

History of Ethiopia/Eritrea/Abyssinia

This is a collection of extracts (quite a few likely to be verbatim or near-verbatim chunks of narrative) from the sources mentioned below, with reference to history of Abyssinia, Ethiopia, Eritrea.

Sources

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Mackintosh Smith (1997) *Yemen: Travels in Dictionary Land*.
Moorehead (1960) *The White Nile*;
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Oliver and Fage (1990) *A short history of Africa*.
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Thesiger (1987) *The Life of my Choice*.

There are some citations in the text that probably derive from citations in the texts above.

Ancient history

Dynastic Egypt was at the height of its powers at about 3,000 BC. From the beginnings of this period there were contacts through the trade in gold and incense along the valleys of the Nile and Atbara (leading to Axum). From around 2,250 BC there are records of rare expeditions into southern Ethiopia from Egypt, probably along the course of the Blue Nile, which returned with ivory, skins, incense; also with boomerangs/throwing sticks (traditional weapons in Sudan), and a pygmy (may have reached Congo basin forests). Bulk of trade went by the old land routes but by 2,000 BC there were occasional sea-borne expeditions down the Red Sea to Eritrea, Somalia and southern Arabia.

Egyptian influence extended up the Nile and contributed to the rise of Kush, around the third cataract, at Dongola. With their Asian expansion coming under threat from the Hittites, increasingly the Pharaohs turned their attention southwards. A series of Egyptian towns spread up the Nile and Kush came under imperial rule. The Kushites were Nilotic-Saharan and independent, though highly Egyptianised. At first, the capital was at Napata near the fourth cataract.

By 1000 BC Egypt was in full decline and in 700 BC the rulers of Kush conquered the land of the Pharaohs - for a short period, Sudanese kings at Napata were at the centre of the ancient world. But by 600 BC Egypt had been sacked by the Assyrians (and later succumbed successively to the Persians, the Greeks and the Romans).

The Kushites retreated up the Nile and retrenched. The new capital, Meroe, on the sixth cataract, near the confluence of the Nile and the Atbara, formed an important centre for iron smelting, which supported commercial and military expansion. From 300 BC-50 AD Meroe prospered by trade in the traditional African commodities - slaves, ivory, ostrich

feathers, ebony, gold and skins, as well as iron goods, and developed a rich culture.

Meroe traded over an area from the Ethiopian highlands to the Niger, and through its slave trade to Egypt passed nearly all the black Africans of the ancient world (the trans-Saharan trade was a Mediaeval innovation following the influx of Muslim Arabs into north Africa). The slaves came from 'Æthiopia' - most of these probably came from Nubia/Sudan, but there may have been some Ethiopians, of whom some achieved prominence as free men in Mediterranean societies (Thomas, 1997??). When Kush declined the trade may have changed, with slaves taken from Nubia's borders to Arabia and the Mediterranean by a new regional trading power, centred in the northern corner of the Tigre highlands, at Axum.

Africa's oldest monarchy; and one of the oldest in the world

From the sixth century BC to the third century BC, the Semitic habashat (mountain tribe) and other tribes from Yemen had migrated across the Red Sea. In the northern Ethiopian highlands they intermarried with the indigenous Hamitic peoples, producing the ancestors of the modern Tigreans and Amharas, and imposing their customs and institutions (Thesiger). According to Oliver and Fage (1990), the origins of Axum are unclear - 'probably it was just the most successful of a series of city states which had grown up among the Semitic-speaking populations of the northern part of the Ethiopian plateau since about the fourth century BC'.

But by the early second century BC, Axum is mentioned in Periplus of the Erythrean Sea (Alexandrian sailor's guide) as the greatest ivory market in north east Africa, and it had become a city of splendid stone buildings and monuments. The kings had carved stone thrones, and there were giant monoliths, some over 100 feet long. The Axumite king, described in the Periplus as 'a covetous and grasping man, but otherwise noble', traded with the Greeks of Alexandria and spoke Greek. There was also mention of a maritime slave trade with Egypt.

The power of Axum must have grown when it entered the lucrative trade in cloth, cinnamon and other spices from India to Rome, formerly the monopoly of the incense caravaneers of south Arabia/Yemen. In AD 100 a Byzantine captain in the employ of the Axumite navy sailed through the straits at the end of the Red Sea and established a sea route to India.

In AD 330, the Axumites became Christians. The Regent Frumentius had been consecrated a bishop in Alexandria and returned to convert the King and his people (the Roman Emperor Constantine only became Holy in 312 and St. Patrick didn't go to Ireland until 433). Wider conversions in Ethiopia were accomplished by Syrian and Egyptian missionaries, according to Oliver and Fage (1990). The Ethiopian church, like the Egyptian Coptic church, supported the 'Monophysite' view of the nature of Christ. The orthodox church had condemned this in 451 as a heresy.

Also in the fourth century the King had sent expeditions armed with the latest iron weapons into Nubia, where they completed the destruction of Meroe, already under attack from the Nuba. Perhaps as a result of the Axumite raids on Meroe, the Nuba steered clear of Axum, and concentrated west and southward. Meanwhile Axum engrossed the west coast Red Sea trade as far as the Egyptian frontier and consolidated its position as the dominant power in north east Africa.

The sixth century was a period of Axumite conquest in Yemen. From the third century on, Axumite influence had grown in Yemen and this had led to many conversions to Christianity. There was an extreme backlash, as the overland trade went into recession. A Yemeni noble seized the throne and began an anti-Christian campaign. When he burned the Christians of Najran he gave the Axumites a pretext for a full-scale expedition to south Arabia to smash the pre-Islamic civilisations.

In Muslim tradition this is associated with a time of great hardship, symbolised by the bursting of the dam at Marib. The dam had serious siltation problems and had often undergone maintenance; it finally collapsed despite (?) repairs carried out in 550 by order of Abrahah, the Ethiopian ruler of Yemen. The collapse of the dam was said to have triggered the diaspora of Yemeni cultivators across the Red Sea to Sudan, and probably to Eritrea, Iraq and Syria, and probably Somalia: in truth this process had begun long before and was to continue long after.

The Emperor Abrahah declared himself independent of Axum and assumed the title of the old Himyari kings of Yemen. He then attempted to divert lucrative pilgrim traffic from Mecca to Sana. In 570 the Meccans registered their objection by defaecating in the Ethiopians' grand ecclesia in Sana. Abraha set off to capture Mecca using elephants. But flocks of partridges suddenly appeared and dropped stones from a great height, killing all but a few of the Ethiopians.

The Yemenis finally rid themselves of the Axumites by calling for help from the Sasanid rulers of Persia, who responded by conquering south Arabia, and Egypt for good measure. Yemen became a Sasanian satrapy, a short-lived condition, soon ended by the inexorable rise of Islam.

In the early seventh century, with the rise of Islam, there was a surge of migration from Yemen. Newly Islamised Arabs went as far as Sudan and Tunisia etc. Islam's all-conquering armies presented no immediate threat to Ethiopia, despite its record as a determined oppressor of south Arabia and its being the nearest Christian state to the source of Islamic expansion.

In the seventh century Arabian Muslims took advantage of a lapse in Ethiopian vigilance to seize the Red Sea port of Massawa and some islands. In 702 Ethiopian pirates sacked Jidda, and in revenge the Caliph seized the ports from which they operated. By the ninth and tenth centuries Arab commentators were writing that Ethiopia still commanded most of the Red Sea coast opposite Yemen and round the Gulf of Aden to Zeila on the Somali coast. The coastlands and trading posts of the shore were occupied by communities of Muslim traders, in place of Greek and Jewish merchants, but they still paid tribute to the Axumite Emperor.

The Islamic empire cut most of Ethiopia's land and seas links with its former Mediterranean trading partners, but Muslim leaders did not regard the Ethiopian faith as cause for a jihad. They extended to Ethiopia the same exemptions provided to Egypt and Syria - all had followed the Monophysite heresy. Thus Ethiopian bishops were still consecrated in Cairo and thousands of Christian pilgrims were permitted to travel and worship openly. Saladin even gave the Ethiopians a church in Jerusalem.

Judith and the pagans - Agau insurrection

The death blow for Axum came in the tenth century from unassimilated Agau in the south. The Hamitic Agau had inhabited the highlands since time immemorial. In the north they had merged with the Arab immigrants to produce the civilisation of Axum. In the south they either were still pagan or belonged to the archaic south Arabian form of Judaism held by the Falashas. Under Queen Judith they overran the Axumite kingdom, burning the churches, and killing the king and massacring the princes of the royal line whom they found confined on a mountain-top. Axum had outlasted Jerusalem and Rome. It went down in flames as Normans invaded Britain.

The heroic recovery of the Christian kingdom

Christianity endured through the actions of a Church comprising an ascetic and reclusive brotherhood of monks and hermits who established their influence by personal sanctity and denial of the world. Gradually the Agau rulers adopted the customs of the vanquished Axumite civilisation, including its religion. A new dynasty of Christian kings led the recovery, the Zagwe. They made the rock hewn churches at Lalibela. In the later years of the dynasty there developed a belief that the Queen of Sheba had visited King Solomon in Jerusalem and borne him a son named Menelik who founded the true Axumite royal line (probably this resulted from an Axumite fondness for genealogy of the type described for the Yemenis by Mackintosh Smith). It was thought that when Menelik later visited his father he came back with the true Ark of the Covenant, leaving Solomon with a forgery in its place.

Through two and a half centuries of the Zagwe dynasty, the political and religious frontiers were pushed south onto the fertile Shoan plateau, which was occupied by Semitic speaking Christian Amhara settlers. By the 1200s these devout pioneers were the most dynamic elements in the kingdom. In 1270 a Shoan prince, Yekuno Amlak, seized power, claiming descent from the old line of Axumite rulers. By 1300 it was universally believed that the Solomonic line had been re-established. The new rulers led the peripatetic life of military commanders in tented capitals and extended their rule over Gojjam and Damot to the west of Shoa, and then followed the Awash valley to Zeila on the Gulf of Aden.

In this area the Christians had been forestalled by Muslim traders from the coast, mostly Afar, who had acquired the trade in the salt from the Aussa depression, and dabbled in incense (and civet musk?), slaves and gold from the lands of Enarea and Kaffa in the south western highlands. The salt was taken up to the highlands - camels as far as the escarpment and donkeys thereafter. The traders were followed by Muslim clerics and a process of conversion was underway. No doubt they had capitalised on the enforced retreat of the Christian armies.

Now the Christian Ethiopians and their armies demanded tribute - they were not seeking to convert the Muslims but unavoidably the conquests assumed a religious dimension and the Muslim trading dynasties fomented resistance.

In 1415 the Christian Ethiopians blotted out the Muslim elements, obliterating the leading Muslim state, Ifat, whose northern part was annexed to Ethiopia; killing the Ifati king

and pursuing fugitives as far as Zeila. Oliver and Fage say this was the prelude to Ethiopia's most brilliant phase of its history to date - 1400-1500. Church and State flourished hand in hand. A system of standing militia was developed to guard the frontiers and keep order in the provinces. These were governed by local lords whose loyalty was assessed by royal intendants. Tribute was raised from a semi circle of states beyond the southern and eastern frontiers.

In the early 1500s the Portuguese were in contact with Ethiopia through a mission based at Massawa. They described the capital of the Emperor, Lebna Dengel, as a town-sized settlement consisting entirely of tents. The emperor rode a finely caparisoned mule, higher status than a horse. But it seemed there was no return to the classical times of Axum - no stone buildings and monuments - as in Yemen, where the great structures of Marib were replaced by clumps of tents and huts. They had the clothes and the relics and ornaments but no decent buildings - perhaps this reflected the transitory nature of the empire - it relied on constant mobile warfare to subdue its constituent parts, coercion to prevent insurrection - e.g. all members of the royal line, except the Emperor's children, were imprisoned on a mountain so they could not plot with the barons/Rases.

The jihad of Ahmad Granj, 'the left hander'

The Muslim survivors of the conquest of Ifat retreated to Adal on the eastern side of the Rift Valley, south of Zeila (thus a Somali state), and began to build a jihad against Ethiopia. A period followed of raids and counter-raids in the region of Harar. In 1517 the Ottoman Turks arrived in the Red Sea after overthrowing the Mamluks in Egypt, employing new firearms and artillery. They found in Adal an Islamic force eager to use the innovative weapons against the Christian Ethiopians.

In 1529 Adal produced a military genius, Ahmad bin Ibrahim or Ahmad Granj, who proceeded to shatter the Ethiopian armies and plunder the kingdom. Churches and monasteries were burned and the accumulated wealth carried off. The royal prisoners on the mountain were executed. Ahmad had achieved a stunning victory by the use of firearms against the spears and shields of the Ethiopians. For the first time in two thousand years Ethiopia had been invaded.

Ahmad miscalculated when he tried to govern Ethiopia through a system of renegade Christian agents - opposition built up around Lebna Dengel who had retreated to a mountain fastness. He appealed to the Portuguese for help - the Portuguese mission in Massawa had already left. Lebna Dengel died and was succeeded by his son before the Portuguese musketeers arrived under Christopher da Gama, son of Vasco in 1542.

Heavily outnumbered, but with better guns, da Gama fought an inconclusive battle against Ahmad near Lake Ashangi. Before the next battle Ahmad was reinforced, enabling him to kill da Gama and rout the Portuguese. But by now the Ethiopians had rallied around Claudius the new Emperor and supported by the remaining Portuguese they fought back. Ahmad was killed in 1543, at which his demoralised army fell apart, to be mercilessly hunted down by the Ethiopians.

Following this intervention, Portuguese missionaries condemned the church which their soldiers had fought to save and laboured to bring the Ethiopian church into obedience to Rome. When the Jesuits converted one king, the Abuna absolved Ethiopians of their duty of

obedience, enabling them to rebel and kill him. His nephew succeeded him and also became a Catholic, triggering more bloody revolution. Alarmed by the slaughter, the Emperor recanted and ordered the ejection from Ethiopia of the Jesuits. Thus, after a hundred years of missionary effort, the Ethiopians were more confirmed than ever in their ancient faith, and inclined to xenophobia.

Pagan Oromo/Galla pastoralists had already taken advantage of the breakdown of Ethiopia's southern and eastern borders to infiltrate on a scale that proved irreversible.

Chaos in Gondar

From 1500-1700 Christian Ethiopia achieved a recovery of sorts, but only by moving its capital to Gondar in the north west, where it remained for two hundred years. The last effective emperor at Gondar was Yasu who reigned until 1700. His successors lost all authority, even in the town, and survived merely as puppets in the hands of ruthless nobles. There were several rival Emperors - at one time there were six rival claimants, all equally impotent.

Chaos reigned in the middle of the eighteenth century - the kingdom had fallen into its constituent provinces with barons intriguing for power. The Scot James Bruce, in Ethiopia in the 1770s to find the source of the Blue Nile and the first Britisher to visit the place, described scenes of appalling brutality and torture in the streets of Gondar. He found the provinces in a state of ceaseless warfare and thought of nothing but 'escape from this bloody country'.

Theodore assumes control, then loses his grip

At last, in 1855, the robber baron, Ras Kassa from Kwara in the north west, secured coronation at Axum and became Theodore. He had subjugated Gondar, Gojjam and the ruler of Tigre at Simien before taking the throne. Shoa submitted to him in 1858 and he took the Shoan prince Menelik as a captive at his court. Thus Theodore began the re-unification of Tigre and Amhara in the north with the southerly province of Shoa. He laid the foundations of a modern army and turned the tide against the Oromo/Galla who had overrun the far south in the days since the sixteenth century.

Emperor Theodore was determined to break the power of the regional Rases and unite the country under his sole control. He also wanted slavery abolished. He had taken as his advisers some British envoys Plowden and Bell. Unfortunately these were killed by rebels and their restraining influence on Theodore lost. Theodore wanted to destroy the Turks and reclaim Jerusalem but was rebuffed by Victoria. He imprisoned the British consul at Magdala and a few missionaries, which led to the GBP ten million Napier expedition and British siege of Magdala in 1867, in the course of which, abandoned by his vassals, Theodore shot himself (with a revolver sent as a present from Queen Victoria). This was the first direct European interference in Ethiopia since the sixteenth century.

Theodore's attempts to subject the traditional rulers of the provinces to his authority had resulted in constant warfare. The extortions of his armies in the field caused general discontent in the rural populace. His name evoked terror but he had lost effective rule of the country beyond his fortress at Magdala. Things were the same a hundred years later.

Yohannes - three wars at once

In 1872 Theodore was succeeded by Emperor John IV/Yohannes, a Tigrean chief who fought his way to the throne using British arms given to him in return for his support for Napier at Magdala. Yohannes had two consuming ambitions - to unify the Christian empire, riven by civil war for most of the last two hundred years (Pakenham, 1991); and to extend its frontiers beyond the eastern escarpments into the deserts that had been lost to the Muslims more than three hundred years before. Massawa was crucial to these ambitions - as Tigre's gateway to Europe it would enable him to build a modern army against his rivals.

But since 1530 Massawa had been in the hands of foreigners - Ahmad the left hander, the Ottoman Turks, the Egyptians - now it was held in the name of Khedive Ismael Pasha, who had banned imports of arms to modernise Yohannes' army. Ismael the Magnificent wished to encompass the whole of the Sudan, east Africa and Ethiopia in his empire. Ostensibly pursued under the banner of civilisation and fighting the slave trade, Ismael's campaign really was intended to secure further financial support from Egypt's backers, who included France, Turkey and Britain. Samuel Baker and General Gordon both were engaged by Ismael to lead his civilising missions.

The Egyptian forces captured a crescent of land between the Blue Nile and Massawa, which they added to the Sudan. They established forts at Gallabat and Keren, and occupied Harar. Gordon rashly attempted to strike inland from the coast through Somaliland to shorten his lines to Buganda (instead of working from Khartoum). This would encircle Ethiopia, but it also meant invading the territory of the Zanzibari Sultan, Barghash, a British ally. After landings at Barawa, Kismayu and Lamu, Kirk, the British Consul at Zanzibar protested and Gordon's forces withdrew.

In 1875 and 1876 Yohannes defended the highlands of Tigre against successive invasions by Ismael's army from the sea. They were armed with the latest weapons and commanded by mercenary officers, including some Americans. Yohannes' armies had only spears, shields and old muskets but outnumbered the infidel ten to one, and they repelled the aggressors with heavy losses.

Nearly bankrupt, but hoping the tide would turn, Ismael decided to come to terms with Ethiopia. He asked Gordon, who had earlier resigned, to handle this. In 1877 Gordon travelled down the Red Sea to Massawa and agreed with the local chieftains to suspend hostilities; later he went to Harar to treat with the Negus (Menelik, presumably). When he went back to Ethiopia in 1879, after resigning again, he was ignominiously turned out of the country.

Salisbury and his FO man, Percy Anderson, decided that Britain's informal empire - power without responsibility - was doomed. They reassessed Britain's priorities in Africa, starting with Egypt, vital to British interests since the Suez Canal opened in 1869. How soon could Egyptian finances be made sound and its independence re-established (subject to appropriate British supervision)?

The day might never come - once France realised that the British would never restore dual control they sabotaged efforts to order the country's finances. Meanwhile the British saw that Ismael's professed dream of a tropical empire from the highlands of Ethiopia

to the source of the White Nile was an absurdity. The British-Egyptian forces in the Sudan must be withdrawn as honourably as possible, despite the Mahdists. Britain assumed control and made Ismael a puppet.

In 1884 Yohannes signed the Treaty of Adowa with the British and agreed to help them against the Mahdi - by giving safe conduct to the Egyptian garrisons on the Sudanese frontier. He also agreed to prohibit the slave trade in all Ethiopia's markets. In return the British granted him free transit through Massawa of all goods, including modern arms. Yohannes assumed this meant he would reclaim Ethiopia's ancient inheritance, stolen by the Turks in the sixteenth century.

After taking Khartoum in 1885 the Mahdi declared a jihad. Obvious targets for his Ansar armies were the Egyptian garrisons on the Ethiopian borders, and the ramshackle Christian Empire that lay beyond. The dervishes lay siege to the forts at Gallabat and Keren and the Mahdi wrote to Yohannes, reminding him that 1200 years before the Ethiopians had welcomed Abu Bakr the Khalifa (successor) of the Prophet, and the Emperor had converted to Islam (referring to Abraha?).

Yohannes did not reply, but called on his vassals for assistance. With their support he was able to rescue the Keren and Magdala garrisons of his erstwhile Egyptian enemies. Ismael's trading forts at Harar and Massawa had never been profitable and at British insistence had been abandoned in 1885, just before Khartoum fell. Harar was seen as of little value and passed to Menelik of Shoa. Yohannes wanted to reclaim Massawa, lost 350 years before to the Ottoman Turks, so that he could achieve his ambition of regaining the desert lands lost to the Muslims.

But Massawa was snapped up by Italy, in a secret deal with the British to counter French ambitions at Djibouti. Massawa would be the start for Italy's colony of Eritrea. Yohannes felt deceived by the British and viewed the Italians with suspicion. The Italians began looking for opportunities to expand into the cool highlands.

In 1887 Yohannes destroyed an exploratory force of 500 men at Dogali. He tried to advance with a force of 100,000 men to attack the Italians in Eritrea but was forced to retreat by the failure of his commissariat in the barren and stony canyons. The Italians maintained their bridgehead at Massawa and courted Menelik of Shoa, to whom they sent large quantities of arms.

The Mahdi died, but his successor the Khalifa gradually built up his forces. While Yohannes faced the Italians in the east, in 1888 the Dervishes sacked Gondar in the north west, then withdrew. Menelik no doubt was plotting for the Emperor's downfall - who to fight first?

With a force of 100,000 loyal nobles and soldiers from Begemdir, Tigre and less reliable Wollo, Yohannes advanced to the desert to fight the dervish infidels near Gallabat. In 1889, just when victory seemed assured for the Ethiopians, Yohannes was mortally wounded and his army gave up. John's body was sent to the Khalifa at Omdurman, and his head was paraded on a pole. A few weeks later Menelik of Shoa was crowned Emperor.

Jan Hoi Menelik the Great and the Italians

Young Menelik by 1878 had accumulated such a stock of arms and made himself so powerful that Yohannes had been compelled to recognise him as King of Shoa. He was accepted as Emperor in 1889 by the nobility and the rulers of the provinces. He established his capital in Addis Ababa, a sprawling Shoan camp site. Menelik had built his stockpile of European weapons, using guns to get ivory to get more guns, from anyone who would trade. While still King of Shoa, he had received a lot of arms from the Italians in return for promises of assistance - now he had become the new Emperor, this seemed a diplomatic masterstroke.

Menelik signed the Treaty of Wichale with the Italians in May 1889. The Amharic version he signed gave the Italians a small slice of the Christian plateau - as far south as Asmara - and the desert lowlands of Bogos in the north. In return the Italians would supply arms. By 1889 they had already sent him a shipment of 5,000 rifles, plus ammunition carefully chosen not to fit.

The Italian version of the treaty gave Italy a sort of protectorate over all Ethiopia, and with this as their authority the Italians pushed well south of Asmara to the Mareb River. Menelik protested. Italy tried to pacify him with a gift of ammunition in 1893, which he accepted before repudiating the treaty as a trick.

Italy's claim to the territory it had seized was upheld in Europe by all the Powers except Turkey, annoyed at the way Italy had seized Massawa; and France and Russia. As Menelik's relations cooled with Italy, so they warmed with the Franco-Russian alliance, which supplied him with arms through Djibouti. The malarial outpost of Massawa was a graveyard for the Italians, but when the British gave Italy permission to use Zeila in Somaliland as a better base from which to launch their advance into Ethiopia, and to block munitions supplies to Menelik, the French protested and permission had to be rescinded.

Initially the Italians tried to shore up Ras Mangasha of Tigre, Yohannes' son, to resist Menelik. But Tigre was in ruins, devastated by war and famine and Mangasha had little support. Eventually he rode south to Shoa to declare his allegiance to Menelik. Other feudal chiefs followed suit. The Italians were not concerned - Ethiopia might be united under the King of Kings but it could not resist a modern army.

In 1894 an ally of Menelik and Mangasha in Eritrea declared he was liberating the province from the Italians, and started a revolt which was easily crushed. The Italians, with native troops, pursued Mangasha south across the de facto frontier. Mangasha pulled back, leaving most of Tigre - Adigrat, Adowa, Makalle - in Italian hands. In Italy this was hailed as a great victory and General Baratieri, was given an increased grant by Crispi's Cabinet. He promised to bring Menelik back in a cage.

Baratieri assessed Menelik's position - he could trust no one diplomatically - not the Muslim Sultan of Aussa in the east, the dervishes, or his own Rases at home; the imperial army was plagued by desertions. He would have to transport his feudal army 500 miles across the gorges of the high plateau and then supply them with food in a Tigre ravaged by war and famine - Yohannes had proved how difficult that was. There might not be a war at all. But 'Under the shadow of those fantastic peaks at Adowa, Italy was shortly to endure the bloodiest defeat ever endured by a colonial power in Africa' Pakenham (1991).

Menelik's Rases rallied to his call - from Gojjam, Wollo, and Harar. Most important was Ras Makonnen from Harar, the province that linked Shoa to the Red Sea and the arms dealers at Djibouti. He had 70,000 modern rifles and some artillery, with Russian-trained gunners. In the van, Makonnen advanced slowly across the country, authorised to open negotiations with the Italians to give the main force time to catch up.

Under pressure from Rome to secure the protectorate, the Italians had advanced to Amba Alagi in Tigre. Their forward positions were quickly swamped by Menelik's vanguard. Baratieri was alarmed to find the vanguard alone numbered 30,000 warriors - he had reckoned on this as the size of Menelik's entire army. Back in Italy, Crispi secured an extra grant to ensure the defeat was avenged. Reinforcements were rushed from Italy.

Baratieri faced the Ethiopian force across the battlements of Tigre. He was short of pack animals and reckoned he had food only for about ten days for his 20,000 men. Since his defensive position was strong he waited. Menelik eschewed frontal assault and took Adowa in an attempt to outflank Baratieri, who dug in a new defensive line. Baratieri believed that Menelik would have to attack him before his army ate the province bare. His best tactic might be to withdraw into Eritrea and let Menelik's army repeat the experience of Yohannes'.

Menelik's army had run out of food and was ready to leave. Some Rases proposed a desperate assault on the enemy lines, but Mangasha reminded Menelik that his father Yohannes had died in such an effort against the dervishes at Gallabat. It seemed Menelik's advance was doomed to retreat, unless the Italians attacked.

Crispi and his Cabinet wanted Menelik humbled in battle, and forced to submit to a protectorate. Unwillingly, Baratieri decided on a cautious strategy to threaten Adowa and provoke either an Ethiopian attack or retreat. But the plan went wrong when two Italian brigades lost their way on a night advance and blundered into Menelik's army on 29th February 1896.

In the first engagements Menelik's wild army took fearful losses against the well-drilled askaris and efficiently deployed mountain guns of the Italian brigade. He watched rulers, of whom all had at one time or another threatened his power, leading their men in the attacks - Ras Mikael of Wollo, Tekla Haimonot of Gojjam and Ras Makonnen of Harar. Finally, egged on by the redoubtable Empress Taitu he threw his Shoan army into the assault on Albertone's brigade, which buckled and then fled in disarray. Baratieri missed the chance for an orderly withdrawal and retrenchment which could have saved the day, and his forces were washed away by waves of screaming Ethiopians. Since there were Galla in Menelik's army, many of the dead and dying were castrated; native prisoners had their left feet and right hands cut off, a customary punishment unchanged since mediaeval times.

The news caused hysteria and riots in Italy and Crispi was hounded from office. Baratieri's replacement arrived in Eritrea to gather the survivors and open negotiations with Menelik. The Shoans were massed at the Mareb River, apparently ready to advance and occupy Eritrea's southern borderland. Then unaccountably they retreated to Shoa with their Italian prisoners. The rivers were dry and food was unobtainable; they had suffered enormous losses; the men had had enough and wanted to return to their farms.

The return to Addis Ababa took two months. Grain and cattle had to be taken in

force from the peasants and the Muslim Wollo harried the flanks of the army.

Menelik was determined to use the victory to cement a permanent peace. In August 1896 he advised the Italians of his terms: abolition of the Treaty of Wichale and recognition of Ethiopia's unqualified independence. The Italians hastened to oblige and a peace treaty was soon signed in Addis Ababa confirming the border as the line of the Mareb.

Once the Italian prisoners were repatriated, Ethiopia resumed normal commercial relations with Italy. Menelik struck shrewd, incompatible deals with the other colonial Powers. France had supplied him with arms and from them he took a large slice of French Somaliland in return for promising his support for their scheme to take over the upper Nile. From the British he accepted part of British Somaliland and duty free status at Zeila in exchange for his promise to oppose the Mahdists. To the Mahdists in Sudan he promised a commercial pact and assistance with arms against their common enemies the 'red British'.

In 1897 Menelik sent his Shoan armies on a new war of conquest against the Galla in the southern borders and the Kaffa in the south west. Tens of thousands were killed or sold into slavery. Their cattle and gold were looted and their lands given out to Shoans. Soon Menelik's empire was twice the size of Yohannes' at its peak. He ruled the Gurage country, the ancient kingdom of Kaffa, and the Anuak and other tribes on the borders of Sudan. With gold looted in Kaffa and the south he would re-equip his army, start modernising the state and extend the dominance of Shoa far into the twentieth century.

Carry on up the Nile

In the 1890s, a nagging question for the Powers was: how should the vast deserts of the upper Nile and eastern Sudan, now controlled by the Mahdists, be controlled? The French resented virtual ejection from government of Egypt when Britain occupied the country in 1882, after forty years of entente and the semblance of 'dual control'. Soon both the French and the British came to believe that control of the upper Nile meant control of Egypt, and as the scramble intensified, each side indulged in diplomatic contortions to gain an advantage in the basin, delimited by the only two large African countries that had so far avoided annexation by the Powers - Sudan was nominally Egyptian; and Ethiopia was still independent.

In 1894 the British and French began negotiations on the question - the British asked that the French accept their entire claim over the Nile basin up to the Congo watershed, on the understanding that British occupation would not mean that Sudan ceased to be part of Egypt's empire, i.e. the British needed Sudan as long as they were in Egypt. For the French there would be territorial compensations in west Africa. The French accepted the west African concessions, but proposed that in return the British and the French should both agree to keep out of Sudan, which would stay Egyptian, until the Egyptians had beaten the Mahdists and re-occupied. This was unacceptable to the jingoistic head of the FO and the talks collapsed.

The British had always questioned the wisdom of the Italian position at Massawa, that malarial outpost. They had been saved from destruction in 1887 when Yohannes was killed at Gallabat. By the terms of the 1889 Treaty of Wichale they had a toehold on the Tigrean plateau, but when Menelik had repudiated the Treaty it had seemed he might drive the Italians into the Red Sea. Now the Mahdists were massing at Kassala, captured by the Italians in 1894. Crispien asked the British to allow him to use Zeila to block the import of arms to

Menelik, but French protests were upheld. .

Could the British help the Italians another way - by attacking the Mahdists to create a diversion? Salisbury held back from this, but in 1896 was spurred into action by news of the Italian defeat. To save the survivors from the Dervishes was pressing. Crispi and the Italians were pleading for help, blaming the Germans for conniving with France. To preserve the Triple Alliance, of which Italy was the weakest member, the Germans contacted Salisbury to advise him that the French had supported Menelik against the Italians and plotted with the Russians and King Leopold to grab the upper Nile (Leopold in 1895 had launched a covert mission to grab territory in Sudan to extend his Congo State up to Fashoda, Khartoum and the west bank of the White Nile. With help from French Somaliland he could link the Atlantic to the Red Sea).

In 1896, Baring, Britain's man in Egypt, stressed again to Salisbury's government the importance of securing British influence in the basin of the upper Nile. Salisbury, now less reticent about a forward policy in Africa, believed an advance should be down the Nile - the railway from Mombasa to Uganda would have been built within a few years. But now he agreed to send a force up the Nile - first as a diversionary advance to Dongola, and then to sort things out once and for all: smash the Khalifa, liberate Khartoum, avenge Gordon and secure the basin of the white Nile from blue mountains of Ethiopia to the rim of the Congo.

The French were outraged. Their man Marchand was already planning to march to Fashoda on the upper Nile with 200 men. His official memorandum authorised him to attempt an entente with the Mahdists, and he had secret instruction to hoist the tricolour - it was a military expedition. When the French learned of the Kitchener expedition, Marchand was ordered to make all speed.

Menelik had defeated the Italians with French support and in 1897 he agreed to assist them to gain control of the upper Nile - the Governor of French Somaliland had met with Ras Makonnen to discuss a French scheme to link the Red Sea with the White Nile via the mountains of Ethiopia; more importantly two French expeditions would be launched from the Red Sea to join hands with Marchand at Fashoda. Menelik signed a 'White Nile Convention', promising to give the expeditions his full support - the French expected him to push his armies down to the east bank of the White Nile. He would be able to claim the river as his empire's border with the new French possessions on the opposite bank.

The two French expeditions took place in the long rains. They passed through Galla country, a green desolation after the depredations of Menelik's soldiers - they had burned the villages, killed the men and enslaved the women and children. When they eventually staggered into Gore with their letter of introduction to Dedjazmatch Tessama from Menelik, they were made to wait, since Menelik's letter instructed the Dedjazmatch to come to Addis Ababa before letting the explorers proceed. After three weeks a courier arrived and said they had Jan Hoi's permission to go wherever they pleased. They pressed on, and met at Siba a force of 2,000 wild Ethiopians who denied them progress. They were forced to return to Addis Ababa, a three week journey, where the Emperor congratulated them on their efforts and decreed those who had stopped them imbeciles who must be punished by Dedjazmatch Tessama, Governor of Gore.

The Frenchmen returned to Gore, without the collapsible boats they needed, crossed the border and splashed through the swamps of eastern Sudan. Their letter from Menelik forced dozens of Galla to escort them - many of these deserted. If caught they were

flogged. On the edges of the Sudd they mistakenly took a southerly route rather than the well-trodden northern ivory route and ended up in a watery void inhabited only by elephants and crocodiles, 150 miles short of their goal. They returned in failure to Addis Ababa.

This was as Menelik had intended. While he had benefited from alliance with the French but he had strong diplomatic reasons for ensuring they never reached Fashoda. The most effective way to protect western Ethiopia from encroachment was the presence of the fanatical enemies of the British, the Mahdists. Menelik was prepared to court even Ethiopia's hereditary enemies if it was in his interest. Abetting the Khalifa in fighting the 'red British' was a good way of biding his time until Menelik was ready to seize eastern Sudan.

Originally ordered to make only a diversionary advance with Egyptian troops to Dongola, by 1898 Sirdar Kitchener's expedition had steamrollered its way to Khartoum and smashed the Khalifa and his Mahdists. British troops had been shipped out to assist, and some feared this risked provoking the French into war. In the event the Khalifa had not taken Menelik's advice to treat with the Powers, nor his offer of assistance.

In 1898 Menelik sent Dedjazmatch Tessama on a reconnaissance to the White Nile, assuring the Khalifa that he only wished to protect himself against foreign encroachers. Tessama took an army of 10,000 warriors and, under duress, a Russian and some Frenchmen. The first stage of the trek was an enjoyable rampage through conquered Galla lands where the army pillaged grain and meat. But only a small party made it through the pestilential marshes beyond the frontier, where many Ethiopians died from malaria. They reached the White Nile after following the Sobat. A few days later, Marchand reached Fashoda, closely followed by the British.

At Khartoum Kitchener had learned of Marchand's tour de force in reaching Fashoda by walking from Brazzaville. Kitchener explained that on behalf of Egypt he had just conquered Sudan, and that included Fashoda, now under a French flag. In a tense diplomatic confrontation the French backed Marchand's effort almost to the point of war but eventually gave way. On the ground, Kitchener's force was overwhelming. The Ethiopians had loathed the foetid swamps and never intended coming to their aid, despite Menelik's past promises.

The Nile may yet play an important part in the future - 86% of the water entering the Nile in Sudan comes from Ethiopia, and even a small diversion in Ethiopia could have important effects downstream (World Resources Institute).

Addis Ababa in the time of Menelik

There were no streets and only a handful of stone buildings. Sprang to life in 1885 from the sprawling camps of Menelik's Rasas. It was like a hundred villages thrown together: 10,000 mud huts spread below the rim of the green Shoan tableland, in a valley dotted with flowering mimosa trees and gashed with streams. By the early 1900s most of the trees had been used for fuel and timber and the Emperor thought about moving the capital. Not wishing to uproot their Legation the British advised planting eucalyptus and so the area was still extensively wooded in Thesiger's time.

The heart of the capital was a great bazaar swarming with white cloaked traders and their mules, Galla/Oromo (Orma), Somalis etc. The only public buildings were five thatched conical churches - Raphael, Mary, Trinity, Oriel and St.,. George; the Adderach, a

huge, gabled banqueting hall that could seat 2,000 warriors eating unleavened bread and raw meat; and some incongruously Indian pavilions designed by a Swiss engineer. The last formed Menelik's palace, guarded by a pair of mangy lions in a cage.

Return to chaos

In 1908 Menelik had a stroke and at this sign of his weakness, old rivalries broke out in the north, where Rases intrigued for power, fought to quash internal rebellions and marched on Addis Ababa. In the south, governors and their armies of occupation pillaged the land and sold the inhabitants into slavery. Menelik's last act was to name his grandson Lij Jasu as his heir, with Ras Tasamma as Regent (the former Dedjazmatch from Gore?). Menelik's scheming wife, the Empress, had other plans and was determined that her nephew's wife, Zauditu, should become Empress. She was thwarted by the council of Ministers, for once unanimous.

In 1911 Ras Tasamma, the Regent, died of a stroke - quite a few of the nobility seemed to die of this - in-breeding depression? Altitude? Poisoning?

The country was paralysed and Addis Ababa filled with soldiery - from the disbanded army of Menelik and the armies of the various Rases contending for power, all now encamped on the surrounding hills. Murder and robbery were common and proceeded regardless of savage public floggings, mutilations and hangings. The country was flooded with rifles brought in through Djibouti.

Lij Jasu seized power in 1911 and Menelik died in 1913. Lij Jasu was a dissolute ruler who thought only of his licentious and murderous pleasures. He converted to Islam and destroyed even the semblance of central government.

In 1916 Lij Jasu presented an Abyssinian flag to the Turkish Consul in Addis Ababa, embroidered with the Turkish crescent and the Islamic declaration of faith. He declared that he would set up an Islamic government in Harar, and recalled its Governor, Dedjazmatch Tafari.

Revolution and disorder 1916-17

Menelik had conquered Harar in 1887 after a ferocious battle, and appointed Ras Makonnen as Governor. Makonnen governed until his death in 1906, when he was succeeded by the unpopular Dedjazmatch Balcha. In 1911 Dedjazmatch Tafari, Makonnen's son, replaced Balcha as governor of Harar. Ras Makonnen was Menelik's cousin and ablest general, had he not died he could well have succeeded the Emperor and Makonnen's son Tafari would have been next in line. Now Tafari would lead the confused and divided chiefs against Lij Jasu.

The Abuna absolved the inhabitants of the Empire of their allegiance to Lij Jasu and the nobles agreed that Menelik's daughter Zauditu should be Empress. Tafari would be made Ras and heir to the throne. Ras Tafari would have to wait another 14 years before he became Emperor.

According to Thesiger, the nobles had hesitated in making Ras Tafari Emperor because they were concerned that 'he wanted to abolish slavery, found schools, build roads and modernise the country' - echoes of Theodore.

Perhaps under a patrician delusion that they had a common interest, Thesiger claims that the nobles and the peasants wanted none of these innovations. This apparently contradicts his claim that Tafari was very popular. It may be more accurate to say that he was very powerful - his father Ras Makonnen had ensured that Harar had an exceptionally well-armed warrior force. Presumably this was at Addis Ababa and still loyal to Tafari.

The forces from Addis Ababa marched to Harar. Lij Jasu had flown and they contented themselves with massacring such Muslims as they could find within the city walls. From misplaced pride Lij Jasu's venerable father Ras Mikael of Wollo entered the war in 1916. At the final battle in October at Sagale, just north of Addis Ababa, the Shoans routed Ras Mikael's forces. Lij Jasu tried to foment further rebellion, but was resoundingly defeated and escaped to Danakil country.

In 1917 Zauditu was crowned Empress. The devious Taitu was banished - she later died of a stroke.

Ethiopia was in a disturbed state - the provinces of Simien, Walkait, Wajju and Wogara all revolted that year. The Wollo Muslims, persecuted by the Shoan army, were raiding at large. The Arussi had risen, along with various Muslim and pagan tribes. Revolution was expected in Tigre. The soldiers could survive only by looting and the peasants were rising in desperation. In Addis Ababa the council of ministers were as usual intriguing for their own gains. Zauditu herself, conscious that Ras Tafari held much of the real power, was constantly plotting to undo him.

From Ras Tafari to Haile Selassie

In 1928 Ras Tafari forced Zauditu to acknowledge his power and make him Negus, or king. Now he felt influential enough to press on with reforms. But in 1930 Ras Gugsa Wale, Zauditu's ex-husband rose in objection, calling on the country to support him to overthrow this Negus who would corrupt their religion and destroy their ancient heritage with his new-fangled ways.

It seemed possible that all Tigre, Begemder, Gojjam and Wollo would rise in support of Ras Gugsa. Tafari summoned his armies from Harar and Sidamo and sent them north to do battle: Ras Gugsa was killed and his army routed. Tafari was now proclaimed Negusa Nagast, King of kings. Empress Zauditu died of diabetes the same year and Tafari became Emperor Haile Selassie the First.

Italian invasion 1935

Mussolini had been looking for a pretext to invade Ethiopia to add it to his new Roman Empire and recover prestige lost at Adowa in 1896. In 1934 Ethiopian and Italian forces clashed at Wal Wal, near the Somali border but actually 60 miles inside Ethiopia. Mussolini demanded reparations for a claimed Ethiopian affront - imperial concessions and abject apologies. Haile Selassie appealed to the League of Nations for arbitration.

The British gave no help, first advising against the appeal to the League, then suggesting that Ethiopia should make concessions to the Italians. They said that in order to encourage a peaceful settlement of the dispute they would cease supplying arms to Italy and Ethiopia. Other arms suppliers to Ethiopia - France, Denmark, Czechoslovakia - followed suit, effectively emasculating the Ethiopian army. Though the British controlled the Suez Canal they did nothing to hinder the shipments of Italian troops and armaments to Massawa and Mogadishu.

Britain was probably unwilling to support Ethiopia's case against Italy in the League of Nations Assembly for fear of upsetting Mussolini and bringing him into league with Hitler. But they did make some noises in the League of Nations Assembly about upholding the covenant to protect smaller weaker nations against aggressors.

In 1935 Italy invaded Ethiopia. The League of Nations eventually condemned the aggressor. The next step ought to have been oil sanctions - the majority in the League supported sanctions on oil. In England Baldwin was facing an election, which he won partly by affirming his support for the League and re-assuring the people that there was no question of military sanctions.

By now the British and the French already had secretly agreed that Mussolini might be placated by a protectorate over all parts of Ethiopia not inhabited by the Amhara - about 75% of the country - they initialled a plan to give Mussolini Tigre, the Danakil and Ogaden country and a trade monopoly over the country south of Addis Ababa. There were other strings attached. Someone leaked the stitch-up to the newspapers and there was uproar in Britain at the Government's apparent hypocrisy. Parliament was threatened: the Foreign Secretary resigned.

Naturally the League of Nations was indignant at the French and British tactics. Delegates expected Britain to vote with them to impose oil sanctions on Italy. Britain was alarmed by Mussolini's blustering and would risk nothing to upset him. Eden, the new Foreign Secretary, said the British were unwilling to discuss sanctions while the peace proposals were being discussed. Since Britain controlled the Suez Canal, her support was essential to sanctions, so the majority in favour evaporated. Mussolini later admitted to Hitler that had the League imposed sanctions on oil, the war would have been abandoned in a week.

On learning of the invasion Haile Selassie ordered full mobilisation and because of Italian dilatoriness the Ethiopians were able to inflict a few early reverses on the invaders. The engagements were in Makalle and Dai Timket in the far north of Tigre and in Simien. Shortly after this Haile Selassie learned of the terms of the Anglo-French carve-up and rejected them - pointing out that to give such concessions to an aggressor was counter to the spirit of the League.

The Italian advance continued to falter and Mussolini ordered the use of terror tactics, poison gas, flame throwers and even bacteriological weapons (his commanders balked at the last suggestion) to augment the shelling, bombing and strafing etc. With their primitive firearms and other archaic weapons and equipment the Ethiopians suffered terrible losses. They also suffered from treachery by some tribes e.g. the Raya, who had been bought by the Italians. The Italians marched into Addis Ababa in May 1936. A few days later, Haile Selassie made a last entreaty to the League of Nations again, but they turned a deaf ear. Ethiopia was

of little import relative to the prospect of another war in Europe.

Allied liberation

In late 1940 an Allied force of Abyssinian refugees, Sudanese soldiers, British officers etc., invaded Ethiopia from Sudan - passing first through Gojjam. Gojjam was the centre of Ethiopian resistance to the Italians - the Patriots had been fighting for six years against the occupying power. Simultaneously, there were Allied advances into Ethiopia from the south-east through Kenya and Somaliland; and into Eritrea from northern Sudan. By May 1941, the Italians were defeated and Haile Selassie was back on his throne in Addis Ababa.

Italy in Ethiopia

Atrocities meted out by the Italians in 1935-40 entrenched the resentment of most Ethiopian people and sporadic resistance continued after the occupation of Addis Ababa. The Patriots of Gojjam resisted until 1940, for instance. Evelyn Waugh suggested that the Italian invasion had some positive impact, introducing much-needed improvements in a 'disgraceful place' - the Italians built the first metalled roads in Ethiopia.

Thesiger found such a view unacceptable, citing atrocities such as the black shirt massacres in Addis Ababa and the shooting of hundreds of priests - but it wasn't the first time this had happened in Ethiopia - just the first time that the aggressor had been European.

Oliver and Fage say the Italians 'had done much to provide the material groundwork for a modern state in Ethiopia and Eritrea'. Harding (1994) goes along with this for Eritrea, but implies that much less was done in Ethiopia. After all, they had been in Addis Ababa for only five years, whereas they had been in Eritrea for 50 years.

Haile Selassie after WWII

With the help of an Allied army including Sudanese, Australian, Indian, Nigerian and South African troops (the Ethiopians were not impressed by the South Africans' fighting capabilities), Ethiopia resumed its status as an independent state, and '...its Emperor, with a renewed sense of urgency, returned to the problems of how to modernise his medieval kingdom without thereby losing control over it' (Oliver and Fage).

In 1952 the British were to leave Eritrea and it was decided to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia¹. The UN proposed Eritrea should be under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian crown, but with an independent assembly and judiciary. The proposal was agreed despite outspoken Russian protests that this would consolidate Western interests in the Horn - Eritrea must be independent, they insisted. The Americans thought there ideally should be more consultation with the Eritrean people, but accepted that, because of US interest, sadly this was not possible. Later the Russians would support Ethiopia's war on Eritrea.

Haile Selassie had ruled Ethiopia as Regent since 1916 and as Emperor since 1930. He had striven to modernise a feudal government and society but met much resistance. Not until 1930 had he felt able to begin curbing the feudal powers of the regional Rases, centralising the administration, tackling slavery and improving health, education and

¹The traditional hostility of the Somali nomads forbade a greater Somalia, but this was achieved later, after the UN had in 1950 entrusted its administration to the Italians.

communications (from Thesiger).

But by 1960 he was seventy and his administration was in trouble. In 1960 the Imperial Bodyguard attempted to overthrow Haile Selassie while he was visiting Brazil. The rebels issued a statement deploring how ...' a few people, depending on their birth and material wealth, had been exploiting the people for personal benefit'. University students came out in support of the rebellion but the Abuna pronounced an anathema on all who favoured revolution. The army and air force remained loyal and the rebellion was squashed. Mengistu, the General in charge of the Bodyguard, was tried and hanged.

Also in the 1960s there began serious armed conflicts over grazing rights with Somali tribes in the Ogaden. In 1962 Haile Selassie decided that Eritrea should be not just a federated territory but a province of the empire. This led to thirty years of war with Eritrean forces, now fighting for secession e.g. the EPLF. At the same time the Tigrean forces (TPLF) were up in arms, seeking not secession but more autonomy within Ethiopia.

In 1966 Haile Selassie celebrated the 25th anniversary of his return to Ethiopia. Thesiger says that the remodelled army, administration, education, health and legal services then on display showed the progress achieved on the Emperor's mission. But Thesiger adds that Haile Selassie was forced to be autocratic, because his ministers were uncomfortable with responsibility and would not risk independent decisions; the government was a body of ageing, corrupt and self-seeking men.

If Haile Selassie was truly a modernising visionary, it is hard to see why he surrounded himself with people who exemplified the old ways. Probably the nobility had too much invested in the old order to commit 'suicide by progress', and the Emperor was hide-bound by tradition. 'Centralisation of government' had made a modern, centralised dictatorship from a feudal, decentralised one.

While Haile Selassie went on many foreign trips and played the role of prestigious international statesmen, at home there was increasing dissatisfaction. His greatest failing was reluctance to give responsibility to progressive young people who had trained in schools and universities at home and abroad to help implement the modernisation he espoused.

Famines in the 1970s were exacerbated by the dislocation by war of agriculture and distribution systems. The oil crisis in 1973 caused more problems. At last in 1974 Haile Selassie appointed a new government led by a progressive Prime Minister. But it was too late.

The Dergue and Mengistu

The oldest monarchy in Africa (one of the oldest in the world) went down for the last time in 1974. At the time many forecast a social revolution and a far-reaching devolution of power to regionally and ethnically diverse claimants, but what emerged was a still more centralist dictatorship (Davidson, 1992).

The Provisional Military Administrative Council (the 'Dergue') took over in 1974 when the army deposed the Emperor and killed his Prime Minister. There was consideration of a new constitutional monarch but, in 1975, the extremist Mengistu Haile Mariam led the Dergue in executing 60 aristocrats, abolishing the monarchy and declaring a communist state.

There followed three years of bitter fighting between Dergue factions. By 1977

Mengistu had emerged as a single leader. There was bitter repression in Addis Ababa - the city had been divided into three hundred sub-districts, each with a prison and guards authorised to take 'appropriate revolutionary measures'. There were officially appointed murder squads and it was estimated that at the height of the 'Red Terror', a hundred or more people were being shot on the streets each day (not clear how long this went on).

Fighting continued in Eritrea and rebellions took place in other northern regions. Support was waning of the western alliance that had backed Haile Selassie. He had prosecuted the war on Eritrea with more than half of the US budget for arms provision to Africa, but the EPLF and ELF were still fighting.

Suddenly Mengistu benefited from an abrupt Cold War power re-alignment in the Horn. In 1977 The Somali dictator Siad Barre fielded his army behind Somali insurrectionists in the Ogaden. Barre's Soviet backers rallied to Mengistu, while Barre cut his ties with USSR. Using Russian gunboats and Cuban troops, Mengistu soon had the Somalis on the run.

With his new Soviet support, which dwarfed former US aid, Mengistu smashed the Eritreans at Massawa in 1978, forcing the EPLF to retreat and massacring the ELF who chose to stand and fight. But the movement eventually recovered. In 1982 Mengistu launched Red Star, an all-out offensive to wipe out the EPLF. There were at least 300,000 Ethiopian soldiers in Eritrea: they were provisioned by the Dergue, so the impact on the local peasants was less than it would have been under the old imperial levy system.

Nonetheless, by 1983/84 failure of the rains and the massive Ethiopian offensive, led to widespread famine in Tigre and Eritrea, more serious in areas in revolt which received little or no food aid, except from the EPLF's over-stretched relief systems. It was impossible for the Dergue to deal effectively with the famine, and some argued that foreign aid merely enabled the Dergue to maintain its military posture against the EPLF, TPLF etc., further punishing regions under rebel control.

By 1985 it was clear that the EPLF were unbeatable - they had taken everything that Mengistu could throw at them. They had learned to endure aerial bombardments, and they were well-motivated and more than a match for the hapless demoralised conscripts sent against them in the difficult terrain. In 1988 the EPLF took Afabet. The government announced its intention to move millions of people over a period of nine years. Mengistu authorised massive translocation of Tigreans in the north; and villagisation of Galla/Oromo in Arussi. There was widespread resistance and it was only a matter of time before the Mengistu government fell.

Over the years Mengistu enjoyed formal support from Russia, Israel, North Korea and East Germany. Almost until the end, Soviet policy attempted 'with great and costly effort to install in a supposedly "revolutionary Ethiopia" those very policies and institutions of a centralized dictatorship that a reforming leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, was about to denounce as disastrous to the Soviet Union itself' (Davidson, 1992).

Mengistu fled when the EPLF looked certain to take Asmara in 1991. There had been a popular rebellion, with elements of true mass participation, under the banner of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (Davidson, 1992). When the EPRDF troops entered Addis Ababa in May 1991 their were EPLF troops among them.

The Ethiopians invited the Eritreans to participate in discussions on the possible form of a new federal arrangement, but the Eritreans preferred to prepare for a referendum, declaring formal independence in 1993.

Modern Ethiopia - new revolution

The new revolution in Ethiopia resulted in a transitional government dedicated to preparing a new constitution that would make good the promises of the 1974 revolution: 'equal rights in self-government to all of Ethiopia's many nationalities and regions'.

The Transitional Period Charter of Ethiopia was adopted by a multi-ethnic conference of Ethiopians, representative of the post-dictatorship regime, in July 1991. It asserted the rights of all Ethiopians to engage in unrestricted political activity, of nations, nationalities and peoples to self determination within a democratized Ethiopia. Each should 'administer its own affairs within its own defined territory, and participate effectively in the central government on the basis of freedom and of fair and proper representation'.

In 1992, Harding (1994) wrote that, despite Menelik's efforts to modernise [mint, printing press, railway from Djibouti], Ethiopia was one of the least developed regions in Africa, and even '...after the reign of Haile Selassie, no less of a modernist, and the strenuous efforts of the revolutionary government which deposed him, the situation has scarcely changed'.

Some say the modern efforts to recognise the diversity of interest groups by decentralisation and pseudo-federation had by 1995 made Ethiopia so democratic that it is less governable than ever, and too focused on ethnic issues.

Eritrea

Oliver and Fage say the Italians 'had done much to provide the material groundwork for a modern state in Ethiopia and Eritrea'. Harding (1994) goes along with this for Eritrea, implying much less was done in Ethiopia. In Eritrea, development came quickly once the inhabitants had been subdued. Dispossessed of their own land in many cases, they were put to work on large commercial farms and plantations, or requisitioned as cheap labour to build new infrastructure. The opening of the Suez Canal brought new trade to Red Sea ports and these were developed with roads and a railway.

Asmara became a modern city with a small manufacturing base and by the 1930s a working class had appeared. The urban population, including expatriate Italians, grew dramatically when Eritrea became a staging post for Mussolini's war in Ethiopia. When in 1941 Italy was defeated in Ethiopia Britain assumed responsibility for Eritrea and dismantled much of the plant installed by the Italians.

Harding quotes various sources, e.g. '£86 million worth of equipment was removed from Eritrea by the British', which indicates that the Italians had invested a substantial amount, despite their cash-strapped situation at home. The British dismantled important port facilities at Massawa and Assab, a potash factory, a salt processing plant and a cement factory; and removed a lot of railway equipment.

Sylvia Pankhurst toured Eritrea shortly before federation in 1952 and counted 75 installations destroyed by the British. She wrote, ' ... All these fine buildings and installations which had been erected in the heyday of Mussolini's Empire had been ruthlessly demolished and sold for what could be obtained for the scrap metal and woodwork...'. One wonders to whom they were sold, and why - were they sold by the British to cover the costs of administering Eritrea?

But after 1945 it had not been all bad news. Education was extended, freedom of the press encouraged, and political associations and trade unions flourished. By this time some Eritreans were advocating an independent future for Eritrea when the British left.

In 1952 the UN agreed that Eritrea, which had no recognised status at the Assembly, should be placed under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian crown, but with an independent assembly and judiciary. Resistance began immediately.

The EPLF did everything itself, ignored by almost all governments and even liberation movements such as ANC, who either did not want to upset the OAU or were part of a Soviet-sponsored fraternity. In the field, the EPLF tried to develop an inclusive approach - some coercive action was inevitable in war, but they attempted to maintain the support of the general population with food, seeds, medical help, education etc.

At Independence, in 1991, Eritrea was said to be better organised than Ethiopia, with an efficient administration in place and better prospects for development, largely thanks to the legacy of the Italians and the EPLF.

In 1992 the provisional government of Eritrea began registering voters. A referendum held in 1993 showed overwhelming support for an independent state. By 1994 Eritrea was on good terms with Israel which had provided military assistance to Mengistu in the war; and became a member of the OAU, headquarters in Addis Ababa. The OAU had studiously ignored the Eritrean question as a threat to the principle, on which they showed rare unity, that colonial boundaries were inviolable (Cairo Declaration, 1964).

There were still conflicts. In 1991 there were skirmishes near the Sudanese border. when a Sudan-funded mujahidin faction of the ELF embarked on a war against the provisional government. The Eritrean Afar people, pastoralists in the Danakil country, were agitating for their own territory - they had always ranged over the margins of Djibouti. Somalia, Eritrea and Ethiopia and now they wanted their own country to avoid further suffering from drought, famine and government-sponsored agricultural settlement. The EPLF believed in settlement of pastoralists and had given many Afar youngsters a route to modern life but the elders resisted.

Since the time of Italian occupation, Asmara had a manufacturing base - potteries, textile mills, breweries, glass works, cement factory, cigarette factory, bakeries and modern sewage systems etc. The firms had been nationalised by Mengistu and run-down. Now they have been privatised and improved. Asmara was still an elegant place in 1991, but experiencing over-population problems, with many homeless people.

Staple crops - teff, sorghum. Food security and sustainable agriculture a priority. There is insufficient good rain-fed arable land. Deep ox-ploughing damaged much of the soil and in the war there was over-concentration on those high production areas out of reach of

the Dergue fighter planes. Over-dependence on the rains. To bring new areas into production would demand costly dams and irrigation works, soil and water conservation etc.

Traditionally Eritreans made up their shortages by trading across into Tigre and Sudan; and Eritrea was interested to maintain the trading relationship with Ethiopia as a buyer of her teff surpluses. Proven cash crops include cotton, to supply the textile mills at Asmara, which once enjoyed lucrative contracts with Italy; similarly coffee, carnations, peppers and tomatoes for export to Italy and Europe.

The EPLF had thought the British Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher indifferent (perhaps because of the EPLF's Marxist origins); but Kinnock's Labour Party undertook to provide support for a referendum and help develop a policy to 'strike at the roots of the agony'. Will New Labour fulfil the windbag's pledge?

The nature of 'the Abyssinian empire'

History shows Abyssinia as a dynamic aggregation of baronial fiefdoms, bonded by devious alliances and counter-intrigues, kept in check by respect for the ruthless power of the Emperor until he could be overthrown; and unified only in resistance to outside intervention (and even in this case we have seen how some Rases might support invaders). A bit like Morocco of the el Glaoui, or a less anarchic Somalia.

The 'feudal federation' was in essence explosively unstable - the Rases were regional governors, keeping order with armies which survived on tribute exacted from unwilling peasants - regular risings were inevitable. Revenues were raised by pillaging the lands of the peasants, looting their gold and selling them into slavery; faithful vassals rewarded by gifts of weaker people's lands.

Progress to modern government meant centralisation, implying curbs on the Rases and greater risks of secession. Modernisation might bring collapse, and, in geo-political terms, stability and progress were exceptions to general turmoil.

The empire survived most enduringly in its institutions of monarchy and Christianity. They provided historical continuity for an 'empire' which might be bounded in good times by the borders of Egypt, Sudan, Kenya, Somalia and the Red Sea, and in thin times by the walls of a highland grotto in Tigre. Many of the most exploited and reactionary subject tribes were pagan or Muslim.

In modern times, things were little changed. in the words of Oliver and Fage, 'it would hardly be correct to say that the central government of Ethiopia was unstable. Its problem was rather that from about 1960 onwards its writ did not run over all the lands it claimed to administer.'

Eritrea vs Ethiopia: the case for independence

Claims that Eritrea was 'part of an Empire' seem to overstate the case - the empire was a shambolic assortment of regions and tribes fighting ruthless exploitation by the Shoans. Much of present day Eritrea had never been held on any consistent historical basis with the Empire. How important to Empire could it have been if Menelik let the Italians keep it in 1897?

Under the Italians for fifty years (1895-1940) Eritrea developed a different character from Ethiopia. By the end of the war, most people in Eritrea wanted to be independent from Ethiopia and voted accordingly in a referendum.

Access to the Red Sea is an important strategic consideration, and Massawa was crucial to Yohannes' goal of modernising his army. When the Italians frustrated Yohannes by grabbing Massawa in 1895, it had been outside Ethiopian control for 350 years - since the 'left hander' took it for the Ottoman Turks and Egypt.

How could Ethiopia manage without Massawa? Menelik took advantage of the French option at Djibouti. But this only demonstrated the importance of a port. It is always better to own a seaboard than to rely on neighbours. The Suez Canal made a port additionally attractive as a revenue earner for a poor country. Ethiopia needs Eritrea (for its port and its custom) and Eritrea needs Ethiopia (for its teff). Might this enable them to form a more harmonious relationship?

Conservation aspects (mainly Ethiopia)

Spectacular scenery in high country of Tigre and Simien e.g. Blue Nile Gorge, Tisisat Falls, etc. (see Thesiger for guidance) There will be priorities for conservation of antiquities e.g. Lalibela etc. Civet farming industry.

For wildlife, there are several critical sites of which only Simien and Awash had full, gazetted national park status, backed with some management resources, in 1990. Simien - spectacular, Walia ibex, Simien jackal, Hamadryad baboons etc. Gelada in Harar.

Important wildlife populations, including rare ungulates, in the Awash River Valley, not all in Awash National Park e.g. Soemmerring's gazelle, beisa oryx, gerenuk, kudus, waterbuck, dorcas gazelle, Somali wild ass.

Bale Mountains National Park contains the largest area of Afro-alpine habitat in Africa. Many endemic plant species. Mountain nyala. Sidamo - Swayne's hartebeest and five endemic bird species - there are many endemic and bird species in Ethiopia. Grevy's zebra and a few elephant. The Rift Valley lake chain important but largely unprotected in 1990. On the Red Sea coast of Eritrea dugongs occur. Habitat clearance for agriculture, and poaching are main threats.

Human populations Ethiopia 40 million and Eritrea 4 million (check).

Development issues

Growth in human populations (Ethiopia 40 million and Eritrea 4 million?) has exacerbated problems related to food security, urbanisation and habitat loss.

Clearly a nation can be food-secure if it generates sufficient cash to pay for necessary imports. Eritrea has limited productive land - deep ploughing with oxen may have damaged soil structure in many areas. But cash crops and industrialisation, and access to the Ethiopian grain market, may secure food sufficiency.

Harrison writes that fifty years ago 40% of Ethiopia was under forest; these days

about 4% of the country is forested (Harrison). He may be referring only to upland forest, since WRI records that Ethiopia in 1980s had about 4 million ha of natural closed forest and 23 million ha of natural open forest (savanna woodland). Deforestation was 88,000 ha per annum. Since the land area of Ethiopia is 110 million ha, this implies 4% of Ethiopia under natural closed forest and about 25% under some form of forest in the 1980s. Upland forests were dense conifer woodlands e.g. juniper, cypress, and *Hagenia* spp. etc. (Thesiger).

Whatever the details, deforestation is a problem, particularly in the uplands, where about 70% of people live. Extending into savanna areas in the west (IUCN). The problems are not new (Thesiger mentions the fuelwood problems in Addis Ababa which almost made Menelik shift his capital), and accelerating. Eucalyptus an important tree for the usual reasons.

Fuelwood in Addis Ababa is dearer than kerosene. In Bale the nearest sources of fuelwood (probably the park) are distant. Hence crop residues and dung are used as fuel or fuel supplements in most part of the country, rather than in soil conservation. This situation represents an economic incentive for commercial fuelwood plantations and/or an incentive to switch to alternative fuels.

Associated with forest clearance and extension of agriculture into marginal lands is soil erosion. Half the highland areas show signs of erosion damage according to Harrison. Are comparisons valid with Kigezi? Ethiopian soils on the plateaux probably good - e.g. the Italians had reckoned they would be good for wheat and olives etc. Rainfall regime?

Average yields were declining through the 1980s - because of war, drought, or soil problems? Harding points out that in Eritrea though drought persisted in the early 1990s famine was no longer a problem in absence of war. 'Famine a political problem'.

There were long range forecasts that a large area of the highlands would become uncultivable if erosion continued unchecked. The World Food Programme supported the Highland Reclamation Project arising from the 1973 drought. This provided food for work on soil conservation measures, mainly in Wollo, Tigre and Eritrea.

Holdings in catchments were distributed with reference to catchment conservation effects - farmers on high on steep slopes were moved and compensated, stone walling installed and eucalyptus planted, to be used for field and poles on managed basis, and bunds used. Done as a mass mobilisation exercise, distortions encouraged over-engineering - the bigger the job, the more food supplied. People built terraces to get food, rather than to conserve soil. The approach later changed to a less coercive one, where farmers were taught soil conservation measures alongside methods for intensifying production on their plots. Probably ideas will spread naturally.

Ethiopia has the highest concentration of livestock in Africa (Harrison). There are more than a million semi-settled herders in Ethiopia and a similar number in Somalia. Cattle, goat, sheep, donkeys, horses, mules and camels. Oxen used for ploughing - useful innovations from the ILCA in Addis Ababa have been the one ox plough and the pond-scoop for making dry season ponds. No tsetse problems, but rinderpest is endemic in southern Ethiopia (the great rinderpest epidemic c. 1890 may have begun here). East Coast Fever? In Shoa a system of pasture woodland is used with *Acacia/Faidherbia albida* - highly nutritious pods for fodder, nitrogen fixing etc. Unlike other trees, not all *A. albida* are taken for fuel.

As noted previously, Asmara had a problem of overpopulation in the early 1990s. Similarly Addis Ababa has changed from a city of tents, as in Menelik's time, to a capital in which most (Harrison says 90%, c.f. about 40% average) of the people live in urban squatter settlements/shanties.

Role of the Peasant Associations; rebels in development

In feudal times, most peasants were serfs or sharecroppers for the landlords. There were positive aspects for forest protection - no one was allowed to cut down the large trees, except with the landlord's permission. After the 1974 revolution forests became State property. Peasants wanted bigger houses and so used the trees as they liked. Presumably the impact of timber extraction for building was, c.f. fuel wood, trivial.

After the revolution land tenure system changed - land was vested in the Peasants' Associations which provided land to farmers (they could not buy, rent or inherit it). Usually each received the use of five ha of land. Feudal dues and taxes abolished, naturally.

Much of the important business of the village conducted at general assemblies of the Peasant Associations. Elected representatives, decide local disputes etc. In northern Ethiopia, where feudalism had been less pronounced, there was opposition and resentment to the collective ownership systems (Harrison). Because they had existing, alternative, tenure systems? Tigre and Eritrea anyway were in revolt for much of this time - the EPLF went on to develop extremely effective grass roots networks to deliver relief and development measures.

But in the centre and south of the country the Associations were popular and lent themselves naturally to development roles. Harrison says that in the Ogaden and Bale villagisation and collectivism worked well, resulting in hundreds of new villages, the gathering of scattered communities 'into compact settlements for better defence', and the improved delivery of basic services in the 1980s.

But villagisation of Galla/Oromo in the 1980s caused an exodus of impoverished refugees to Somalia, according to Thesiger. No doubt Mengistu used the programme as an opportunity for repression.

E.g. Bale Integrated Basic Services Project has had several successes. The Peasant Associations, aid agencies, ministries etc. form grass roots steering committees to participatorily workshop decisions. Ideas work up through a hierarchy of district, regional and national steering committees. Villages contribute as much as they can to development projects, consulting the aid people if they need extra resources. Government role to provide technical and limited material support. Result (UNICEF) - 'an integrated set of essential services that are geared to the genuine needs..., low cost, self-sustaining and flexible..'

Local health officers were trained to educate people on primary health care topics - pit latrines, hygiene, nutrition, diarrhoeal problems, traditional birth attendants etc. Education made great strides - teachers elected and paid for by the community; wells dug, form revenue generating groups e.g. co-op shops etc. Some small seed money from UNESCO after which self-sustaining. Partly motivated by euphoria on release from serfdom (Harrison).

Institutional reform and capacity-building

Issues - modernisation, democratisation, evolution, efficiency (operational, financial), privatisation, etc. Organisational capacity to deliver basic services effectively is obviously important for sustainability. Lots of grass roots, self help and 'participatory' interventions should continue long term in cases where the State structures are genuinely useless and/or really espouse decentralisation and/or privatisation and work to create effective formal systems to incorporate them and link them to government. For true development, technical input is essential - as seen in Kigezi on self-help schools project - and if possible this should be made available by government.

Institutional problems may be more prevalent in Ethiopia than in Eritrea, since the EPLF had longer to develop a structured system than the TPLF, EPRDF etc. in Ethiopia. E.g. EPLF in the war 1962-91 developed systems to deliver health, relief, seeds etc. to people in areas under their control; the post-revolution system in Ethiopia appeared to be dysfunctional.

National characteristics etc. (paraphrased from Thesiger)

“Nobs”: Tigreans and Amharans

Tigreans and Amhara especially proud of their history
Somewhat reactionary, arrogant and xenophobic (with justification)
Love litigation; Avaricious; Courteous; Enduring

“Plebs”: Everyone else e.g. Galla, Wollo, Somali, Gurage, Kaffa

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