

SOME DEVELOPMENTS IN ETHIOPIA DURING  
THE ERA OF THE MESAFINT

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In writing the history of a centralised state the tendency has been to see things almost exclusively from the point of view of the central authority; what happens within the units or the provinces composing the state is generally considered in relation to the position, powers and privileges of the central authority; it is in the context of the centre that the importance of events in the provinces are assessed.

Writers on Ethiopia have not been an exception in this, although, in fact, Ethiopia was never a centralised state in the sense in which, for example, Dahomey in the nineteenth century was. Nevertheless, the imperial authority has been made the pivot around which the history of Ethiopia has been written and whatever references have been made to the provinces and to what may be considered as purely provincial history have been incidental. And, in so far as the era of the mesafint is concerned, these incidental references have been made with the purpose of showing the extent to which the central authority was in decline and was therefore incapable of exercising control over the provinces. The impression is given that without the imperial authority nothing really worth knowing about could happen within the provinces. Thus when, for a number of reasons, the imperial authority fell on a period of decline and was, for nearly a hundred years, no longer in a position to play a dominant role in the Empire, history, as it were, ceased to be made. One only has to open any of the standard history books on Ethiopia to appreciate the point which is being made here. The period from about 1769 to the advent of Tewodros to the imperial throne in 1855 is invariably dismissed in at most a couple of para-

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graphs in the existing history books.<sup>1</sup> These few paragraphs merely labour the point that the central imperial authority was in decline and that in the provinces the period was marked by incessant internecine wars. History, as it were, starts to be made again from 1855 when a man of great military acumen fought his way to the imperial throne and the central authority again started to play a dominating role throughout the empire. This approach to the history of the Empire cannot be of much help for an understanding of the era of the mesafint. It would seem that a change in approach and a shift in the area of inquiry are necessary if we are to appreciate fully the events of the period as well as the significance of the era of the mesafint in the general course of the history of Ethiopia. Serious attention should be given to a study of the provinces with a view to finding out precisely what was happening within each of the provinces during the era of the mesafint. There can be no doubt that a study of the provinces will offer a more detailed and a clearer picture of developments in the Empire during this period than a study of the imperial authority as such can do.

The one hundred or so years covered in this paper constituted a period of frequent warfare within the provinces. These wars have been seen as reflecting a state of anarchy in which no positive developments could have taken place. There can be little doubt that the frequency of the wars made life rather difficult for the individual inhabitants of the provinces. But the wars of the period can also be seen as the outward manifestation of a positive development through which the provinces were able to save the Empire from total collapse in the face of real and serious dangers.

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1. Over the past five years a few provincial studies have appeared but these are mostly anthropological: The only serious historical studies of the provinces known to the present writer are Dr. M. Abir's Ph.D. Thesis which has now been published under the title Ethiopia: The Era of the Princes, Longmans 1968, and Kofi Darkwah: The Rise of the Kingdom of Shoa, Unpublished London Ph.D. Thesis, 1966.

This paper attempts to do two things: the first is to give an indication of a major development which took place in the provinces during the period under consideration and of which the wars of the period, it has been suggested, were the outward manifestation; that is to say, territorial expansion, centralization and consolidation of provincial autonomy. Secondly, it attempts to show how as a result of this development, and contrary to popular belief, the provinces were able to preserve the territorial integrity of the Empire at a period when the central imperial authority was not in a position to lead the Empire against the dangers which threatened her unity and her very existence as an empire.

For the purpose of this paper two principal dangers which faced the empire in the period under review will be considered. The first was the occupation by the Galla of more than half the territory of the medieval empire and the entry of the Galla of the central plateau into the court and into the politics of the Empire with all its political and constitutional implications. The second danger was the attempt made by Muslim Egypt to occupy parts of the territory of Christian Ethiopia in the West, North-west, (Metemma district), North (the Bogos area) North-east (Massawa region).

The Galla conquest had significant religious and cultural implications for the Amhara.<sup>2</sup> At the time of their conquest the Galla were adherents of their own traditional religions and in their drive had killed off Christian Amhara and destroyed churches. They did not care a straw for either the church or the monarchy, institutions which were the embodiment of Amhara civilization. On settling down the Galla tended to adopt Islam rather than the Ethiopian Christianity. This was particularly so with the Galla of the central plateau, the Wollo, the Raja and the Yejju. Islam was adopted as a protective weapon against Christian Ethiopia.<sup>3</sup> With

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2. The word Amhara is used in this paper to cover both the Amharic and Tigrean speaking people of Ethiopia.
  3. Antonio Cecchi: Da Zeila alle Frontiere del Caffa  
Roma 1886, Vol. II pp.55-60.

muslim states ringing the Christian Empire in the North, North-west, and East, the adoption of Islam by the Galla, particularly those in the heart of the Empire, presented a great danger to all that the Amhara held dear. This fact was realised by the Amhara princes but for the most part neither the Emperor nor any other prince was in a position to deal with the situation.

The Scottish traveller James Bruce who visited Ethiopia between 1768 and 1773 describes a state of incessant warfare in the Empire.<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that these wars were by no means meaningless; they reflected a constitutional struggle at two different levels. At the national level it was a struggle between the imperial authority on the one hand and the provincial nobility on the other hand. The issue in this contest was the proper relationship between the Amhara nobles, traditional rulers of the provinces, and the central government as personified by the Emperor and his court. For the most part the nobles had the upper hand in this contest and provincialism got the better of imperial centralisation. The struggle which went on at the national level may be considered as a magnification of that which took place at the provincial level. In the provinces, at this period, an incessant contest was being fought between the provincial chiefs on the one hand and the petty chieftains of the various units which constituted the individual provinces. In this as in the national struggle the issue was one of centralization by the provincial chiefs as against the separatist tendencies of the districts. This is not surprising for a provincial chief needed to have the whole of his province united behind him before he could confidently enter the constitutional struggle against the imperial authority and hold his own against other provinces. In the provinces, however, unlike at the national level, it was the forces of decentralization which lost the contest. Within the provinces

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4. James Bruce: Travels to discover the Source of the Nile in the years 1768-1773. Edinburgh 8 vols. 1804.

See also Kofi Darkwah: "A New Approach to Ethiopia in the 18th and 19th Century" Research Review, Vol. 3 No. 3 1967, pp. 45-46.

therefore the era of the mesafint was marked by territorial expansion, centralization and the consolidation of provincial autonomy by the provincial chiefs. In this way provinces of varying strength and size emerged which, on their own initiative, stood up against the forces which threatened their traditional Amhara culture with destruction.

One such province was Shoa. A centre of the Empire from at least the 13th Century, Shoa was overrun by the Galla and by the beginning of the 18th Century was almost completely lost to the Christian Empire. Yet Christianity and the Amhara population were not annihilated. A few Amhara families managed to escape and took refuge in mountain fastnesses in the district of Manz. By a process which cannot be detailed in this paper, the surviving Amhara, under the leadership of a local family, gradually defeated the surrounding Galla and by the 1840's a powerful and well administered kingdom had emerged in the Southern half of the medieval Empire.<sup>5</sup> Among the reasons advanced by the most enlightened rulers of Shoa to justify their expansionist policy was the regaining of the lands which were lost to their ancestors and the re-establishment of the Amhara culture in the re-conquered lands.<sup>6</sup> Although this may sound ethno-centric it became an established policy of the Shoan dynasty to foster the revival of Amhara culture in the conquered Galla districts. This was done in two ways; first, by the conversion or rather a campaign for converting the Galla to the Ethiopian christianity. This enabled the church to educate the converted Galla in all

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5. For details of this development see Kofi Darkwah: The Rise of the Kingdom of Shoa 1813-1889. London Ph.D. Thesis July 1966. See also Art. Cit. in Research Review cit. pp.47-52.
6. Harris, W.C.: The Highlands of Ethiopia, London 1844 Vol.III p.37. Journal of Isenberg and Krapf. London 1843, pp.179-80.  
 Libro Verde No.XV Etiopia. Doc. 95 Menelik al Re Umberto I, Entotto 28 ghenbot, l'anno 20 del nostro regno. (= 4/6/1885).

aspects of Amhara civilization. In this connection it should be remembered that until the reign of Menelik II (1889-1913) when education of the western type was introduced into the Empire, education in all its aspects was the exclusive domain of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. And the church was the repository of Amhara culture. Secondly, by planting Amhara colonies among the Galla and encouraging closer association between the two peoples so that the process of assimilation might be facilitated.<sup>7</sup> The success of the policy of "Amharization" of the Galla was rather slow and must not be over-emphasized. Yet it can be said with a reasonable degree of confidence that by the 1850s when Tewodros revived the imperial authority and enabled it to assert her influence far and wide, the danger which the Southern Galla had presented to the Empire had been neutralized as a result of the Shoan expansion. Indeed Shoan conquest of the Galla provinces continued with increased vigour during the time when Menelik was king of Shoa (1865-1889). By the time this expansion became an imperial policy with the accession of Menelik to the imperial throne in 1889 nearly three-quarters of the Galla provinces had already been re-conquered by the "province" of Shoa and the Southern Galla were no longer a danger to the continued existence of the Empire. Here then is an example of a situation in the period under review where a "province" of the Empire, on its own initiative, and at a time when the imperial authority was moribund, worked to save Ethiopia from a danger which could well have led to the complete collapse of the whole Empire.

On the centre of the plateau between Shoa in the South and the province of Amhara in the North were the Wollo, the Raya and the Yejju Galla. The danger which they presented to the unity of the empire was in a sense greater than that presented by the Southern Galla. In the first place the Central Galla were more thoroughly Islamised than those in the South. Moreover, the Central Galla became identified with the imperial family through

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7. Sellassie, Guebre: Chronique, du règne de Ménélik II, roi des rois d'Ethiopie. (Edt. and trans. by Maurice de Coppet). Paris 1930-32. Vol. I pp.281-2.

marriage. It was in this that the greatest danger lay. Upon the advice of his mother, the Empress Mentuab, the Emperor Iyasu II (1730-50) married the daughter of one of the Galla chiefs of the central plateau. The object of this unprecedented move was probably to gain, in the Galla, allies against the separatist tendencies of the traditional Amhara chiefs. On the death of Iyasu II the heir to the throne was not only a half-Galla but also a minor whose Galla mother, Waizero Wobit,<sup>8</sup> acted as the regent. As was to be expected, the regent depended on her Galla relatives for her government appointing Galla to posts both in the provinces and at the court. The Scottish traveller James Bruce who was an eye witness to some of these events remarks that the appointment of the Galla to positions of influence was "observed with great discontent by the old families (i.e. Amhara families) which were the strength of the crown in former reigns".<sup>9</sup> From this time until the defeat of Ras Ali by Tewodros II in 1853-4, the Emperors became, in the words of the Chronicles "little more than Galla puppets". This is by no means an exaggeration, for the title of Ras, the third highest title in the Empire besides Negusa Nagast (Emperor) and Negus (King) fell to one of the dynasties of the Yejju Galla. And for more than fifty years members of this family exercised political power in Gondar and were indeed the real and effective rulers of what was left of the Empire until the last of them, Ras Ali II, was overthrown by Kassa of Quara who later became Emperor as Tewodros II. It will be an interesting study to examine the nature and the extent of the contribution made by the Galla of the central plateau to the weakening of the imperial authority. Scholars are likely to disagree on the causal relationship between Galla predominance and the separatist tendencies of the Amhara nobles; what is certain however is that the one intensified the other.

A brief analysis of the political situation in the Empire at the time of Bruce's visit indicates to what extent the Galla were in control of affairs. Of the five most important political personalities in the Northern

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8. Bruce: op. cit. Vol. IV p.148.

9. Bruce: op. cit. Vol. IV p.147.

half of the Empire, the Emperor was half-Galla; Powussen, the governor of the province of Begemder was a Galla, so were Fasil, governor of Godjam, and Gusho governor of the province of Amhara in which the imperial capital, Gondar, was situated. Only the governor of Tigre, Mikael Sehul was not a Galla. Besides, all the important court officials as well as the imperial troops were all to a man Galla.<sup>10</sup> It is no surprise that the Chronicles refer to the Emperors of this era as little more than Galla puppets.

"Amhara" opposition to Galla dominance over the affairs of the Empire was led by the Northern province of Tigre. Indeed no other province could, in the circumstance of those times, do this, since they were all firmly controlled by Galla chiefs. Thus while Shoa was turning the tide against the Southern Galla, Tigre was vigorously resisting the influence of the Galla of the central plateau over the Emperors.

It would seem that next to Shoa Tigre was the province which achieved the highest degree of success in the process of expansion and centralization which went on in the provinces. Here as in Shoa, a local dynasty, claiming to be a branch of the imperial family established a fairly strong and prosperous "Rasship". Unlike Shoa, however, Tigre did not become an independent kingdom because it did not possess the advantages which enabled Shoa to cut off the ties which had subordinated her to the imperial authority. Another reason for Tigre's inability to assert her independence was the "unpatriotic" activities of certain ambitious members of the Tigrean ruling dynasty. An example of this is found in the shifting alliances which Wube made with powerful interests both within and outside the province in his bid to secure the governorship of Tigre.

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10. Bruce: op. cit. Vols. 4, 5, 6 passim.  
.. Russel, Michael: Nubia and Abyssinia. London 1833.  
pp.145-160.



Not only did Wube seek military support from the French agents on the coast but also he married the daughter of Ras Ali, the effective Galla ruler of the Empire, in order to win the Ras' support against his rival Sabagardis in Tigre. Once he had achieved the governorship, however, Wube turned against Ras Ali and followed the traditional Tigrean policy of resistance to Galla predominance in the affairs of the Empire.<sup>11</sup>

At the time of Bruce's travels in Ethiopia the governor of Tigre, Ras Mikael Sehul, was perhaps the most powerful single governor in the Empire. And he personified Tigrean abhorrence of Galla rule at Gondar. An able warrior and a shrewd politician, he would stop at nothing in his determination to weaken and eventually eliminate Galla hold on the imperial authority. If it suited his purpose he would not hesitate to sacrifice his closest ally, and in fact twice in a period of six months Ras Mikael contrived the murder of two Emperors and a number of Galla chieftains.<sup>12</sup> By playing off the Galla governors, on whom the Emperors depended for the maintenance of their position, against one another, Mikael succeeded in making himself indispensable to the Emperors of his time. Nevertheless, his efforts to replace the Galla governors with men who had no Galla blood in them were only partially successful, and when he died the Galla were still firmly in control of affairs at the imperial court.

Mikael Sehul's anti-Galla policy was inherited by his 19th century successors as governors of Tigre. Walda Selassie (1800-16) Sebagadis (1823-31) and Wube (1831-53) all offered the Galla dominated imperial government at Gondar an extremely doubtful support and on many occasions were indeed more of enemies than of supporters. This is reflected in the many revolts which broke out in Tigre against the imperial government. Walda Selassie of Tigre was engaged in hostilities with the Ras of Gondar "who is called Gougousa" among other reasons, because "he has made

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11. C.M.S. Archives: CM/044 Krapf to D. Coates. 28/2/1842.

12. Bruce: op. cit. Vol. 4 pp.158-190.

a king who is not orthodox in the faith"<sup>13</sup> Walda Selassie's successor as governor of Tigre Sebagadis was almost constantly at war with Ras Gugsa and later with Gugsa's successor, Ras Mariam. And Wube while he was only the governor of Semen, even before he became the ruler of the whole of Tigre, had left no doubt as to his dislike of Galla predominance at Gondar. In March 1830, for example, while Ras Mariam's messengers were in Tigre treating for peace with Sebagadis, Wube of Semen set off on an expedition against the Ras at Gondar.<sup>14</sup> The C.M.S. Missionary, Samuel Gobat who was an eyewitness to some of these events points out in his Journal that "there has almost always been war between the House of Googsa and that of the Governors of Semen, during more than thirty years". He also remarks on the ruins that he saw "... of several villages (in Semen) desolated by Ras Googsa about twenty five years ago".<sup>15</sup> As governor of the whole of Tigre, therefore, Wube merely continued the traditional policy of the ruling house not only of Semen but also of Tigre against the Galla.

Tigrean resistance to Galla domination at Gondar appears to have reached a climax around 1842 when in alliance with Gojjam, Wube marched on Ras Ali's capital at Debra Tabor and was reported to have defeated the Ras in battle and to have induced the Abun to invest a non-Galla called Yohannes with the royal title while Wube himself assumed the title of Ras.<sup>16</sup> This Tigrean victory turned out to be an anti-climax for in the subsequent encounters Ras Ali defeated the Tigreans, replaced Yohannes with a man of his choice and forced Wube

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13. F.O. 1/1 f.155-6. no date: Ras Welled (i.e. Walda) Selassie to George III.
14. Samuel Gobat: Journal of a Three Years' Residence in Abyssinia etc. London. 1834. p.68.
15. Samuel Gobat: op. cit. p.76, 78.
16. C.M/044. Krapf to Coates, quoted above.

to flee from Gondar to Tigre. Such was the state of affairs when about 1852 an Amhara upstart called Kassa from the district of Quara (Kwara) began successfully to fight his way to the imperial throne, defeating all the provincial governors, both Amhara and Galla, and for the first time in over a hundred years initiated positive measures by which Galla domination at the Imperial Court was to be progressively destroyed.

The extrusion of the "Amhara" from positions of power both at the court and in the provinces by the Galla was not the only danger which faced the christian empire during the era of the mesafint. Perhaps even more serious was the threat which Muslim Egypt offered to the territorial integrity of the Empire. Egypt's imperial ambitions in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden coasts dated back a number of centuries. In the 12th century, for example, in her bid to control the Red Sea trade Egyptian soldiers conquered South-Western Arabia in 1174. It has even been said that "in some sense Somali and the North Kenya coast down to the Tana River can be considered as part of an Egyptian sphere until after the coming of the Portuguese".<sup>17</sup> It was, however, not until the early decades of the 19th century that Egyptian territorial ambitions were directed at the inland frontiers of Ethiopia. The revitalization of decadent Egypt by Muhammad Ali and the imperial aspirations of that ruler manifested themselves first in the conquest of Sudan and later in fruitless adventures in Syria. They were also to endanger the peace on the frontiers of Christian Ethiopia.

Muhammad Ali's schemes of conquest were said to have included among others the control of the source of the Nile which gave life to Egypt.<sup>18</sup> In pursuance of this objective Ali pushed his Sudan conquest along the Blue Nile as far as beyond Sennar. In their gradual encroachments the Egyptians came into collision with the

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17. G. Mathew in Oliver and Mathew: History of East Africa. Vol. I. p.III.

18. Dye, W. Mac E.: Muslim Egypt and Christian Abyssinia. 1880. p.120.

Ethiopians from Cassala in the West to Massawa in the North East. Throughout the reign of Muhammad Ali frontier incidents between Egypto-Sudanese soldiers and the Ethiopians were frequent.<sup>19</sup> Indeed the border struggle continued into the second half of the century not only in the West and North-West but also in the northern and eastern frontiers of Ethiopia. It was not until 1884 that the first serious official attempt at settlement was made between the two countries with Britain as a sort of guarantor.<sup>20</sup>

Throughout the first half of this long struggle the Ethiopians fought under no central direction for the central authority, it will be remembered, was moribund. Ethiopian resistance therefore became a duty which fell on the shoulders of the governors of the frontier provinces which were directly threatened. One province or rather district which stood up vigorously against the Egyptians was the north-western frontier district of Quara. Here, no less than in Shoa or in Tigre, the process of conquest and centralization which was such a feature of provincial development during this period led to the consolidation of the power of the local ruling dynasty. It was this local dynasty which offered the leadership that was needed in the resistance to Egyptian encroachment. One of the better known among the local rulers of the first half of the nineteenth century was Dedjatch Kenfu, whose youthful brother or nephew, Kassa, the future Emperor Tewodros II, threw himself body and soul into the struggle against the

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19. For details of this frontier struggle see M. Abir: "The Origins of the Ethiopian-Egyptian border problem in the 19th century". J.A.H. Vol. VIII, No.3, 1967.

20. For Ethio-Egyptian frontier struggle in the second half of the century see among others Dye, Mac. op. cit.; F.O. Confidential Print Nos. 3203 and 4249.

Egyptians.<sup>21</sup> The effect of these struggles on the development of Kassa's ideas must be noted in passing. In the first place it brought home to him the urgent need for national unity; he realized clearly that not until Ethiopia could present a united front against the Egyptians she stood in danger of becoming a prey to her northern neighbour. Secondly, Kassa's religious sentiments were sharpened and he became an inveterate enemy of the Muslims. It was these experiences which determined Kassa, if ever he had the opportunity, to re-unite and strengthen the divided Empire and to lead his Christian soldiers in a crusade against the Muslims not only in Egypt but also in the Holy Land. As Emperor therefore Kassa/Tewodros's relations with Muslim Egypt were the worst in the history of modern Ethiopia.<sup>22</sup> As a result of the resistance offered by the rulers of the district of Quara Egypt was kept at bay in the north-west and her attempts at territorial acquisition in this area met with no success.

It was not only Quara which was forced by the necessity for self-preservation to resist Egyptian encroachments on the frontiers of the Christian Empire. Wube, the ruler of Tigre (1831-53) also opposed the Egyptians vigorously in the Bogos area. This area was to become crucial in the Ethio-Egyptian border struggle during the 1870s and the 1880s. In the 1830s and 1840s Wube consistently resisted not only Egyptian encroachments but also attempts by French Roman Catholics to establish missions in the Bogos region. In 1844 for example Wube succeeded in driving away the Egyptian and Turkish soldiers from Bogos to Massawa and threatened to invade the port of Massawa.<sup>23</sup> Although Wube's

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21. For Kassa's early life see among others Henry Dufton: Narrative of a Journey Through Abyssinia in 1862-3 London 1867, pp.120-22. For the relationship between Kassa and Dedj Kenfu see Sven Rubenson: King of Kings Tewodros of Ethiopia, pp.25-26 and footnote 39 on p.26.

22. F.O. Confidential Print No.4249.

23. F.O. Confidential Print No.3203.

successes against the Egyptians were not as spectacular as those of the rulers of Quara, his resistance considerably weakened Egyptian advance against Ethiopian in the north and postponed large scale confrontation between the two states for at least thirty years; by then Ethiopia had come under an effective central government and was therefore able to resist successfully the Egyptian attacks in the 1870s.

In conclusion it may be said that the era of the mesafint witnessed interesting developments in the Empire of Ethiopia. On the one hand the imperial authority as a result of a combination of related factors sank to its nadir. On the other hand the provinces passed through a period of positive achievement in the form of territorial expansion, centralization and consolidation of provincial autonomy. The degree of autonomy and the extent of centralization, however, varied from one province to another. It was this development which took place in the provinces that enabled them to withstand pressures and dangers which directly threatened their individual existence. In preserving their individual existence in the face of these dangers, the province ironically saved the Empire from total collapse, for their very continued existence as semi-independent units of the Ethiopian Empire made it possible for a re-unification to take place when in the second half of the 19th century the imperial crown fell into the hands of able persons.



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