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A NEW APPROACH TO ETHIOPIA IN THE 18TH AND 19TH
CENTURY

The history of Ethiopia has so far been written from the point of view of the central imperial authority. Very little attention has been paid to the provinces as such and to what may be considered as purely provincial history.¹ One gets the impression that nothing of interest appeared to be happening within the provinces and that history was made only at the centre. Thus when the Imperial power fell on a period of decline and was not in a position to play a dominant role in the Empire the history of Ethiopia became either non-existent or at best uninteresting. This statement is proved by the fact that the period from about the middle of the 18th century to the advent of Theodore to the Imperial throne in 1855 is invariably dismissed in a couple of lines in the existing history books. These few lines merely point out that the Imperial authority was in decline and that in the provinces the period was marked by meaningless internecine wars. History is made to re-begin around 1855 when a man of great military talent successfully fought his way to the imperial throne and the central authority again started to play a dominating role throughout the Empire. Although this form of historiography may be useful for an understanding of certain periods in

¹ A few provincial studies have appeared in the last two or three years. But these are mostly anthropological cf. For example: D.N. Levine: Wax and Gold: University of Chicago Press, 1965; H. Lewis: A Galla Monarchy; W.A. Shack: The Gurage: Oxford University Press, London, 1966.

Ethiopian history it does not help us to understand the period 1750-1855. The researches of the present writer have led him to believe that we ought to go to the provinces and examine what was happening there in order to appreciate fully the importance of the period 1750-1850 in the general course of the development of Ethiopia.

The Scottish Traveller James Bruce who visited Ethiopia from 1768 to 1772 and other travellers who visited the country in the first half of the 19th century describe a state of incessant warfare in the Empire. These wars have been portrayed in the books as (to borrow a phrase from Professor Hugh Trevor-Roper) "unrewarding gyrations of barbarous" or ambitious provincial nobles.

A careful study of the period shows that far from being meaningless the wars reflect a definite development by which the Empire was saved from total collapse. They reflect a constitutional struggle at two different levels. At the national level it was a struggle between the imperial authority on the one hand and the provincial nobility of the highland on the other hand. The issue at stake appears to have been the traditional role of the Abyssinian² nobles in the government of the Empire. For the most part the nobles had the upper hand in this contest and provincialism got the better of imperial centralization.

The struggle which went on at the national level may be said to have been a magnification of that which took place at the provincial level. In many of the

2. Abyssinian - is here used in place of Amhara to refer to the highland peoples before the Galla conquest of the 16th and 17th century. It is intended to include Tigrean speaking and Amharic speaking peoples of the highlands.

provinces, at this period, an incessant contest was being fought between the provincial chiefs on the one hand and the petty chieftains of the various units which constituted the individual provinces. In this as in the struggle at the national level, the issue was one of centralization by the provincial chiefs as against the separatist tendencies of the districts. This is not surprising, for a provincial chief needed to have the whole of his province united behind him before he could confidently enter the constitutional struggle against the imperial authority and hold his own against other provinces. In the provinces, however, unlike at the national level, it was the forces of decentralization which lost the contest. Within the provinces therefore, the period 1750-1855 was marked by territorial expansion, centralization and consolidation of provincial autonomy by the provincial chiefs. It should probably be remarked that it was not all the provinces which passed through a period of territorial expansion. Nevertheless, it is true to say that practically all the provinces were in one way or another affected by the process of territorial expansion or centralization. The vicissitudes of the wars reflected the political as well as the territorial strength of the contending parties, so that a weaker province was invariably absorbed by its stronger neighbour. In this way provinces of varying strength and size emerged not only on the Highland but also in the Eastern Lowlands, in Harar and in the Maca Galla country to the south of Gojjam. By 1842 Highland Ethiopia was dominated by four large provinces: Tigre in the north, Amhara in the centre, Gojjam in the west and Shoa in the south. In addition there were smaller provinces, for example, Lasta, Simen, Begemder and Damot, all of which were to a smaller or greater degree dependent on one or the other of the four larger provinces. The present writer is convinced that a careful

and detailed study of the histories of these provinces especially in the 18th and 19th centuries will afford a far greater understanding of Ethiopia during the period of imperial decline than a study of the central imperial authority as such can do. In this article we shall outline the development of one of these provinces (Shoa) and relate it to the decline of the imperial authority. The object is to show how a study of the provinces can help us to understand the decline of the Empire.

Until about the end of the 16th century Shoa was an important part of the Empire of Ethiopia. The Shoa towns of Tegulet and Debra Berhan served as the capitals for a number of the Emperors of the "restored" dynasty and Debra Libanos was a religious centre of national importance. During the 16th century together with other southern provinces of the Empire Shoa was overrun by the Galla, and by the beginning of the 18th century Shoa was completely lost to the Imperial authority. The few Amharan families of Shoa who survived the Galla onslaught took refuge in mountain fastnesses in the district of Manz.³ In the course of time, as a result of warfare among the various Amharan families, the sub-division of Agancha emerged as the dominant power and a leading member of the Agancha Amhara, called Nagassi, became in effect the ruler of all the Amhara families in Manz. Nagassi died about 1703; on his death a struggle for the leadership which he had won for himself ensued among his sons out of which Sebastiyé emerged the victor. Sebastiyé gradually strengthened the position of power

3. Guebre Sellasie: Chronique In regne de Menelik II, Roi des Rois d'Ethiopie. Edt. Maurice de Coppet. Paris 1930-32 Vol.I. p.62-3.

which he inherited from his father and when he died about 1720 his son Abiye was acknowledged by the Manzian Amhara as the undisputed ruler of the whole of Manz. A hereditary dynasty was thus gradually emerging in Manz which owed its position largely to the military skill of its members.

Abiye contributed to the growth of the power of the rising dynasty in two important ways. In the first place, having consolidated his position in Manz, he made war on the Galla tribes surrounding Manz and in this way initiated the process of territorial expansion of Manz which led to the rise of the kingdom of Shoa and culminated in the unification of Ethiopia in 1889. Secondly, he adopted the title of Maredazmatch; this was a significant step made towards asserting the independence of the rising province from the Imperial authority for in the Medieval Empire titles had been granted by the Emperors to deserving subjects and not adopted by the subjects themselves. This leads one to the concept of the Empire.

Even at the height of its power medieval Ethiopia was not a firmly united country. The concept of the Empire which prevailed and which was to be repeatedly referred to by leading political figure in 19th century Ethiopia, was one of a central kingdom or province with outlying tribute-paying provinces. The degree of control exercised by the centre over the outlying provinces depended on whether the centre, in effect the actual occupant of the imperial throne, was strong or weak. If the centre was strong the provinces fulfilled their obligations regularly but if the centre was weak they tended to neglect their duties and became separatist in outlook. The emperors were not always in a position to assert their influence effectively over the outlying

provinces, but even the weakest of them never abandoned their claim to areas over which effective imperial control had once extended. This explains why, when Egypt occupied Harar from 1875 to 1885 Merelik could complain to the European powers that Egypt had occupied part of his territory⁴ though, in fact, Harar at this time was completely independent not only of Shoa but of the Christian Empire as a whole.

The Emperors of the period still claimed the Galla dominated province of Shoa as part of their Empire and indeed Nagassi did not behave in any way which implied independence from the Emperor.⁵ However, as the rulers of the expanding province of Manz or the rising kingdom of Shoa became more and more powerful, they tended to act like independent rulers. Wassen Saggad (1809-1813) the sixth ruler of modern Shoa adopted the title of Ras, the third highest title in the Empire besides Negus (king) and Negusa Nagast (Emperor) without any reference to the Imperial court at Gondar. His successor Sahla Selassie went a step further and in 1839 declared himself negus. The French traveller Antoine d'Abbadie who was in Northern Ethiopia at this time wrote thus on this action of Sahla Selassie's: "The Maredazmatch Sahla Selassie has made himself absolute master of Shoa."

⁴. See for example Libro Verde No.XV Ethiopia Doc 95 Menelik al Umberto I. Entoto 4: 6: 1885. (28 ghenbot 1'anno 20 del nostro regno).

⁵. Nagassi is said to have gone to the Emperor's court at Gondar presumably to pay his tribute to the Emperor and to receive at his hands the investiture acknowledging him as the principal chieftain in Manz.

He has assumed the title of king which is not recognized by the clergy and the nobles of Gondar."⁶ Much as the Emperor and his court at Gondar opposed this action they were in no position to force the king of Shoa to renounce this title and to bring him back to obedience. By thus making themselves independent of the Emperors, the rulers of Shoa contributed to a reduction in the resources of the imperial authority and thereby aggravated its weakened position and accentuated the decline of its influence.

From its small beginnings in Agacha, Manz expanded gradually and by the 1840's had developed into a powerful, prosperous and well-administered Kingdom of Shoa. By the opening of the 19th century, commitment to war had become an essential constituent of Shoa's strength and prosperity for in war lay territorial gains and increase in its manpower as well as material resources. As a result of the campaigns of conquest and expansion Shoa in 1842 covered an area estimated at 150 miles in length by 90 miles in breadth. Its population was estimated at 2½ million people of whom one million were Christians and the rest consisted of pagans and muslims.⁷ The general direction of the expansion was southwards and south-westwards so that the frontiers of the Kingdom were pushed further and further towards the richest part of the whole of the Ethiopian region - the Galla and Sidama lands which lie to the south of

6. M.A.E.(Paris). M.& D. (Afrique) Vol.13 p.9. Antoine d'Abbadie to M. le Directeur de la Division Commerciale au MAE 14: 7: 1839.

7. India Office Library: Bombay Secret Proceedings: LG 204 No.1216 Graham. Harris: The Highlands of Aethiopia (Lond. 1844) Vol.III p.28.

the Southern bend of the Abay River (the Blue Nile). In this way more and more of the trade of the area fell into the hands of the rulers of Asha. This had important effects not only on the development of Shoa but also on the financial and the general economic position of the central imperial authority.

The trade of highland Ethiopia was essentially transit trade; all the commodities which were described at the coast as Ethiopian or Abyssinian products came from the south-westerly Galla and Sidama provinces. Taxes on the trade constituted one of the most important sources of income for the rulers of Ethiopia. The products reached the sea ports by one of three routes: a northern route across the Abay through Godjam, Gondar and Tigre to the port of Massawa; an eastern route through what by the 1840's was southern Shoa to the Somali ports of Zeyla and Tadjura, and a south-eastern route through southern Gurage, Arussi and Harar to the ports of Zeyla, Tadjura or Berbera. Of the three routes the most important was the northern one and it was on it that the wealth of the imperial authority at Gondar largely depended. As Shoa advanced towards the sources of the Abyssinian products more and more of the trade came to be diverted through Shoa. This was of course to the detriment of the imperial authority. Thus the rise of Shoa and the assertion of her independence from imperial control weakened not only the manpower but also the material resources of the imperial power at Gondar. This had military and political consequences which were ruinous to the prestige and the effective physical strength of the imperial authority. In the 1880's Shoa's control over the eastern and south-eastern routes as well as her conquest of the south-westerly (i.e. Maca) Galla country became a source of conflict between Ras Adal of

Gojjam (backed by the Emperor John IV⁸) and Menelik the king of Shoa.

Between 1852 and 1855 Kassa, a man of great military skill and considerable administrative ability successfully fought his way to the imperial throne as Emperor Theodore II. Under him the imperial authority regained a good deal of its lost prestige and physical strength and once again asserted its effective control over the outlying provinces including Shoa. Although soon after its conquest in 1855-6 Shoa rebelled against the imperial government and indeed was to be in a state of rebellion throughout the reign of Theodore, between 1856 and 1859 she paid regular tribute to the imperial chest. After 1859 when Theodore's attempt to bring rebel Shoa back to allegiance failed Shoa once again became independent of the Empire. From 1865 to 1889 independent Shoa was the greatest domestic thorn in the flesh of the revitalized imperial power, now in the hands of Emperor John IV. The relations between Emperor John IV and Menelik, King of Shoa and the effects of the relationship on the policies of both rulers is a subject which needs a special study and will not be touched upon here. We only have to remember that under Menelik Shoa reached the climax of its development. Its area was more than doubled in twenty years and the manpower and material resources of its ruler increased correspondingly; European travellers who visited Ethiopia in the 19th century considered it the best governed and the most peaceful of all the Ethiopian "provinces".⁹

8. Kofi Darkwah: The Rise of the Kingdom of Shoa 1813-89. Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis London July 1966. P.170.

9. See for Example: A Aubry: "Une Mission au Choa et dans les pays Galla" in Bulletin de la Societe de Geographie de Paris 7^e Serie, Vol.VIII, 1887 Passim.
Jules Borelli: Ethiopie Meridionale. Paris 1890 Passim.

In conclusion it may be said that Ethiopia passed through an interesting period in the 18th century and the first three quarters of the 19th century. From the point of view of the imperial authority it was largely a period of decline.. We do not know for certain what was happening in each of the provinces, but the information available indicates that a number of the provinces of the Highland passed through a period of positive achievement in the form of territorial expansion centralization and consolidation of provincial autonomy. The causal relationship between the decline of the imperial authority and the separatist tendencies of the provinces is not easy to establish; but there is little doubt that the one intensified the other. The extent of centralization and the degree of autonomy would seem to vary from one province to another, but the exact nature of these developments can be shown only when detailed studies of the provinces are available.

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