

# Ethiopia's Suppressed Historical Treasures in the Northern Frontier: Key Manifestations of the Hidden-True History worth Exploring

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13 July 2016

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## Why History Matters

For the purpose of this piece, *treasures* refer to precious sociocultural, natural, and historical heritages of a nation. In her *four frontiers*: the North, the South, the East, and the West, Ethiopia possesses an immense wealth of historical inheritance and natural wealth, which must be explored, recorded, safeguarded, and disseminated throughout the world. Each Ethiopia's nation, nationality, and people contribute to this wealth, which is a *national pride* that can enhance social harmony, socioeconomic development, political stability, and national image. This is Ethiopia's best way to unity in diversity, renaissance, and genuine sustainable development.

A national *identity* comprises qualitative and quantitative facts of present and historical nature that describe a given human population. In light of this, history is a social science, which deals with recording, analyzing, interpreting, and disseminating knowledge of historic significance from which present and future generations learn. True historical facts contribute to the knowledge of cultural, social, economic, institutional, technological, and political development processes a given society goes through over time. We live in an uncertain and ever changing world. To understand cultural, social, economic, institutional, and political dynamics requires ability to explain one's own history: (1) How did we Ethiopians reach where we are? (2) What historical events shaped the modern nation state of Ethiopia? (3) What were the misdeeds of the previous political rulers? (4) What lessons can we learn from those misdeeds? (5) Where are we heading? (6) What is the next Ethiopian generation going to inherit from the present generation? These are some of the fundamental research questions we must deal with. We should be able to explain the **true historical pathways** Ethiopia went and is going through.

It is a well demonstrated truth that **history matters**. It plays important roles in the processes of genuine sustainable development (GSD). This is because interactive dynamics (= changes with time = history) of the cultural, social, economic, institutional, political, technological, and environmental dimensions of GSD generate mutually reinforcing forces of development, provided that an **effective political governance system** prevails. I define GSD as a dynamic process by which human well-being is improved in an inclusive, a just, and an environmentally safe operating space. It can be achieved through inventions, innovations, diffusion, and adoption of appropriate technologies as well as learning-by-doing<sup>1</sup>. In short, GSD means living within the health and integrity boundaries of ecosystems.

For now, this piece focuses on some of the key historical events that took place in Ethiopia's Northern frontier, Tigrai. My overarching goal is to provoke (motivate) a large scale research project on the historical events that shaped the sociocultural, economic, institutional, political, technological, and environmental landscape of modern Tigrai. I trust other Ethiopians, who are more knowledgeable than me will do the same on the Eastern, the Western, and the Southern frontiers.

## Historical Facts of Suppression

Like the other Ethiopia's nations, Tigrai went through historic and complex predicaments of suppression for centuries. Corrupt political governance systems of the Imperial Aristocracies (Menelik to Haile Selassie) and the savagery of the military junta imposed systematic cultural, social, economic,

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<sup>1</sup>Asghedom Ghebremichael. 2016. Frontiers of the Biosphere Inhibit Perpetual Economic Growth: *Exploring Pathways to Genuine Sustainable Development*; forthcoming in *the Journal of Environmental and Social Sciences* (Aug. 2016 Issue)

institutional, and political suppression. It was enshrined in the national constitution to deny the people of Tigrai their *natural-human rights*, the fundamental rights and freedoms, to exist and develop as rightful citizens of Ethiopia. They were not allowed to use their language, Tigrigna, in schools, administrative offices, courts, contractual agreements, birth and marriage certificates, and many formal and informal socioeconomic and cultural agreements that required documentation. In short, there was a constitutionally enforced process of assimilation to create an *Amharanized-homogeneous, a singular Ethiopian* society. This, of course, applied to all Ethiopia's nations, nationalities, and peoples. Ironically, the Amhara masses were also victims of the corrupt political governance system like any other Ethiopians, despite the fact that their cultural values, norms, customs, mores, language, and religion were being used as instruments of assimilation and pacification.

In the case of Tigrai, the suppression went on in absolute disregard the sacrifices the people of Tigrai paid for Ethiopia's *multiple victories* at battlefields against external invaders. It is unimaginable to achieve the victories (highlighted below) without the immense patriotic nationalism and military prowess (natural gift) of the Tigraian heroes, heroines, and the general populace. National and international historians acknowledge that there were clear evidences of betrayal, denial, and outright suppression of cultural, social, and historical identities of the people of Tigrai. There are also acknowledgements and appreciations of the contributions of Tigrai to Ethiopia's nationhood. But, Tigrai, like all other Ethiopian peoples, was subjected to chronic poverty. Poverty is deprivation of all human capabilities and livelihood material assets. Deprivation's adverse effects on human well-being are manifested through: political oppression, illiteracy, lack of information and financial resources, fatalism, social exclusion, disenfranchisement, inaccessible social services (e.g., justice, health, and education), a general disillusionment (absolute disappointment), and cynicism (a general distrust of others' motives). These and similar characteristics described **the poverty that trapped Tigrai for centuries**. One only hopes, with some optimism, for the current government to succeed in freeing Ethiopians from the abject poverty trap very soon.

By-the-way, in my view, Ethiopia is now on the right route to GSD, despite some of the seemingly insurmountable challenges. To that end, however, we need to learn from the historical misdeeds of corrupt political governance systems. Historical failures and successes must be researched, recorded, analyzed, interpreted, and published as hard and soft copies for the present and future generations to learn from. I have justified reasons to be optimistic that this will be done very soon regarding Tigrai! I also hope the same for the other nations, nationalities, and peoples of Ethiopia. This is the only way to social harmony, peace, true democratic governance, and prosperity.

I am mindful that it will be difficult for some chauvinists to accept the message of this piece. Let them continue spreading the venom of their extreme malice, bitterness, and hatred. For them, Ethiopia's unity in diversity, renaissance, and development are bitter pills to swallow. They better swallow them and sleep in America and Europe. For compatriots who would like to understand the facts that justify the quest for publishing the true history of Tigrai, I ask that they go over the following facts and carry out their own research to verify them.

## **Chronicling the Historical Facts<sup>2</sup> Succinctly**

### **Land of all Battlefields and Victories**

#### ***Background***

Frequent wars fought against external invaders in Tigrai's soil are the major historical events that perpetuated poverty in Tigrai. "*some twenty major battles were fought in Tigrayan soil between the Battle of Adwa and the Italian invasion of 1935*"<sup>3</sup> (emphasis added). Tigraian men and women, the

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<sup>2</sup> I wrote most of the following material in Apr. 2013 under the title: *Global Solidarity Network of Tigraians for Development*, a successful motivational call, which was posted on several Websites.

<sup>3</sup> Young, John. 1997. *Peasant revolution in Ethiopia: the Tigray People's Revolution Front, 1975 – 1991* (p. 46). Cambridge University Press, New York, NY.

peasantry, had to bear the brutalities of the wars. In addition to their bravery in fighting the foreign enemies, the poor Tigraian households had to provide food, water, and shelter to the peasant armies from many corners of Ethiopia, because Ethiopia did not have salaried-national army until 1941. The rules of war during those years let “.. *soldiers to feed themselves at the expense of the peasants on whose lands they traversed. Indeed, pillaging (plundering, robbing) from the peasants and collecting war booty were the soldiers’ chief incentives for joining the army*” (emphasis added).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the Tigraian men and women provided topographic information, transportation logistics (donkeys and mules), and crucial intelligence about the frontlines. It is bitterly annoying to observe Ethiopia’s writers and policy makers give demeaning lip-service to Tigrai’s sacrifices in protecting Ethiopia’s sovereignty and integrity. Have a look at the following chronicle of historical facts:

### **The Selfless Patriotism of Emperor Yohannes IV**

Against all Menelik’s machinations of deception, treachery, and betrayal, Emperor Yohannes IV demonstrated his patriotism, leadership skills, and military prowess against all Ethiopia’s enemies of his time. Of course, the brilliance of his trusted and famous general, *Alula Aba-Nega*, was imperative. Alula’s army routed well-equipped Egyptians, led by European and American mercenaries, in the following battlefields: in 1875 at *Gundet*; in 1876 at *Guraé*; in 1880 at *Senhit*; and in 1887 at *Aylet*. Again, on January 26, 1887, Ras Alula’s military prowess was put into a decisive victory at *Dogali*, where Italian invaders were annihilated. The Italians decried their humiliating defeat at *Dogali* as “The *Dogali Massacre*”.<sup>5</sup> Note that all battlefields are part of today’s State of Eritrea. *Do not ask; it is a long and complicated history.*

In any case, we human beings are incapable to foresee our destiny. Emperor Yohannes IV died on Mar. 12, 1889 at Metema, in today’s *Amhara Killil*, while defending his beloved country against the Mahdists of Mahdi Mohammed Ahmed of Sudan. The Mahdists managed to snatch the Emperor’s body from the Ethiopian heroes, who fought to the last drop of blood to defend their beloved King’s body. They (the Mahdists) *beheaded* him and took his head to Omdurman to be displayed as a trophy. The Sudanese Muslims, the Mahdists, revealed their primitiveness and savagery through that act of cruelty. For the King, that was an enduring evidence of his selfless patriotism. Emperor Yohannes IV gave his life for the integrity and sovereignty of Ethiopia. By doing that he instilled pride and heroism in all Ethiopian generations that followed him.

There is a legitimate-historical question the answer to which is very simple, but crucially important for Ethiopians to keep in mind: Why did those all enemies tried to subjugate Ethiopia? Just because these enemies and their collaborators were and are interested in Ethiopia’s: (a) strategic location for their purpose of geopolitical and economic spheres of influence; (b) unique ecosystems that embed the natural wealth of: extensive arable lands, in-tact natural forests (the old days), wetlands, multiple water bodies, precious minerals, fossil fuels, etc.; and (c) relative to the desert lands of the Middle East, Ethiopia possesses best quality of natural environment to live in. In addition, the Muslims hated to see Ethiopia as an island of Christianity, although Ethiopia welcomes all Muslims to live freely in peace and security. These historical facts should remind the modern Ethiopian generation to remain *vigilant*, as their forefathers did, when dealing with friends and foes alike.

Shouldn’t we *immortalize* the enlightening patriotism of Emperor Yohannes IV and his brilliant general, Alula Aba-Nega? The answer is big YES, we should! We must erect monuments in Addis Ababa (if **Menelik**, why not **Yohannes?**) and in Mekelle at the top of *Enda-Yesus* escarpment, facing to the northern frontier, where his armies marched to the battlefields of: *Gundet*, *Guraé*, *Senhit*, *Aylet*, and *Dogali*. These are the main battlefields where the Emperor’s most trusted general, Alul Aba-Nega, routed Ethiopia’s enemies, the Egyptians and Italians. **For Alula Aba-Nega, I suggest a national park somewhere in Tembien, his birth homeland, where his imposing (huge) statue must be erected.** This

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.historynet.com/first-italo-abyssinian-war-battle-of-adowa.htm> , accessed 30 June 2016

will be a **sustainable source of income from tourism**, which will contribute to renewal, diversification, and development of rural community-based economies. I just hope that the Federal and the State of Tigray governments will take all necessary measures to reaffirm this historical truth. Let it be known that this generation of Tigrayians will not remain complacent to all the injustices that afflicted enduring harm on Tigray. There is an urgent need for redressing all miscarriages of justice.

### **The Ultimate Betrayal of Menelik II**

While Emperor Yohannes was fighting all of the above highlighted wars, Menelik was making secret deals with the Italians and other enemies of Ethiopia to sabotage Emperor Yohannes' efforts. Shortly after they were subjected to a humiliating defeat in 1887 at *Dogali* in the hands of Alula Aba-Nega, the Italians agreed in a secret treaty to supply Menelik with 5,000 Remington rifles and money; and to recognize him as a sovereign power in return for his promise to assist Italy's colonial expansion. Between 1885 and 1895, a total of 189,000 weapons were imported into *Showa*. Very quickly, just within two months after the death of Emperor Yohannes IV, Menelik claimed the *Ethiopian Imperial Throne*; and he recognized the Italians' sovereignty over the *Ethiopian Red Sea Frontier*, Bahri-Negash, which they (the purchasers) named Eritrea, after the *Treaty of Wuchale* was signed on May 2, 1889.

Menelik's strategic goal was to divide, weaken, and subjugate the Tigrigna speaking people of the *whole northern frontier* so that he expands his empire to the southern Ethiopian frontier. In that treasonous blunder, he succeeded. **We are now called Tigrayians and Eritreans. That was a cruel-tragic act that separated a family by imposing two historical identifies.** Eritrea now is an independent nation state. But, that trick did not last long. Menelik had to fight the Italians at Adwa in 1896, when the historic Ethiopian victory, a pride of all Africans, was scored. Again, at the Battle of Adwa, Tigrayan heroes, heroines, and the general populace played crucially determinant roles. They fought, used their knowledge of the topography to provide strategic intelligence on the enemy's moves, and provided food, water, and shelter to the peasant army from other parts of Ethiopia.

It is bitterly disgusting and hard to believe, but it is true, that some chauvinist elements hate to mention Tigrayan patriotism and the contributions Tigray made to Ethiopia's nationhood. With no mention of the human sacrifices, destruction of properties, including churches and mosques, and the extensive **bioecological destruction** Tigray paid for the victory of Adwa, they (the chauvinists) attribute the shining victory of Adwa to Menelik, the traitor, as if he and his henchmen from Showa alone defeated the enemy. In reality, however, their contributions were minimal compared to sacrifices the Tigrayan masses paid. To this day, they continue to glorify him. Soon, truth will be revealed, written, and told. To start with, a *monument* and a *national museum of history and sociocultural heritages* at appropriate locations in Adwa deserve an immediate attention of the Federal and the State governments to immortalize those who paid their lives for our freedom and for Africa's pride and freedom.

**Contributions to local economic development:** The monument, the museum, and well-designed ecotourism business ventures, coupled with sustainable management of the watershed ecosystems, will contribute to renewal, diversification, and development of rural community-based economies tremendously. The developmental infrastructure system can be established along the historical chains of the mountains of Soloda, Gessesso, Semayata, Mariam Shewito, Gendebta, Yeha, and many others. These chains of mountains played militarily strategic roles in defeating Ethiopia's enemies. There are knowledgeable people who can show exactly where the historical battlegrounds were so that they can serve as ecotourism destinations, once they are rehabilitated and landmarked artfully as **heritage-treasures of great values**. At these heritage sites, several types of community driven microenterprises, including resorts for national and international tourists, can be established with helping hands of the Federal and the State governments.

### **Vindictive Haile-Selassie and the Woyane I Patriots**

*Emperor Haile-Selassie, King of Kings, the Lion of Judah, from the Tribe of Judah, the Solomonic Dynasty* (not funny, it was his official title), ruled Ethiopia from 1930 to 1974, with an iron fist of vengeance, most of it directed at the Tigrayan people. Absolute political power was vested in him.

Because the 1931 Constitution was deemed not giving enough power to him, a new constitution was enshrined in 1955<sup>6</sup>. This constitution declared Haile-Selassie as a descendant of King Solomon of Israel and Ethiopia's Queen of Sheba. His primacy was exercised through appointment of officials; control of the armed forces and foreign affairs; and oversight of the judiciary. Parliament was given power to approve treaties, but the Emperor had the final say: he was empowered to the extent of dissolving the Parliament.

In the 1930s, the Italians started to *scratch their wounds* they sustained in the hands of Ethiopian heroes and heroines at the 1896 Battle of Adwa, where they were humiliated decisively. As pointed out earlier, Menelik sold *Bahiri-Negash*, Ethiopia's Red Sea Frontier, May 2, 1889 to the Italians through the *Treaty of Wuchale*. To fill their egoistic attitudes, they named our *Bahiri-Negash* as Eritrea. On October 2, 1935, Mussolini declared, "We have been patient with Ethiopia for forty years; now our patience is exhausted"<sup>7</sup>. By that Mussolini meant that Italy was ready to avenge the humiliating defeat it suffered at the Battle of Adwa. From their new colony of Eritrea, thanks to Menelik, the Italians started their vengeance the morning of October 3, 1935 with 100,000-man army. Adwa and Adigrat were brutally bombarded and occupied on October 5 and 6, respectively; and Mekelle fell into the hands of the enemy on November 8, 1935. The rest is a long history.

The key point is that Haile-Selassie fled Ethiopia to London, leaving Ethiopian patriots at the mercy of Fascist Italy. After his return with the help of the British, fearful of the Woyane I Patriots, Haile-Selassie treated Tigrai in the harshest way possible. He did this because the Woyane I Patriots, Blata Haile-Mariam and his comrades, considered his action of fleeing to safety, while the war was raging, as a treason. They, the Patriots, refused to submit to his feudal order. They had expected him to lead the war like Yohannes IV did.

Haile-Selassie used various policy instruments of intimidation, humiliation, assassination, and assimilation against Tigrai. Some of the policy instruments included: (a) heavy taxes imposed on the peasantry to be paid in cash; (b) declaring using Tigrigna illegal for any formal communications (e.g., legal-justice processes, education, contractual agreements, and birth and marriage certificates); (c) imposing a strict condition of learning and using Amharic as the only medium of communication; and (d) kidnapping and assassination as well as arresting key patriots for life. It was illegal to write a *Tigrigna language* name even on simple placards to identify sports' teams or any other organization from Tigrai at national events, such as sports and ceremonies. That was constitutionally enacted system of suppression.

This brutality led to the birth of a well-coordinated force of Woyane I. In January 1942, at the battlefield of Quobo, three British officers and hundreds of Haile-Selassie's soldiers, trying to collect forced tax in cash, were killed. It took Haile-Selassie and his British advisors 30,000 *Shewan* soldiers, from April to July 1942, to regain the upper hand over the Woyane I Patriots. The whole region of Raya, Azebo, and Wejerat was devastated; and severe fines, in both livestock and money, were imposed to impoverish and to force the Woyane I Patriots and the peasantry into submission.

But, Haile-Selassie's punitive measures did not have any effect on the Patriots and the oppressed masses. The rebellion got stronger than ever before. Blata Haile-Mariam Reda, who was a gifted inspiring leader, used the rainy season of 1943 to organize his forces. After celebrating the Ethiopian New Year on September 12, 1943, the Patriots went on the offensive. They moved victoriously to the strategic locations of *Quiha* and *Enda Yesus*, overlooking Mekelle, which was quickly captured. Haile-Selassie's officials fled. Blata Haile-Mariam declared victory at Mekelle with following motto:

*Our governor is Jesus Christ  
And our flag that of Ethiopia  
Our religion is that of Yohannes IV*

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<sup>6</sup> Henze, P. 2000. *Layers of Time: A history of Ethiopia*. St. Martin's Press, New York.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

*People of Tigray, follow the motto of Woyane*<sup>8</sup>.

After the humiliating defeats of his army, Haile-Selassie requested and received help from the Royal British Air Force to mercilessly bomb a marketplace at Mekelle during a market day in October 1943. This collaborative brutality, using a foreign air force, was a crime against humanity. It was beyond the capacity of the Woyane I Patriots. The human, animal, and material losses of that crime remain unknown and, of course, must be *immeasurable*. Erecting a *memorial monument for that massacre* is overdue. It requires an immediate attention of all concerned.

Vindictive Haile-Selassie started his punitive policies with vengeance. The unique Ethiopian feudalism started in earnest. It was declared that all fertile lands were to be owned by: the royal, the elite, the patriarchate, the bourgeoisie, the comprador, and the Tewahedo-Orthodox Church. By the way, *the Tewahedo-Orthodox Church* was the King's instrument to pacify the gullible Ethiopian masses. All these elite class-sectors of the society were not producers, but all extracted different benefits from the peasantry in terms of: (a) tribute, (b) products, (c) rents, (d) services, and (e) *courvee* labour. Well configured extractive political institutions, which concentrated power in the hands of the narrow elite class, and extractive economic institutions, which naturally accompanied the extractive political institutions, facilitated sustenance of these instruments of exploitation<sup>9</sup>. By contrast, inclusive political institutions lay the foundations for inclusive economic institutions to create an effective political governance system. In any case, the classic feudal trinity of nobleman, priest, and peasant, was well entrenched; and prevailed up to the demise of the King in 1974. The historical fact is that Emperor Haile-Selassie deprived Tigrai of all human capabilities and livelihood assets, perpetuating a trap of chronic poverty.

### **Marxist-Leninist Military Junta versus the Shinning Victories of Woyane II**

In an attempt to force Tigrai into submission, Mengistu Haile-Mariam's Derg committed horrifying terror and devastation on Tigrai over the 17-year period of armed struggle against its rule of terror (1974-1991). The most savage act it committed against humanity was at the market town of Hawzien on June 22, 1988. "The Ethiopian air force bombarded the town for the whole day by airplanes and helicopters; and killed more than 2,500 civilians"<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, the regime's counterinsurgency and *social control* policies imposed on Tigrai turned the drought of 1984/85 into a tragic famine, starvation, and hunger. The final outcome, however, as it is well known worldwide, was the *shinning victory* of Woyane II. This was achieved against an enemy, which was armed to the teeth and was described as black Africa's sophisticated-strongest army.

### **Closing Remarks**

I leave the historic details of the 17-year bitter struggle for our future discussions. For now, a call for redressing miscarriages of justice is in order: the patience, the civility, and the magnanimity of the Tigrayan people must be acknowledged gratefully. Although Tigrai paid immeasurable sacrifices to defeat external invaders and dictatorial-corrupt political oppressors, the people are willing and happy to live in freedom, peace, security, prosperity, and harmony with all their Ethiopian compatriots in a democratically united Ethiopia. The people of Tigrai have never been and never will be vindictive. They would like to be seen as civil, compassionate, magnanimous, and patriotic Ethiopians. But, civility, humility, and patience are **not** signs of weakness; the quest for justice that remedies all historical grievances will continue.

AG: 13 July 2016

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid, footnote 5

<sup>9</sup> Acemogulu, D.; Robinson, J.A. 2012. *The origins of power, prosperity, and poverty: why nations fail*. Crown Publishers, New York.

<sup>10</sup> Human Right Watch/Africa, Nov. 1994, Vol. 6, No. 11, provides substantial details of the atrocities.