

Remembering Menelik II and the Battle of Adewa.

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Historically, the Turks, then the Egyptians, later still the Turko-Egyptians, and finally the Italians vied to carve away, or at least to dominate, the territorial boundaries of Ethiopia. This was a saga of enemy encirclement that began around 702 when the Ethiopian navy lost its attempt to assert control of the Hijaz across the Red Sea. Ethiopian monarchs were still working hard centuries later to keep enemies (*dina*) at bay. These were enemies with whom blood money could not be exchanged and *de facto* they did not belong in the north-east African region. Down the centuries the monarchs struggled to coordinate internal resources for the purpose of fighting them. Their strategy included lessening regional potentates' competition to control the helm of power. In other words, the monarchs accompanied fighting the *dina* with redirecting the energies of those competing for internal power towards sustaining a unitary state. The latest in doing this was Tewodros II (r1855-1868). Yohannes IV (r1872-1889), who followed his example, retained only two *negus* under him by the mid-1880's, and Menelik II (r1889-1913) had only one by the 1890's. All three fought effectively to keep out the *dina* from their borderlands by making sure there was a singular state in Ethiopia.

Of course, the *dina* had their views of this internal Ethiopian process. The Turks of old, who imagined Ethiopia as one of their outlying provinces, were able to bribe or somehow convince some to be their stooges on its borderlands (so Haggai Erlich tells us, among others). Power holders in Egypt installed favourite 'rulers' all around the areas controlled by the Ethiopian monarchs in their eagerness to control the trade routes and other resources along the Nile Valley and the Red Sea. Just as these traditional (and historical) enemies had this serious purpose, which still resonates with us with regard to present day international politics, the Ethiopian monarchs also kept their eyes on the bigger prize. They always managed to curb the success of lackeys of Egypt or Turkey from disrupting the Ethiopian state. Despite superior wealth and access to firearms and other weapons, the traditional *dina* thus failed to succeed in bribing those who vied for internal power. This developed a reputation for Ethiopia: Ethiopians always fight among themselves but unite in the face of external invasion.

Competition to control the Red Sea and the Blue Nile brought European colonialists along the Ethiopian borderlands in the second half of the nineteenth century. With superior technology and determination to acquire political, economic and geographical control so as to plant colonies (i.e. bring their own natives to possess new territories and export raw materials), Europeans were not satisfied with exercising control through surrogate rulers. Opening and controlling the Suez Canal, in particular, brought the British into Egypt (1882), a part of Somaliland and later the new country they called the Sudan. The opening of the Suez Canal also brought their rivals, the French, to establish colonies along the Red Sea.

Britain and France had been establishing colonies around the world since the sixteenth century. Italy on the other hand had come into existence only in 1861, taking the date they proclaimed Victor Emmanuel as the first king of the newly formed state. It acquired the port of Assab after its treacherous local ruler had sold it to an Italian company. The French and the British urged and helped Italy to expand from Assa into the highlands of Hamasen in Ethiopia. The Italian leaders also learnt from the British different ways and means of taking and keeping territories in African especially using local differences and exploiting points of competition for power. They also relied on technologically advanced weapons, of course. Determined to take on Ethiopia since the 1880s, they were encouraging their agents to work on lulling the Ethiopians into accepting Italian colonial ambitions.

The Ethiopians knew that the advent of such grabbing Europeans from beyond the seas hailed a different type of *dina*.

To be continued...

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