

Emeye Menelik Abba Dagnev: Emperor of Ethiopia

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Emperor Menelik II was born as Sahlemariam to King Hailemeleket and Weizero Ejigayehu in 1844. Menelik, apparently claimed his descent from the House of Abeto Yacob, one of the siblings of Emperor Libne Dingil, but there is no doubt that he is the grandson of King Sahleselassie of Shewa.

At the age of eleven, Menelik was abducted by Emperor Tewodros and was imprisoned at Meqdella. After nine years of incarceration, however, thanks to the cunning ability and surreptitious operation of Weizero Ejigayehu's loylas, Menelik managed to escape from Meqdella on July 1865.

After Meqdella, Menelik ruled over Shewa as king and undisputed sovereign for 12 years. But in 1877, Emperor Yohannes' formidable force had come to Shewa and Menelik had no choice but to submit to the Emperor, and thus he wisely secured an authoritative position within the Empire and his Shewan governorship. And soon after his successful escape from Meqdella, Menelik was attracted to the beautiful and charming Weizero Bafena who was much older than him. Bafena was wedded several times and had 8 children from her previous marriages. Menelik was probably attracted to her wealth and political clout, on top of her beauty, in the Merhabete district where she is from originally. Although Menelik was not polygamous, he was a womanizer nonetheless. He lived with Bafena for 17 years but he had several other women from whom he begot several children. One of these women is Weleteselassie (a Guraghe) who had two sons by Menelik. Therefore, Tekelesadiq Mekuria's contention "Menelik had no son to name as his successor" is not true. The second wife of Menelik was Weizero Benchi who gave birth to Zewditu; a third one was Weizero Dessela, apparently a servant in the royal house turned a *Chin-gered* (ቅን ገረድ) or a maid wife, who was by all measure a beautiful young lady and who gave birth to Shewaregga (later wedded to Ras Michael of Wello and gave birth to Lij Eyasu); the fourth one was Aletash Tewodros who was also once legally married to Menelik; and of course, the fifth lady of Menelik was the astute and most powerful woman in Ethiopia, Weizero Taitu Bitul, later empress. With respect to several marriages, however, Menelik and Taitu were even. Taitu was married four times before she was wedded to her fifth husband, Menelik Abba Dagnev.

In the same year Emperor Yohannes dispatched his punitive forces to Shewa, Bafena planned a coup d'état against Menelik and attempted to bring to power Meshesha Seifu (her son-in-law) assisted by Muammed Ali (later Ras Michael), her other son-in-law. Ironically, the stepmother of Muammed Ali, Weizero Werqitu (an Oromo) was the spearhead, along with Weizero Ejigayehu, in the plan for Menelik's escape from Meqdella. In any event, Bafena's coup was abortive and her land was confiscated but later she was given a chance to rehabilitate by order of Menelik.

After the martyrdom of Emperor Yohannes in March 1889, Menelik became emperor of Ethiopia on May of the same year and he also signed the Treaty of Wuchale that duly recognized the Mereb Millash (later Eritrea) as Italian colony in the same month and year. Now, Menelik, the sovereign power, began to enjoy the submission of prominent Ethiopian dignitaries such as Negus Teklehaimanot of Gojjam, Wag Seyoum Birru of Lasta, Dejach Woldeselassie of Simien, and the son of Emperor Tewodros, Ras Meshesha. These aristocrats, at the higher echelon of the Ethiopian hierarchy, at least tacitly acknowledged Menelik as the legitimate emperor of Ethiopia. Exception to the rule was Ras Mengesha Yohannes of Tigray, who initially claimed heir to the throne and opposed Menelik's legitimacy to sovereign power, but gradually he too joined the chorus of the above leaders. Mengesha, however, made a wise move because given the Italian menace from Eritrea, his quarrel with his Tigrayan aristocrats (Ras Alula and Ras Sebat) and the unmatched hegemony of Menelik; he had no choice but to submit to Aba Dagneu.

Once Menelik secured recognition from prominent Ethiopian leaders and managed to consolidate the reigns of power, he ventured on a major agenda of modernizing Ethiopia as we shall see later, but he was completely preoccupied by a historic mission to preserve Ethiopia's independence. Although he was a good friend of the Italians during the whole reign of Emperor Yohannes, he was at loggerheads with them on a number of occasions. The Italians were at once benefactors and detractors to his own existence. In January 1895, the Italians managed to defeat the Kitet army of Ras Mengesha in Tigray, where at least one thousand of the latter's troops including Dejasmach Tedla, Dejasmach Beyene, Dejasmach Kassa, Kegnasmach Endargachew, and Shum Agame Tesfai (Hentalo), were sacrificed. Moreover, as part of the Kitet army (**ክትት ሠራዊት**) and as commanders in the forefront, "Kegnasmach Hailemariam, Azmach Abraha, Dejasmach Zegeye Aba Gebru, and Kegnasmach Sebat (from Akeleguzai)"¹ became sacrificial lambs. Ras Mengesha himself was wounded at the battle of Koatit but he proved to the Italians and to his fellow Ethiopians that he was a superb military tactician at least in terms of resisting the relatively superior firearms of the Italians.

The defeat of Kitet inevitably became an Italian nightmare to Menelik. Indeed, the Emperor was compelled to mobilize his forces, unite the Ethiopian people, and march against the Italians beginning February 1895 and headed toward Amba Alagie where the Italian forces garrisoned. He delegated responsibilities at his palace to his uncle Ras Darge and Dejach Hailemariam as his assistant. The brave and gallant Empress Taitu, of course, marched along with her husband but with her own troops. Incidentally, the Empress' sister Weizero Azalech was one of the brave Ethiopian women who were at the forefront of the battle of Adwa. Ras Mekonnen, in effect, was the chief of staff, and other prominent commanders such as Ras Wolie, Ras Michael, Ras Mengesha Yohannes, Ras Mengesha Atikem, Ras Alula, Dejach Woldie, Fitewrari Gebeyehu, Fitewrari Tecele, Liqemekuas Adnew, and Kegnasmach Tafesse participated at Amba Alagie.

At Amba Alagie, despite strategic advantage, the Italians were defeated after two hours of intense fighting on either side. They retreated to Mekelle with Ethiopian pursuance, and the siege of Mekelle ensued soon after Alagie. Two months after Mekelle, the battle

of Adwa was fought on March 1, 1896, where Ethiopians again scored a resounding victory. At Adwa, other prominent Ethiopian leaders like Negus Teklehaimanot of Gojjam, Ras Michael of Wello, Ras Sebhat Aregawi and Dejach Hagos Teferi of Tigray closed ranks with their Ethiopian brethren. For a detailed version of the battle of Adwa, please see www.africanidea.org/ethiopian_victory.html ²

When the victorious Menelik returned to Addis Ababa, Jubilant Ethiopians gave him a hero's welcome with much fanfare and euphoria and in his praise and his honor and to other Ethiopian leaders as well, this is what the Ethiopian poet said in Amharic:

ምንሊክ ተወልዶ ባያነሳ ጋሻ፡
ግብሩ እንቀላል ነበር ይህን ግዜ አበሻ።
በሠራው ወጨፎ፡ ባመጣው እርሳስ፡
ተፈጠመ ጣልያን፡ አበሻ እንዳይደርስ።
ምንልክ ተጉዞ የምትጠይቁኝ፡
ፊትም አላለፈ፡ ኋላም አይገኝ።
አባተ በመድፉ አምሳውን ሲገድል፡
ባልቻ በመትረየስ ነጥሎ ሲጥል፡
የጎጃሙ ንጉሥ ግፋ ብሎ ሲል።
እቴጌ ጣይቱ እቴጌ ብርሃን፡
ዳዊትዋን ዘርግታ ስምግኒ ስትል።
ተማራኪው ባዙቅ ውሃ ውሃ ሲል፡
ዳኛው ስጠው አለ ሠላሳ በርሜል።
እንደ በላዔ ስብእ እንደመቤታችን፡
ሲቻለው ይምራል የኛማ ጌታችን።³

Following Adwa, the question of Eritrea, which had been contentious after the treaty of Wuchale, was revitalized. Ras Alula was of the opinion that the triumphant Ethiopian troops pursue the Italian forces in disarray and regain Mereb Millash, his former dominion. Menelik did not accept Alula's ideas and he was more interested in consolidating his empire by incorporating leftovers of the grand southern conquest.

The post-Adwa Ethiopian politics, however, is subject to interpretation. Eritreans of the times who joined hands with their Ethiopian brethren felt betrayed by Menelik when Eritrea was left intact for the Italian colonizers. Some chroniclers of oral tradition opined that 'Menelik was genuinely scared by his erstwhile Tigrayan rivals and did not want to encourage the unity of greater Tigray.' This may have a grain of truth, because as per Italian documents some Ethiopian forces have marched beyond Adwa to Gurae; others, including Dejach Sengal (brother of Bahata Hagos of Akeleguzai) went up to Belessa, and the forces of Ras Sebhat had effectively disconnected the communication networks of the Italians between Asmera and Adigrat. In spite of this reality, however, all of a sudden the bulk of Ethiopian troops assembled at Mai Feres were ordered to march back to Shewa and other parts of Ethiopia, or their respective regions such as Wello and/or Gojjam.

Interestingly, a letter written by Menelik on March 26, 1889 (in retrospect) is most fitting to the above interpretation of Menelik's indecision to reclaim Eritrea:

“From: Menelik II of Shewa, Harar, Keffa, and the Galla Territories
To: The powerful and friend King Umberto

In Ginbot 1, 1881, a very tragic incident happened at Metema. The King of Kings Yohannes went there with the entire army to fight the Dervish but he was defeated, wounded and killed. In the meantime, till my messengers come to you along with Antonelli and till I confide to you what is in my guts, I beg you to convey a message to your generals at Massawa and instruct them not to listen to the rebels in Tigray, nor give them any military hardware. Let your Majesty's troops consolidate at Asmera. I beg you to control and reinforce the roads by your defense forces. I have the audacity to tell you this, because by his grace God will grant me the throne to which I have a mandate and that I have wished to acquire for a long time now. It is also because He [God] will render Ethiopia peace and tranquility.”⁴

But to be fair to Menelik, we must also acknowledge his stance, the exact opposite of what he wrote to King Umberto, against the Italians when they made initial advances from Massawa to Asmera:

“Were we not once friends? Why then have you today taken a country that does not belong to you? What has brought you to this land which is mine and not yours?”⁵

As I have pointed above and as I have discussed in my previous articles with respect to Emperors Tewodros and Yohannes, the Ethiopian politics under Menelik should be examined in the context of European hegemony and partition of Africa by European colonizers. Whether Menelik confided with the Italians and/or deliberately abandoned Eritrea could be more of academic exercise. Tangibly and tangentially, we know for a fact that Menelik denounced the Treaty of Wuchale, united Ethiopians against the colonizing Italian forces, and he led Ethiopia toward modernity via his vision and his inquisitive mind. This position of mine on Menelik is not novice, and this is what I scribbled about him in 1995 in my book *ETHIOPIA: The Political Economy of Transition*:

“Menelik was a brilliant and fascinating emperor who was endowed with an extraordinary insight to traditional wisdom of politics. He was ready to handle internal and external political matters properly. In the aftermath of his southern conquests, he adopted a variegated policy of administration. Though most of the south was allotted to his Amhara soldiers and the conquered lands were distributed among settlers or *Neftegnas*, he also recognized the importance of local chiefs of *Balabats* and hence appointed to paramount positions from among the conquered peoples. He continued Jimma's internal autonomy and also appointed Muslims for highest offices wherever former principalities and sultanates existed.

Ethiopia under Menelik, with “clearly defined” national borders was to be administered from Addis Ababa, the geopolitical center of the Empire-state. Thus the creation of administrative regions and the appointment of governors directly accountable to Menelik necessitated running a centralized empire with some sense of control.

Menelik in effect laid the foundation of modern bureaucracy. As has been shown, Tewodros attempted to control and eliminate local powers by abolishing the grant of fiefs or *Gult* lands and appointing his own military officers, while Menelik’s answer to the problem was a bureaucratically centralized form of government.

Another more significant contribution is Menelik’s realization of the importance of modern infrastructure, education and health services in order to run his empire. Between 1897 and 1908, the telephone, telegraph, the Menelik modern hospital (first run by the Russian Red Cross), the Menelik modern school, electric lights, the Bank of Abyssinia (under the auspices of Egyptian administration) were introduced. For a better and efficient communication, roads were constructed and a Franco-Ethiopian railroad, though far from completion in Menelik’s lifetime, began its operation in 1894. The Arada Posta had also begun and Ethiopia became a member of the Universal Postal Union in the same year.

The achievements of Menelik were certainly brilliant. Centralized form of administration means an efficient way of running a government and at least laying the foundation for a relatively uniform system of economic life – uniform tax laws, regulation of trade and tariffs and tight control of customs. On the other hand, it means heavy burden on the subject peasantry; it means the entrenchment of feudalism in a more centralized way. The southern peoples were in particular subjected to all forms of exploitation and oppression. The feudal land tenure system was imposed upon them and the majority of the population was reduced to tenancy and serfdom.”⁶

It was during Menelik that modern Ethiopia began the use of money in commercial transaction (reminiscence of the Aksumite coin mints). Before Menelik struck his own coin (with his name and picture embossed on it), the Maria Theresa thalers were used for limited merchandizes in the market. The first Menelik’s coins (*Grish*) were first issued in 1894 in Paris; the second issue of *Grish* came out in 1897.

Money alone, however, could not be an effective medium of exchange unless it is supplemented by modern infrastructure. As mentioned above, Menelik ordered the construction of several roads and bridges including one bridge over the Abbay (Blue Nile) and a motor road from Addis Ababa to Addis Alem (newly built all-whether road); similar projects were undertaken in the Tegulet and Debre Libanos areas for the exploitation of coal that was then discovered. The first steam engines brought from Europe were also tried on the new pavements in and around Addis Ababa. As is shown above too, Menelik gave permission to Engineer Mussie Ilg to undertake and sign the contract for the construction of the railway from Djibouti to Addis Ababa. The original plan of the railway construction, that was never realized, however, was meant to connect Entoto, Kaffa, and the White Nile.

Menelik was also the first Ethiopian monarch to introduce a government run by a cabinet of ministers with their respective ministries. In 1907, the bureau with official functionaries had begun in earnest and the following ministers were appointed:

Afenegus Nessibou, Minister of Justice
Fitewrari Habtegiorgis, Minister of War
Likemequas Ketema, Minister of Interior
Negadrs Hailegiorgis, Minister of Commerce and Foreign Affairs
Bejirond Mulugeta, Minister of Finance
Kentiba Waldetsadiq, Minister of Agriculture
Tsehafe Taezaz Gebreselassie, Minister of Pen
Qegnazmach Mekonnen, Minister of Public Works
Azaj Metaferia, Minister of Palace.⁷

And according to Tekeltsadiq Mekuria, there were two additional ministries that were established by proclamation but no ministers were appointed to these respective ministries: For the Ministry of Telephone, Lij Beyene Yimer was tentatively appointed; for the Ministry of Education, no minister was appointed at all.⁸ Although education was far from modern curricula during Menelik and a uniform national educational system was not established yet, the Emperor is credited for initiating co-education for the first Ethiopian schools. He was also a strong believer that education and religion are separate (not necessarily ‘separation of the state and religion’) and he emphatically warned the first French missionary teachers not to teach religion in the schools.

In an effort to transform Ethiopia via modern education, Menelik attempted to influence the conservative Ethiopians to change their attitude toward menial (manual) jobs and is believed to have issued proclamation on the dignity of labor as documented by Mahteme Selassie in his *Zekre Neger*:

“They [metalworkers, weavers, potters, etc] are in fact more important to the crown [than anyone]. Those whom you call traders and insult – they exchange goods we need. The indolent insult the wise. Looking down on people is due to lack of education. In faraway countries...they respect those called engineers. Workers prosper. They are not insulted for their profession. You who insult people, who use farm tools, turn my country barren. Insults to these people insults me, and those who do it will be imprisoned one year.”⁹

The title of ‘Tsehafe Taezaz (literally ‘scribbler of orders’) is not novice to Ethiopian traditional political systems; all hitherto kings have had Tsehafe Taezaz (chronicler) whose main duty was to document events and dispatch royal proclamations. During Menelik, the portfolio of the Tsehafe Taezaz or minister of pen may have had conflicted or overlapped with the minister of palace whose duty was mainly the administration of the palace and who was in charge of the protocol.

By and large, Menelik was a very curious leader aimed at transforming Ethiopia. He knew very well about the progress achieved by Japan and he wanted to emulate the latter. He

also liked to try new innovations and was adventurous in some sense; it is believed that Menelik brought a bicycle to his palace and tried it in front of dignitaries and diplomats and fell six times before he began to somewhat ride it properly. Robert Skinner, the American ambassador to Ethiopia appointed by Theodore Roosevelt, was one of the diplomats who witnessed Menelik's curiosity and adventure in trying new consumer items.

Menelik was the first Ethiopian leader to introduce gramophones and cinematography, but the religious leaders kept them at bay for some time due to their vehement opposition. The latter perceived cinema as act of the devil; in fact, the first cinema hall (at the junction of Ghandi Street and Churchill Avenue was popularly known as Seytan Biet (ሰይጣን ቤት house of the devil). With respect to the opposition of the introduction of cinema by the priests, Menelik is believed to have said, "priests or no priests, I will see this thing." The first reel to be run was of a religious subject, showing Jesus walking on water, so the priests...though they wanted too, could not speak of the intervention of Satan. What a success! Menelik and Ras Mekonnen were most assiduous attending the cinema."¹⁰

There is time for everything, as they say! And one of the modernizing Ethiopian leaders, Emeye Menelik Aba Dagnaw had to make the transition too. For the most part of his life – from his escape from Meqdele to wielding state power – and his political career, Menelik was perhaps the most fortunate and lucky leader in modern Ethiopian history in terms of scoring victories over Ethiopian enemies and relative enjoyment of longevity vis-à-vis his predecessors. But towards the end of his life, he was not so lucky. In 1909, he began suffering from blood poisoning and gastro-intestinal disease and by 1910 he was paralyzed and confined to his palace. On May 18 1909, cognizant of his incapacitation, Menelik ordered the official proclamation of his successor (Lij Eyasu) to be read for the public at JanMieda. The name of the successor, for no apparent reason, however, was not mentioned in the proclamation; Ethiopians in general and Addis Ababans in particular did not know who the successor was till October 28 1910 when Menelik himself (after recuperating from dumbness) ordered the reading of the proclamation at his palace and clearly revealing Lij Eyasu as his legitimate successor. A copy of the written proclamation, with a seal bearing the name of Emperor Menelik, was also sent to all regional administrators in Ethiopia. Menelik finally succumbed to his stroke and died on November 12, 1913.

Notes:

1. ዶክተር ተወልደ ትኩላ: የኢትዮጵያ አንድነትና ኢጣልያ የኢትዮጵያ ጥናትና ምርምር ተቋም: አዲስ አበባ ዩኒቨርሲቲ: አዲስ አበባ: ምያዝያ 1990 ዓ.ም. ገጽ 313:
2. Ghelawdewos Araia, www.africanidea.org/ethiopian_visctory.html
3. ተክለ ጻድቅ መኮርያ: የኢትዮጵያ ታሪክ: ከዐፄ ቴዎድሮስ እስከ ቀዳማዊ ኃይለ ሥላሴ: ብርሃንና ሰላም: 1961 ዓ.ም. ገጽ: 99-100
4. Carlo Rosseti, *Storia Diplomatici duranteil Regno di Menelik*, p. 59, quoted in Tewelde Tuku, Ethiopian Unity and Italy (same as # 1 above)

5. Richard Pankhurst (editor), The Ethiopian Royal Chronicles, Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 175
6. Ghelawdewos Araia, Ethiopia: The Political Economy of Transition, University Press of America, 1995, pp. 24-26
7. Richard Pankhurst, *ibid*, pp. 192-193; see also Tekletsadiq Mekuria, Ethiopian History: From Emperor Tewodros to Emperor Haile Selassie (same as # 3 above)
8. Tekletsadiq Mekuria, *ibid*, p. 122
9. Chris Prouty, Empress Taytu and Menilek II, The Red Sea Press, 1986, p. 301
10. Chris Prouty, *ibid*, p. 239

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