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ASPECTS OF THE 19TH CENTURY HISTORY OF ETHIOPIA

by Kofi Darkwah*

In recent years considerable research has been conducted into various aspects of the history of Ethiopia particularly for the 19th century. Consequently much more is now known about the empire than before. The result of the researches is, however, still largely in the form of theses or articles in various learned journals. The present paper attempts to bring together in the form of an outline, and only for the 19th century, those aspects of the history of the empire into which research has been made in the last few years, and to indicate the new interpretations which have resulted.

The 19th century was an interesting and at the same time a very important period in the long history of the empire of Ethiopia. When the century began the prestige and authority of the emperor, who was the embodiment of the central government were at a low ebb, and the rulers of the provinces acted almost like masters of independent entities. This unhappy situation continued throughout the first half of the century. During the second half of the century, however, the position of the emperor improved gradually until by the end of the century the central government commanded respect and obedience throughout the length and breadth of the empire.

The decline of the imperial power dated back to the 18th century and was the cumulated result of a combination of factors which took their origin in the preceding centuries. In the first half of the 16th century the last phase of a long series of wars between the Christian empire and her Muslim neighbours was fought. In this struggle the odds were so badly against the christian state that it was only through the intervention of some four hundred well-armed Portuguese soldiers that she was saved from a possible total extinction as a christian state. Nor did her Portuguese saviours have an easy job for their combined efforts succeeded in defeating the Muslims only through desparate fighting which cost the Portuguese more than three quarters of their men including their leader Christopher da Gama, the brother of the more famous naval explorer Vasco da

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Gama.¹ Secondly, in the first decades of the 17th century, there ensued fifteen years of religious civil strife. This was the religious effect of the intervention of the Portuguese, Roman Catholic by denomination, in the war between Orthodox Monophysite Christian Ethiopia and the Muslims. In this religious civil strife the Roman Catholics won to their side the support of the emperors of the time. Nevertheless, they were finally defeated and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church came back to its own. The third factor which contributed to the decline of the Imperial authority was the migration of the people called Galla. At the time of their advance into Ethiopia in the 16th and 17th centuries the Galla were neither christians nor muslims but adherents of their own traditional religions. In their advance they came to occupy the whole of the southern and parts of the central Ethiopian plateau; in other words the Galla occupied at least half the traditional territory of the christian empire. The imperial government was unable to stem the tide of the Galla onslaught.

The combined effect of these three factors was that by the end of the 17th century the imperial authority had lost much of the human and material resources to which it had had access in former times. It had also lost the respect and confidence which it used to enjoy from its traditional supporters - the Amhara and Tigrean nobility. Consequently these traditional supporters became more separatist in their attitude to the central imperial government. This tendency was aggravated by the marriage of Emperor Iyasu II (1730-55) to the daughter of a Yejju Galla chief. The marriage, contracted on the advice of the Emperor's mother, was probably intended to gain, in the Galla, useful allies for the imperial crown against the separatist tendencies of the Tigrean/Amhara nobility; but it had the effect of alienating these traditional nobles all the more because they saw in the marriage a threat to their traditional role in the government of the empire. This fear was not unfounded for in course of time the newer element in the society, the Galla, were brought into every level of the governmental machinery until by the opening of the 19th century

1. The story of Portuguese role in the war is told in The Portuguese Expedition to Abyssinia in 1541-1543, as narrated by Castanhoso. Trans. and ed. R.S. Whiteway, London, Hakluyt Society 1902.

the Galla occupied important positions not only in the provinces but also at the imperial court.

It is not difficult to see how this came about. When Iyasu II died the heir to the throne, Iyoas, was half-Galla; he was also a minor and his Galla mother 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. From this time until the rise of Emperor Tewodros in 1855 the politics of the empire was dominated by the Galla.

Right from the beginning of this development the traditional nobility sought to resist the budding influence of the Galla in the empire. One way by which they hoped to do this was to try and weaken, and if possible completely cut off, their allegiance to the central or imperial government. When the 19th century opened therefore there had been a long standing struggle on the part of the Amhara/Tigrean nobles to eliminate the Galla influence from the governing circles of the empire. This struggle was championed by the northern province of Tigre, and Tigre's assumption of this responsibility dated back to the last quarter of the 18th century when Ras Mikael Sehul became governor of that province. Thus one of the topics to consider in any serious discussion of the history of Ethiopia in the 19th century is the struggle between the Tigrean/Amhara nobles on the one hand and the central imperial authority as represented by the Galla dominated imperial court. The issue at stake, of course, was the proper role of the traditional nobles in the government of the empire. Although in the first half of the 19th century the traditional nobles were unable to oust the Galla from their positions of influence they succeeded in keeping the effective power of the imperial authority from most of the former provinces of the empire and limited it only to the capital, Gondar, and its surrounding districts.

Another important topic of the period is the development which took place within the provinces themselves. Within the individual provinces the 19th century saw serious efforts by the provincial rulers to expand their territory, centralise and consolidate their power over the expanding province. This

process also takes its origin from the 18th century in some case and in others from the 17th century.

A conspicuous feature of the process of expansion and centralisation was the almost incessant warfare which went on in the various parts of the individual provinces. As a result of these wars provincial frontiers kept shifting and provinces of varying sizes and strength emerged in all parts of the empire. The weaker ones were in course of time absorbed by their stronger neighbours and in this way the number of provinces kept changing. In the first quarter of the century there must have been at least ten provinces in the northern and central parts of the empire, and there were at least as many in the southern parts. By the middle of the century the northern and central parts were dominated by four large provinces: Tigre, Begemder, Gojjam and Wallo. Shoa dominated the area immediately to the south of Wallo; to the south-west of Shoa five monarchies of different sizes and degrees of cohesion had emerged, and to the south and south-east of Shoa were the provinces of Gurage, Arussi and Harar. All these provinces continued to expand their territory in the second half of the century with varying degrees of success. By 1889 Shoa had achieved such successes in her expansion that she had absorbed all the provinces to the south-west, south and south-east. Tigre, in the north had similarly extended the frontiers of her effective influence although to a lesser extent than was the case with Shoa. As for centralisation and the development of strong provincial government Shoa was probably the most successful.

An important factor in the expansion of the provinces was their importation of improved European firearms. Beginning from the first decade of the century there was a steady influx of firearms until by the 1880s Ethiopia was the best armed of the black African countries. Owing to her geographical position - her nearness to the coast - Tigre was by far the most successful in the acquisition of firearms. As early as 1808 the ruler of Tigre, Ras Walda Sellassie and his subordinate chiefs were reported to possess a total of 8,900 matchlocks, and by 1831 the Tigrean rulers had acquired at least another three thousand muskets.¹

1. Richard Pankhurst: Economic History of Ethiopia 1800-1935. Haile Sellassie I University Press, Addis Ababa, 1968, p.579 and sources cited in Footnote 3 on page 611.

Next to Tigre Shoa was the best armed. The other provinces in the north and in the centre managed to obtain a few firearms, probably not more than two thousand matchlocks between them all by the 1830s¹; but the southern provinces were deprived of this advantage by the firm control that Shoa exercised over importation of firearms into those parts of the empire.² Acquisition of firearms, it should be emphasized, continued throughout the 19th century. From the 1830s onwards the rulers of Shoa, for example, sought ways and means by which to increase their stock of firearms. Under Menilek (1865-1889) a definite policy of acquisition was pursued as a result of which thousands of firearms were imported from Italy and through private French traders. Yet despite the expansion in Shoa's armament position Tigre continued to be the best armed province in the empire throughout the 1870s and the 1880s. The success achieved by Tigre and Shoa in arms acquisition is one of the factors which explain the success which attended their expansionist and centralising activities.

In the early years of the 1850s a rebellion which started from the district of Quara in the north-west of the empire was to have profound effects on the subsequent history of the empire as a whole. The rebellion was began by Kassa of Quara, one of the minor officials of Ras Ali, Galla governor of Begemder, guardian of the imperial throne and the effective ruler of what was left of the empire. By sheer military prowess Kassa defeated one provincial governor after another including Ras Ali himself, killing some and imprisoning others; by the end of February 1855 the rebel was in control of the three great provinces of Tigre, Begemder and Gojjam. Ignoring the existence of the puppet emperor of the day Kassa got himself crowned as emperor and took the throne name of Tewodros II. In 1855-56 he conquered the provinces of Wallo and Shoa and brought them also under his control. For the first time since the middle of the 18th century all these provinces were brought under the control of the central imperial government.

1. Ibid.

2. Archivio Storico della Società Geografica Italiana. Cartonì VIII D Traversi's letter dated Let-Marefia 10/4/1888.

As emperor Tewodros set out to achieve three things. First, to reorganise the political character of the empire in such a way as to break the separatist and rebellious tendencies of the nobility and subject them unequivocally under the authority of the Imperial Authority. Secondly, to bring about religious unity within his empire by converting the pagans and muslims to the orthodox church of Ethiopia and expelling those who would not adopt the christian faith. Thirdly, to reform the social and economic life of the empire and eliminate the abuses of the preceding era. His ultimate objective was to make the power of the emperor supreme within the empire through reforms calculated to strengthen the imperial authority morally, economically and militarily. In short his objective was to revitalize and modernise his empire.

In his efforts to realize his objective Tewodros sought to take advantage of modern technology; he also sought to make use of European nationals who came to his country as an instrument for developing sustained friendly relationship with the states of Europe. It must be noted that in his desire to make his country profit by its relationship with Europe Tewodros had good company in contemporary or near contemporary rulers in other parts of 19th century Africa. Such well-known rulers as Muhammad Ali and Khedive Ismail both of Egypt, Kabaka Mutesa I of Buganda, King Moshesh the founder of the Basuto [Lesotho] nation - to name only a few - all had the desire to use their relationship with the states of Europe to the advantage of their native countries.

In those admirable objectives of revitalising the central imperial authority and modernizing his empire Tewodros II achieved only a transient success. Despite his initial achievements he was unable to push his reforms successfully through the second half of his reign. The habits of insubordination separatism and autonomy which marked the political life in the period before his rise to power had, in the words of a recent writer, "become too firmly entrenched to eradicate as quickly as Tewodros hoped to eradicate them".¹ In his efforts to eradi-

1. Donald Crumney: "Tewodros as a Reformer and a Modernizer" Journal of African History Vol.X No.3, 1969, p.468.
For a biographical study of Tewodros see Sven Rubenson: King of Kings Tewodros of Ethiopia. Published by H.S. I University in association with O.U.P., Addis Ababa and Nairobi, 1966.

cate these abuses Tewodros did not receive from his subjects that degree of cooperation which was necessary for the success of his policies. This led to frustration on the part of the emperor. The frustration revealed itself in high-handed, cruel and inhuman acts. The resulting despotic behaviour of Tewodros had the effect of uniting the country against him, a unity which expressed itself in revolts all over the country. Thus Tewodros spent the second half of his reign trying, almost always without success, to suppress revolt after revolt in different parts of his empire. The same element of frustration led to a strain in his relations with the European nationals in his empire and to his imprisoning the British Consul and a number of Europeans. The upshot of this action was that in 1867 the British government despatched a military expedition led by Sir Robert Napier into Ethiopia with the sole aim of freeing the British Consul and the other Europeans imprisoned by the Ethiopian emperor. Tewodros committed suicide in April 1868 just as Napier's men were on the point of entering his headquarters Maqdala. His death brought to an end the first serious attempt in the 19th century to revive the power and the prestige of the imperial authority and to reunite all the former provinces of the empire under one effective central government.

Although Tewodros failed to achieve his objectives his reign was not without significance. In the first place his rise to power led to the elimination of the Galla control over the imperial crown which had lasted for more than a century. From that time effective political power in the empire reverted into the hands of the Amhara and Tigrean nobility. Secondly the events of his reign brought the central imperial authority some vitality and self-confidence and his attempt at reforms as well as his efforts to adopt modern technology as a weapon for the development of his empire constituted a worthy example which was emulated by his successors.

On the death of Tewodros Wagshum Gobazie of Lasta declared himself emperor with the throne name Tekla Giyorgis and managed to keep himself in power for three to four years. Throughout this period, however, his position was challenged by other provincial leaders among whom was Godja Kassa of

Tigre. The desultory skirmishes which ensued ended with the victory of Kassa over Tekla Giyorgis in July 1871.¹ Kassa then got himself crowned as emperor and took the throne name of Yohannes IV.

The policy that Yohannes pursued as emperor was, in its domestic as well as foreign aspects, essentially a continuation of the noble aspirations that Tewodros had, with such admirable vigour, sought to translate into a reality. In other words Yohannes sought to make the imperial authority supreme at home and to defend the unity, integrity and independence of his empire against encroachment from foreign powers.

Though Yohannes was anxious to make the imperial authority supreme at home the methods by which he hoped to achieve this were different from those employed by his predecessor. Tewodros had used armed warfare to try and reduce all the provincial rulers to a position of complete subordination to the central government and was not prepared to concede even a shadowy independence to any province. Yohannes on the other hand was prepared to concede limited autonomy to the provinces provided and for as long as they recognised him as their overlord and paid him regular tribute. This method was clearly ineffective for establishing the absolute supremacy of the imperial authority throughout the empire. The ineffectiveness of Yohannes' method has led one scholar to remark that "rather than risking a series of civil wars, he [Yohannes] gave up Tewodros' idea of making Ethiopia a centralized national state"; he concedes, however, that "[Yohannes] was certainly not prepared to accept a divided Ethiopia".² Such a remark fails to take fully into consideration the circumstances of the time. It is true that both Tewodros and Yohannes faced external threat to the integrity

1. M. Chaîne: "Histoire du règne de Iohannes roi d'Éthiopie 1868-1889" Revue Semitique 1913, p.180. The Chronicler adds that Tekla Giyorgis was killed in the battle.
2. Sven Rubenson: "Some aspects on the survival of Ethiopian independence in the period of the scramble for Africa". Historians in Tropical Africa, Salisbury, 1962, p.259.

of their empire but the external threat which faced Yohannes was certainly different in dimension and intensity from that with which Tewodros had to deal. It was this essential difference which determined the change in approach to domestic issues. Yohannes' methods should thus be seen and judged in the light of the situation in which he found himself. Yohannes was not prepared to accept a divided Ethiopia, yet he adopted methods which seemed ineffective in achieving national unity. He may have adopted those methods because throughout his reign he was involved in a struggle with foreign countries to safeguard the frontiers and preserve the territorial integrity of his empire. For this reason he never really had a free hand to deal more firmly with his recalcitrant provincial rulers. And while he was involved in a struggle with foreign powers he must have thought it wise not to weaken his resources in an armed conflict to assert his supremacy at home, especially if this could be secured, if only temporarily, by some other method. Thus Yohannes may well have adopted these somewhat compromising methods as a stop gap measure until such time that he would be free from entanglements with foreign countries to deal more firmly with his provincial rulers. His treatment of the King of Shoa and the ruler of Gojjam supports this view. But as it turned out that time never came.

The weakness in Yohannes method is revealed in the relationship between the imperial authority and the ruler of the Kingdom of Shoa who at this time was an astute and ambitious man called Menilek.

In 1875 after he had secured himself in the north Yohannes marched south to Shoa with the object of suppressing the independence of that kingdom. Threatening Egyptian attack on his northern frontier forced the emperor to change his mind and instead of fighting he regulated his relations with Menilek by an agreement by which Menilek acknowledged Yohannes as his overlord and agreed to pay him tribute.¹

1. Ministère des Affaires Étrangères (Paris): Correspondence Politique des Consuls, Égypte, Massouah, Vol.4, p.12. De Sarzec to Decarzes, 14/8/1875.

L.L. Lande: "Un voyageur français dans L'Éthiopie Méridionale" Revue des Deux Mondes Vol.30, 1878, pp. 895-6.

This arrangement was not satisfactory to either party; while Yohannes expected Menilek to behave like a vassal the latter continued to act like an absolute master of an independent kingdom and even styled himself by the emperor's title. Yohannes was of course determined to establish himself as the supreme ruler of the whole of Ethiopia and could not tolerate this pretence on the part of Menilek. In 1878 therefore when he was for a brief period free from engagements with his foreign enemies Yohannes went south to Shoa intending to break once and for all the pretensions of the ruler of that part of the empire. Again the prospect of weakening his forces in a domestic war at a time when he needed his full strength to protect his vulnerable frontiers against external threats forced him to settle his differences with Menilek in a "treaty" made on March 20 at Litche. The most important "clauses" of the "treaty" were as follows: Menilek renounced the imperial title by which he styled himself and in return was officially recognised and crowned as King of Shoa by Yohannes. Menilek also reaffirmed his recognition of Yohannes as his overlord and promised to give him tribute and military service. On his part Yohannes promised to provide military help for Menilek when the need arose. On religious issues it was agreed that Menilek should expel from his Kingdom the European missionaries then working there. The agreement was a set-back for the independence of Menilek so that by forcing him to accept it Yohannes had thereby succeeded in establishing himself as the supreme ruler in the empire.

The activities of Menilek in the four years following the 1878 settlement caused the emperor considerable uneasiness. By way of arbitrating between Menilek and Ras Adal, the governor of Gojjam, who had gone to war in June 1882 Yohannes made a new settlement with Menilek which was designed to ensure in no uncertain manner the obedience and support of Menilek for the emperor. This settlement confirmed the two previous settlements. Menilek's control over those Galla lands to the

1. Antonio Cecchi: Da Zeila alle frontiere del Caffa, Roma, 1886, Vol.1, p.415-405. Massaja, G.: I miei trenta-cinque anni di missione nell'alta Etiopia, Milano, 1885-95, Vol.XI, p.10. Waldmeier, T.: Autobiography of Theophilus Waldmeier, London, 1886, p.133.

south of Gojjam disputed between himself and Ras Adal was recognised. With a view to strengthening the relationship between the emperor Yohannes and his vassal Menilek a marriage union was arranged between the emperor's son and heir, Ras Areya Sellassie and Meneilek's daughter Waizero Zauditu. The marriage actually took place in October 1882. Further the settlement dealt with the question of succession to the imperial throne on the death of Yohannes. But precisely what was arranged is not known. Most writers think that Menilek was recognised as the direct successor to Yohannes. This seems very unlikely, in view of (a) the strength of regional sentiments at the time, (b) the fact that Yohannes had a son to succeed him and could hardly be expected to overlook the rights or claims of his own son in favour a vassal; and (c) the purpose behind the marriage between Ras Areya Sellassie and Waizero Zauditu. It is here being suggested, having regard to all the circumstances of the time, that the succession settlement agreed upon was likely to be something like this: that the emperor's son and heir Ras Areya was to succeed him and was himself to be succeeded by the children from his marriage to Zauditu; and that in the event of Ras Areya dying without an heir Menilek was to succeed him.

The concessions made to Menilek in the settlements of 1878 and 1882 would seem to have compromised the supremacy of Yohannes' imperial position vis-a-vis Menilek and would seem to suggest the failure of Yohannes to reduce Shoa and its ruler to a position of undisputed subordination to the imperial authority. This could only be achieved, it would seem, by armed warfare but for other good reasons - explained earlier in this paper¹ - Yohannes was hesitant to adopt that course of action. On his part Menilek appeared to be content with his method of exacting concessions from the emperor through negotiations. He was careful not to provoke Yohannes into armed conflict for he was painfully aware of the fact that militarily the emperor was more powerful and that he (Menilek) stood the chance of being defeated if it came to armed warfare between them.

In 1888 Ras Areya Sellassie, the heir to Yohannes, died without any children by Zauditu. A year later when

1. Page 69-70 above.

Yohannes was killed in battle against the Sudanese Mahdists the imperial crown passed into the hands of Menilek of Shoa who became emperor Menilek II.

Menilek II was one of the greatest emperors that Ethiopia has known in its long history. In not only its system of government but also in its territorial extent and problems Ethiopia of today was largely his creation. He adopted and successfully executed the policy, first initiated by Tewodros II of uniting all the provinces of the empire under one effective central government. In his relations with foreign powers he continued the policy of ensuring the territorial integrity and independence of his empire. The method he adopted to achieve his domestic objective was a revolution in government by which hereditary rulers were gradually abolished and their place taken by officials appointed by and responsible to the crown. It is appropriate to remind ourselves that this process by which hereditary officials were replaced by appointed bureaucracy was not peculiar to 19th century Ethiopia. It occurred in many other contemporary African Kingdoms and empires; indeed it seems to be the usual method by which monarchical centralization was effected.

It must be pointed out that the administrative methods employed by Menilek had been tried out by him and his predecessors as Kings of Shoa. Thus when Menilek became emperor he had behind him at least twenty years of experience in the art of government. This factor contributed in no small measure to making his imperial reign the success which it was.

Another important development which took place in the reign of Menilek was the expansion of the empire. Again this dates back to the period when Menilek was just the King of Shoa. From 1865 when he became the ruler of Shoa Menilek systematically expanded the frontiers of his inheritance on all sides. By 1889 when he became emperor he had more than doubled the size of his Kingdom which now included the five south-westerly monarchies of Guma, Ghera, Goma, Limmu-Enarga and Jimma Kaka, Gurage to the south as well as Arussi and the city state of Harar to the south-east of Shoa. On becoming emperor Menilek continued the policy of territorial expansion and it was in this period that the southernmost provinces of present day Ethiopia were conquered.

As has been mentioned earlier the success of Menilek's expansionist activities can be explained in terms of organization and firearms. Menilek's opponents were in most cases dis-united; to add to this disadvantage they also either possessed no firearms at all as in the case of the southerly and the south-westerly provinces, or they possessed very few as in the case of Harar. In their campaigns of conquest therefore Menilek's soldiers had a decisive advantage in their relative organization and in their possession of firearms.

So far we have dealt only with the domestic history of Ethiopia, whatever references have been made to her relations with other powers have been incidental. We may now look in detail at the relations which developed between her and her neighbours of the Nile Valley - Egypt and the Sudan - as well as with European powers which showed an interest in the area, namely Britain, France and Italy.

Relations with Egypt were very important throughout the 19th century. As far as the Sudan was concerned, however, it was only from the 1880s that her influence on Ethiopian affairs became important enough to attract the attention and reaction from the central imperial government of Ethiopia. This was because until the Mahdist revolt in the Sudan in 1882 that country formed part of the Turkish possessions conquered and governed by Egypt so that her relations with Ethiopia were submerged in Egypt's relations with the christian empire.

In the early years of the 19th century Muhammad Ali came to power in Egypt and he at once embarked on a programme of military social and economic reforms to transform and strengthen Egypt. To obtain the manpower and the revenues which were needed to carry through these reforms Muhammad Ali turned to the areas to the south of Egypt and conquered the independent states of Dongola, Shendi, Berber, Sennar and Kordofan in northern and central Sudan. The attraction of these areas lay in the prospects they offered for slave hunt and also in the legendary mineral wealth that was believed to be there.¹ In the 1830s Egypt got involved in military

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1. For Egyptian rule in the Sudan see among others Mustafa Sabri: L'Empire Égyptien sous Mehemet Ali, (Paris 1930).
 - Richard Hill: Egypt in the Sudan 1820-1881, (1959).
 - P.M. Holt : A Modern History of the Sudan from the fun] sultanate to the present day.

adventures in Syria and Greece and as a result her need for more revenue and manpower increased considerably. To meet this increased need Egyptian troops in the Sudan pushed further afield establishing posts and raiding into the borders of the Ethiopian plateau. This was the area which was most promising for minerals, trade and slave hunting. Naturally the Ethiopians did not look on the activities of the Egyptians with composure, and clashes ensued between the two neighbours on their frontiers. On a number of occasions it looked as if the Egypto-Sudanese soldiers would penetrate well into Ethiopia.¹

Since Ethiopia lacked effective central government during the first half of the 19th century it fell on the rulers of the frontier districts immediately threatened to oppose the Egyptian incursions into areas which they considered to be part of their territory. In parts of the north and in the north-west it was the rulers of Dembya who resisted the Egyptians while the rulers of Tigre opposed them in parts of the north and in north-east. Although serious clashes occurred between the Egyptians and the Ethiopians in 1828-9, in the 1830s and 1840s, these were relatively mild compared with what was to happen in the second half of the century.

In the first half of the 19th century Egyptian objective in Ethiopia was limited to establishing its authority in the areas on the slopes of the Ethiopian plateau which were rich in minerals and to controlling the caravan routes and the outlets for the rich Ethiopian trade. In the second half of the century, however, the Egyptians became overtly imperial in their ambitions as regards the Ethiopian regions. This was part of the larger plan of the then ruler of Egypt, Khedive Ismail, following the imperial traditions of his great predecessor Muhammad Ali, to build an Egyptian empire covering the whole of north-east Africa. In pursuit of this plan Ismail bought the port of Massawa from his suzerain the sultan of Turkey in 1865, and between 1870 and 1875 Egyptian troops occupied all the ports on the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden coasts. In 1875 an Egyptian contingent pushed inland and

1. For details of this struggle in the first half of the 19th century see M. Abir: 'The Origins of the Ethiopian-Egyptian border problem in the 19th century'. J.A.H. Vol. VIII, No. 3, 1967, pp. 443-461.

occupied the important southern city state of Harar. Already by 1871 the Egyptian governor of Massawa, Werner Munzinger¹ was ready with plans for Egyptian annexation of Bogos, Halhal and Marea, districts in northern Ethiopia regarded by the rulers of Tigre as part of their territory. In 1872 Bogos and its surrounding districts were in fact occupied by the Egyptians.²

These events took place at a time when the struggle for succession to the imperial throne in Ethiopia following the death of Tewodros was still unsettled, so that there was no effective reaction to the Egyptian activities in the north. By 1875 Yohannes IV had emerged from the succession struggle as the new emperor and had established himself as the strong man in the empire. In that year when Egyptian troops penetrated into the northern province of Tigre they were crushingly defeated at Gundet by the new emperor, Yohannes. In the following year, in an attempt to avenge their defeat at Gundet, the Egyptians projected an attack on Ethiopia from three different points - the north, the east and Harar. Again they were completely wiped out by the Ethiopians.³ From this time until 1884 the Egyptian threat of conquest paled into periodic border clashes on Ethiopia's northern frontier. In 1884 through the efforts of the British government a peace treaty was signed between Egypt and Ethiopia which stipulated Egyptian withdrawal from the Ethiopian regions and normalised relations between the two countries.⁴ It was fortunate for Ethiopia that the period of determined Egyptian imperial efforts coincided with the revival

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1. Munzinger was a Swiss who came to the Red Sea region originally as an explorer and a businessman. He soon developed ambitions for territorial possession in the region and in his attempt to win support for his plans took service first with Britain then with France as Vice-Consul at Massawa and later with Egypt as governor of that port.
 2. Sven Rubenson: "Some Aspects on the Survival of Ethiopian Independence in the period of the scramble for Africa". Op.cit., p.257.
 3. For relations between Egypt and Ethiopia in the second half of the century see G. Douin: Histoire du règne du Khedive Ismail, (Cairo 1938), Tome III Pts. 2 and 3. W. Mac. E. Dye: Muslim Egypt and Christian Abyssinia, 1880.
 4. This was the Hewett Treaty which was signed at Adowa on June 3, 1884 after several months of negotiations.

of central government capable of offering effective resistance to Egypt. It was probably this which saved christian Ethiopia from being dismembered by imperially minded muslim Egypt.

In the 1880s the Sudan, as distinct from Egypt, became a factor which was taken seriously in the governing circles of Ethiopia. This was because in 1882 the Sudan, under the inspiring leadership of a religious figure, Muhammad Ahmad bin Abdalla, popularly known as the Mahdi, revolted against Egypt. A fairly strong muslim state was then established in the Sudan whose attitude to her non-muslim neighbours was militant and uncompromising. A jihad (holy war) was set in motion aimed at converting the infidels to Islam, and christian Ethiopia became an obvious target. From 1882 onwards, therefore, Mahdist troops made periodic incursions into the western districts of Ethiopia and caused much uneasiness among the frontier population. On at least two occasions¹ emperor Yohannes approached the Mahdist authorities to agree to make peace between them but on both occasions their response was not encouraging.² Early in 1887 Negus Tekla Haymanot the Ethiopian governor of Gojjam attacked Gallabat and pillaged the neighbourhood. Gallabat was an important market district on Ethiopia's north-western frontier the possession of which was disputed between the Ethiopia and the Sudan. In 1888 the Mahdist soldiers penetrated well into Ethiopia and sacked Gondar, its former capital. In the following year there was an encounter between the opposing forces at Gallabat. It was in his attempt to stem this tide from the Sudanese muslims

1. First in a letter to the Mahdi in March or April 1885 then in a letter to the Khalifa dated 25 December 1888. See G.N. Sanderson: "Sudanese Factors in the History of Ethiopia in the Nineteenth Century" Paper read at the International Conference on the theme Sudan in Africa at Khartoum in February 1968, p.5 and footnote 27 on p.iii.
2. G.N. Sanderson, "Contributions from African Sources... etc." Historians in Tropical Africa, Salisbury 1962, p.33 and footnote 3; p.234 and footnote 1.

that emperor Yohannes received a mortal wound in an otherwise successful initial battle at Metemma in 1889. This Sudanese threat to Ethiopia was one of the legacies that Menilek II inherited when he succeeded Yohannes as emperor. Shortly after his accession Menilek made overtures to the Khalifa for peaceful settlement of the issues at stake between them.¹ During the reign of Menilek however there was a gradual cessation of hostilities and a consequent improvement in the relations between the two countries. From 1893 onwards because of the increasing threat of European attack against her, Sudan's attitude to Ethiopia softened. In 1895 Menilek again made overtures to the Khalifa but it was not until February 1897 that peace was concluded between them at Addis Ababa.² This new relationship did not have the time to reveal its full effects because of the conquest of the Mahdist state in 1898 by Anglo-Egyptian troops.

We must now consider Ethiopia's relations with those European powers which took an interest in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden areas. Throughout the first half of the 19th century British, French, German and Italian nationals visited the Ethiopian regions. They included explorers, missionaries, naval officers, traders and adventurers. A number of these visitors were favourably received and sometimes patronised by one or the other of the Ethiopian princes who, in doing so, hoped to use their visitors as a channel through which they could enter into friendly relations with the different European countries from where they came. Many of these attempts did not achieve anything concrete beyond enabling the Ethiopian princes to acquire some firearms from Europe.

The contact which seemed to promise something solid was that with the British. Desirous of winning undisputed control over the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden route which was important for uninterrupted communication with their

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1. G.N. Sanderson: "Contributions from African Sources..." Op.cit., p.234 and footnote 2.
 2. G.N. Sanderson: "The Foreign Policy of the Negus Menilek 1896-98" Journal of African History Vol.V, No.1, 1964

possessions in India, the British were anxious to cultivate the friendship of the African princes whose territory bordered on the route.¹ In 1841 a British mission was sent to the King of Shoa in southern Ethiopia to enter into friendly and commercial relations with the government of that Kingdom. The mission stayed until February 1843 and negotiated a commercial treaty but the difficulties involved in implementing it made the treaty remain a dead letter.² In northern Ethiopia the attempt by the British to win the friendship of the Ethiopian princes was more promising than the case in the south. Here in 1848 the first British Consul was appointed and stationed at Massawa. The man first appointed to the post, W.C. Plowden, remained in the country until he was killed in 1860 by rebels against emperor Tewodros. It was his successor, Cameron, who together with some European missionaries was imprisoned by Tewodros in 1865.³ And it was for the purpose of liberating those prisoners that the British Expedition led by Lord Napier was sent into Ethiopia in 1867-68. After 1868 the British lost interest in Ethiopia and it was not until the 1890s that their interest in that country was revived.

Throughout the 19th century the French were interested in Ethiopia and French missionaries and explorers were active in the country. In the 1870s and '80s French merchants traded actively in southern parts of the empire particularly in Shoa and Harar. But throughout this period, despite several efforts to that effect, their efforts were not given any serious official backing and remained essentially on an individual level. It was in the Somali country that the French government intervened to acquire first a sphere of influence and later a colony in the 1880s and 1890s.

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1. Public Records Office: F.O. 1/1 folio 169. Henry Rudland to General Hewitt dated Mocha, 30/9/1809.
 2. Correspondence on this mission is found in F.O. 1/3 and in India Office Library, Bombay Secret Proceedings, Lantern Gallery Nos. 145, 159, 184, 185, 189-206.
 3. Abyssinia Original Correspondence Vols. 1-3.

Italy was the one European nation which exercised the greatest influence on Ethiopian affairs in the 19th century. In the second quarter of the century missionaries from Italy were active in Tigre and in what is now Eritrea. When they were expelled from the north some of them went to the Galla country to the south of Gojjam and into southern Shoa where they remained until the late 1870s and early 1880s when pressure from emperor Yohannes forced them to withdraw. It was in Menilek's Shoa however, that the Italians were most active. From 1868 when the missionary Massaja arrived in Shoa a steady stream of Italian nationals of all types - traders, explorers, adventurers, doctors, artisans, engineers - came into the kingdom. Some of them took service with the king and a number of them accompanied him in his campaigns of conquest. They travelled up and down the kingdom and their reports constitute a valuable source of historical information. Learned and commercial societies in Italy as well as the Italian government showed an interest in the activities of their nationals in Shoa and from 1882 the government of Italy appointed an official representative in Shoa. This ambassador, Pietro Antonelli, worked hard to establish a commercial and a firm diplomatic relations between the two kingdoms.

At the time when the Italians were in Shoa they were also established in parts of the Somali coast. In 1885, on the withdrawal of the Egyptian troops from the Red Sea port of Massawa, the Italians occupied it and began to push gradually inland towards the frontiers of Tigre. The fact was that from 1882 the Italians were determined to acquire a colony in the Ethiopian region. It is quite possible that the activities of the Italian nationals in Shoa and in the Galla regions to the south of Shoa had the ulterior motive of finding out the prospects of Italy acquiring a colony somewhere in southern Ethiopia. And missions which were sent to Gojjam and northern Ethiopia in the 1870s and 1880s appear to have had such a motive.¹ The region to the north of Tigre as well as the northern districts of Tigre itself must have appeared to the Italians

1. Ministero degli Affari Esteri (Rome): A.S.M.A.I. 36/1-4 Memorandum by the Società Geografica Italiana to the President of the Council of Ministers dated 8/4/1878.

to be an area where they could acquire a colony hence their occupation of Massawa in 1885 and their gradual penetration inland towards Tigre. On a number of occasions both emperor Yohannes and negus (King) Menilek of Shoa, who was a friend of the Italians, asked the latter to clarify their intentions with regards to the northern areas of Tigre; on each occasion the Italians protested their pacific intentions. Notwithstanding their protestations they continued pushing gradually inland. This brought them into hostilities with Yohannes who acted not only as the emperor of the whole of Ethiopia but also as ruler of Tigre for Tigre was the emperor's native province. In a skirmish which took place in January 1887 at Dogali the Ethiopians massacred an Italian force. This halted the Italian advance but only temporarily and by the time of the death of emperor Yohannes the Italian threat to the territorial integrity of the empire was still very great.

Not long after Menilek had succeeded Yohannes as emperor in March 1889 he came to terms with the Italians in a treaty signed on May 2 at Wichale. By this treaty Menilek allowed the Italians to keep the area which they had already occupied, that is Massawa and the lowlands between the coast and the highlands. Clause seventeen of this treaty was interpreted by the Italians to mean that they had acquired protectorate rights over the whole of Ethiopia.¹ The misunderstanding which arose between the two parties over this clause coupled with the continued penetration of the Italians beyond the limits set by other clauses of the treaty of Wichale led, after the failure of the many attempts at peaceful settlement, to a series of skirmishes which culminated in a battle fought near Adowa on 1st March 1896 in which the Italians were routed

1. For details of this see Sven Rubenson: Wichale XVII, The Attempt to establish a Protectorate over Ethiopia. Addis Ababa 1964. Carlo Giglio: L'Articolo XVII del trattato di Ucciali, Casa Editrice Pietro Cairoli, Como 1967. These two publications are expanded versions of articles published by the two scholars on the treaty of Wichale in the Journal of African History Vol.V No.2, 1964 and Vol.VI No.2, 1965. See also Rubenson: "Professor Giglio, Antonelli and Article XVII of the treaty of Wichale", in same Journal Vol.VII No.3, 1966.

by the Ethiopians. A new basis for Italo-Ethiopian relations was established by the treaty of Addis Ababa (October, 1896) which ended the state of war existing at the time.

The battle of Adowa was a severe setback for the colonial ambitions of Italy in northern Ethiopia. The victory won by the Ethiopians had important consequences. It saved the empire from conquest not only by Italy but by any other power with colonial ambition in Africa. The Ethiopian victory forced the European powers to change their attitude to that Christian empire as a protectorate of Italy and to recognise her as a sovereign independent nation whose ruler must be dealt with as an independent sovereign and whose views must be taken into account on any negotiations concerning North-East Africa. Menilek was thus able to make diplomatic use of his victory over the Italians to sign frontier treaties with Britain, France and Italy whose colonies bordered on Ethiopia in the East, South and West by which the boundaries between Ethiopia and those colonies were demarcated. These boundary treaties were made between 1896 and 1907. Except with slight alterations the present day frontiers of Ethiopia reflect those negotiated between Menilek and the European colonial powers during the closing years of the 19th century.

Internally the victory at Adowa strengthened the position and power of Menilek. Before the war the loyalty of the nobles of Tigre, particularly Ras Mangasha, to Menilek as emperor had been in some doubt. Now, with the defeat of the Italians the chances of those chiefs securing the support of the Italians in Eritrea to make trouble for Menilek became extremely slim and they were thus forced to recognise Menilek as the supreme authority in the empire. From this time, notwithstanding Ras Mangasha's rebellion of 1898 the country could be said to have acquired a sense of unity probably greater than what was known at the time of Yohannes. After 1896, as a result of the new sense of security which Menilek gained both internally and externally with his victory over the Italians, he was able to turn his attention more seriously to pushing through a programme for the modernization of his empire. Although Menilek's career as an innovator and a modernizer began with his return to Shoa from Maqdaia in 1865 and continued throughout the 1870s and

1880s some of his most ambitious innovations were carried out, or at least attempted, in the period after the battle of Adowa. It was probably in the field of modernization that Menilek made the greatest use of Europeans and of modern technology.¹

Some account must now be given of the condition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in the 19th century. Like the institution of the monarchy the Church was, and has remained to this day, one of the pillars of the unity and civilization of Ethiopia. Church leaders exercised considerable influence on political leaders; the Abun² as well as the Echege², the two top officials of the church had their seats in the imperial capital and their relations with the political leaders reflected the relations between the church and the state.³

Until the 16th century the relations between church and state were by and large smooth, and were in line with the settlement of 1269 by which the church had in effect been subordinated to the state. Yet the state respected the church's authority in its spiritual domain and both the church and the state co-operated in the territorial, moral and religious expansion that the empire witnessed in the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries.

In the 17th century the smooth relationship between church and the monarchy or the imperial authority passed through a period of strain which grew progressively worse until by the opening of the 19th century it was almost at a breaking point. Thus one of the issues that one has to consider in respect of the church in the period under review was the unsettled nature of its relationship with the state.

1. For a study of Menilek as a modernizer see Chapter V of my forthcoming monograph, Menelik of Ethiopia, Heinemann, (in the press).
2. The Abun (abuna when followed by a name) was the metropolitan of the Church; the Echege was the head of all the monks.
3. The main source for this account of the state of the church is Ignazio Guidi: "La Chiesa Abissina" Oriente Moderno, Anno II (1922-1923), pp. 123-128, 186-190, 252-256.

During the first three quarters of the century sporadic efforts were made to settle the differences between church and monarchy; but whatever success attended these efforts was short lived and in general the strained relations remained until the 1870s when a new and happier phase in church-state relations opened.

The deterioration in the relations between church and state in the 17th century was the result of the participation of the monarchy in the dispute which ensued between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the Jesuit missionaries who attempted to convert Ethiopia to Roman Catholicism. During this dispute the emperors of the time sided with the Jesuits, allowed themselves to be converted and proceeded by means of royal edicts to abolish the age old practices of the local orthodox church and substituted for them the practices of the Roman Catholic Church. This threat to the existence of the Orthodox Church was the cause of the religious civil war of the 17th century of which mention has already been made earlier in these article. Although in the end the monarchy gave in to the church and restored the traditional practices of the church, the role which the monarchy had played had the effect of weakening the respect and the confidence of the church for the monarchy and thereby strained the otherwise smooth relations that had existed between those two pillars of Ethiopian civilization.

The situation was aggravated in the 18th century when the Galla of the central plateau entered the court and began to wield influence over the policy of the emperors. As was said earlier the Galla were either pagan or muslim; in either case they did not care a straw for those things which the Ethiopian Church held dear. Or, at best they were nominal christians, in which case they were lukewarm in their attachment to the orthodox church. In such a situation it was only to be expected that conflict would develop between the leaders of the church and those of the state not only on purely religious matters but also on some issues of a secular nature. Moreover, by tradition the church expected political leaders not merely to be members but even more important to be champions of the orthodox faith and to shape their actions and lives along lines that would meet the approval of the

church. From the 18th century onwards therefore these two groups of leaders in the empire were, as it were, at each other's throat with each group seeking to take advantage of the difficulties of the other to further its own course. The Galla guardians of the imperial court dilly-dallied each time the post of Abun fell vacant and a new Abun had to be obtained from Egypt. And when after a long lapse an Abun was obtained, usually through the instrumentality of one or the other of the Tigrean/Amhara provincial governors, the imperial court treated the cleric in such a way as to make it extremely difficult for him to carry out successfully the functions of his office. The Abuns on their part naturally sided with the Tigrean/Amhara governors in their efforts to weaken and overthrow Galla influence over imperial policy.¹

Another subject that needs to be considered relates to the church itself and was centred on its domestic issues. Such was the organization of the church that there was no religious institution or body at the national level which had the responsibility over doctrine. The highest ecclesiastical figure in the country was the Abun, who was at this time always a foreigner from Egypt. His rights and privileges were considerable but his duties, especially the purely religious ones were circumscribed and limited to consecrating bishops and crowning a new emperor. The organization of the church was centred on the monasteries of which the most important were those of Debra Libanos in Shoa (whose head was always chosen as the echege) and Ewostethewos in Gojjam. The teachings of the church were interpreted by the monks in each of the monasteries; differences as regards interpretation and emphasis could therefore easily arise as between two monasteries. The only institution which had the power to resolve any such differences and re-establish or enforce orthodoxy was the emperor and his court. But by the middle of the 18th century the court was hardly in a position to discharge this function; yet this was the time when there were serious doctrinal differences between the various monastic orders within the church, for the two principal monastic parties had by this time, both fallen

1. M. Abir: Ethiopia: The Era of the Princes. Longmans, 1968, pp. 35-42, 157-9, 179-181.

away from the doctrine of Alexandria which was considered orthodox in Ethiopia.

The doctrinal controversies dated back to the religious troubles of the early 17th century. By the opening of the 19th century these controversies had crystallized around two major issues - the number of births that Christ had and the relationship between the three persons of the Trinity. With the decline of the imperial authority, and against the background of the conflict firstly between the church and the monarchy, secondly between the various monastic parties as to the orthodoxy of their own doctrines, and thirdly between the various provincial chiefs for territorial as well as political aggrandizement, the provincial chiefs took up the doctrine of the principal monasteries in their domains and made it the official doctrine in the territories under their control. The result was that the church came to be divided against itself and as a unified national institution it simply ceased to exist. Thus the decline of the state was paralleled by a corresponding decline of the church.

In the 1840s and again during the first half of the reign of emperor Tewodros efforts were made to resolve the doctrinal differences in the church and to establish a uniform orthodox doctrine.¹ These efforts achieved very little success. It was not until May 1878 that the revitalized imperial authority now in the hands of Yohannes IV was able to exercise its traditional powers in respect of the church and summoned a council which resolved the doctrinal differences which had plagued the church for more than two hundred years. Thereafter the church was able to regain its unity, its spiritual leadership and moral influence within the empire. As was the case with the state the church also witnessed a period of decline and revival during the 19th century.

1. Ignazio Guidi. Art. cit.