Shilalo, Sheshebit on the western front of the border. Relative peace once again was established until the end of Menelik's effective reign in 1908.

11. Conclusion: the Deutsche-Axum Expedition

The Victory gained at 'Adwa radically changed the image of the country and several foreign governments and entrepreneurs were attracted by emerging Ethiopia. After the Italo-Ethiopian Peace Agreement was concluded in October 1896, Italy, France, Great Britain and Russia successively established Legations at Addis Abeba. The United States of America sent a diplomatic mission led by Robert Skinner in 1903, and in 1906 a Legation was established. The German government sent Dr. Friedrich Rosen in 1905 who negotiated a commercial treaty and a Legation was established in May 1906.

During this period, *dejjazmach* Gebre Sillasé had become a Crown Councillor. According to his own diary, he suggested to the Emperor that assistance should be requested from foreign governments for historical research and to train Ethiopian peasants in agrarian techniques. Gebre Sillasé's interest in historical research was awakened by Theodore Bent's book and the chapter in it by professor H.D. Müller on the inscriptions from Yeha and Aksum.¹²

In 1905, *nebure ed* Wolde Giyorgis was appointed *ich'egé*, the highest ecclesiastical echelon accorded to an Ethiopian prelate at the time, Gebre Sillasé was appointed in his place as *nebure ed* of Aksum in addition to the territory under his command. This was unprecedented. Although laymen were appointed as governors of Axum, the rank of *nebure ed* from time immemorial was reserved to high ranking prelates.

On the 6th of January 1906 the Deutsche Aksum Expedition led by Professor Enno Littmann arrived in Aksum and were received by *dejjazmach* Gebre Sillasé.

¹² Bent, Theodore J. *The Sacred City of the Ethiopians*, London 1896, p. 231 to the end.

Throughout the period of their stay from January to April, Gebre Sillasé carefully attended to their need. Apart from Gebre Sillasé, who was well versed with the historical traditions, other scholars such as *membir* Gebre Mika'él, *bejiron*d Gebre Sillasé, assisted the German team as transmitters of the historical traditions of Aksum and its surroundings.

When the task of the Deutsche Aksum Expedition was concluded, a thanks giving ceremony was held at the church of St. Mary. A great feast was arranged and a banquet was given in honour of the German team of experts attended by *abune* Petros, the Coptic Archbishop, and dignitaries such as *dejjazmach* Siyyum Mengesha and *shum 'agame* Desta Sibhat with a large number of their followers. Great demonstrations of joy were displayed in Aksum and Addis Abeba.

Gebre Sillasé's initiatives at Aksum invariably met with difficulties and unfounded accusations. Towards the end of the 19th century, the Church of St. Mary of Tsyon, that was built by Emperor Fassiledes in the 17th century, started crumbling due to lack of maintenance. The Mayshum reservoir was filled up and the inhabitants of Aksum were suffering from lack of water supply. The largest standing stela was in danger and badly required strengthening the base.

Gebre Sillasé's endeavor in rebuilding the facade and part of the *Qine Mablet* the outermost part of the church by engaging Italian contractors was initially opposed by the clergy as sacrilege.¹³ The construction of the base was also opposed on the ground that the stela would fall. The excavation and rebuilding the Mayshum reservoir led to serious accusation that the explosives to blast the rock and the working equipment which were brought by camel from Eritrea were war material in order to set up a coup d'état. Even the mansion he built and donated to the city was left to deteriorate due to lack of maintenance and had become a shelter of sheep and goat. Only recently thanks to Dr. Tsehaye Teferra, was it renovated to be used as a public library. His association with the Deutsche Axum Expedition, however, did not give rise to allegations and unfounded accusations. This can perhaps be explained by the profound knowledge and fluency of Gə'əz that Littmann displayed which could possibly stun and charm the Axumite clergy and notables. His engaging personality could also have been a factor.

As I grew up hearing about Professor Littmann, and the bond of friendship that had developed between him and my father, I was driven by curiosity and got in touch with him in 1948, when I was a student at Oxford.

Subsequently, I cherished the memorable privilege of visiting him twice at Tübingen in 1952 and 1957. Allow me to repeat what I said in my presentation at the First Littmann Conference at Munich in 2002:

“the intense curiosity which he still possessed on everything pertaining to Ethiopia even at an advanced age in the twilight of his remarkable life, was amazing. The mastery of Geez which he had acquired in his prime age had not faded as shown in his correspondence with me which I have attached as an appendix to my paper. The

13 Rava, Marizio: *Al Lago Tana*, Roma 1913, P-235. Tsehaye Haile: *A Short Biography of dejjazmach Gabrasellassie Bariya Gabir*. Thesis submitted to the History Department of Haile Sellassie University, 1972, P. 77.

task accomplished by the German team of experts under the leadership of Enno Littmann laid the foundation for the subsequent archaeological and epigraphic works at Axum”.

I am delighted to hear a street is named after him in Aksum. Indeed we Ethiopians owe Enno Littmann and his team a great deal.

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ዛቴ፡ ጠማር፡ ዘተፈነወት፡ እምጋቦ፡ ፕሮፌሰር፡ ጌድ፡
 ሊተማን፡ ተብደሐ፡ ንቦ፡ ይኸውር፡ ወለቀል፡ ደጃዝማቸ፡ ዘውዳ፡
 ገብረ፡ ሠላሴ፡።
 ዛቴ፡ ሙልእክ፡ ሰላም፡ ወፍቅር፡ ወተፍሠሐት፡ እከጋጠኑ፡
 ከሙ፡ ተወክፍኩ፡ ጠማረኩ፡ ክበርተ፡ ወተፈላጊኩ፡ ባቴ፡ ወ
 እእክተኩ፡ ፈደፋደ፡ እንክርኩ፡ ሙህርተኩ፡ በልሳ፡ ገዕዝ፡
 ዘኢተዘንገዐት፡ ኅቡኩ፡ ወኅቦ፡ ደቂቀ፡ እተረጅደ፡ እላ፡
 ደመስሎኩ፡ ዓፈ፡ ተፈላጊኩ፡ በርእየተ፡ ወለደ፡ ፍቅር፡ ፊቱ፡
 ገብረ፡ ሠላሴ፡ ዘገንኩ፡ ምስሌሁ፡ በእክሉም፡ እሙ፡ እህጉረ፡
 እጉረ፡።
 እ፡ ፍቅር፡ ያህን፡ ህሉ፡ ወተቀይ፡ ለበቀዳተ፡ ሀገርክ፡
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 መጋቢት፡ በ፲፱፻፲፯፡ ዓፄ፡ ሆ፡።

Enno Littmann.

Fig. 2: Letter by Enno Littmann to dejjasmach Zewde

there are only a very few differences in the two
 editions, mostly misprints. The title አገሩን ለሰላም
 ለሰላም ለሰላም is the same as Philozophi Abessini.
 But now there is a very important thing. Conti
 Rossini has proved that the two A+S's were not
 written by an Ethiopian, but by the Italian padre Giacchino
 di Urbino who lived a long time in Ethiopia and
 who knew Ge'ez like an Ethiopian scholar!
 I was glad to see that our German Abyssinian
 Expedition has been of use to the Ethiopian scholars.
 With best wishes and with kindest regards,
 also from my wife,
 Yours sincerely
 Enno Littmann

Fig. 3(b): Letter by Enno Littmann to *dejjazmach* Zewde