

The British Expeditionary Force to Meqdella and the Deliberate Distortion of History

Posted on Saturday, March 11, 2017 by Gebre Selassie Araya Source Horn Affairs [My note is mainly based on Dej. Zewde Gebre-Selassie's (PhD) book, "Yohannes IV of Ethiopia": A Political Biography" (2014).]

In the eyes of the general reader, and the Shāwanized history of Abyssinia in particular, Kassa Mircha (later Emperor Yohannes IV) has been singularly portrayed as a collaborator with the British during the 'British Expedition against Emperor Tewodros in 1868. But this is half of the truth often presented with distortion. The following letters will help readers to set the historical record straight and challenge the historical distortions disseminated by biased 'Historians' who are directly or indirectly affiliated to the ruling elite of the past.

According to intelligence reports of the British army, Minilik II was the first to establish contact with the British. He had made several offers to storm Mäqdäla on behalf of the British to free the captives. Here is one of Minilik's letters, which he had sent to General Napir in 1868 G/C.

'Having heard that you have come to Abyssinia, I was first willing to send to you in a suitable manner, but my enemies who are between us are blocking the road, and divide us, and so it has become difficult to send a person of note, together with a man knowing the country. Earlier, I had intended to liberate the captives and I came very near Mäqdäla; but as a business seemed impossible, and my army had no more provisions, I returned to my country. Now, I am far off, but I have no hesitation to help. As to my friendship with the queen, it is not a matter of today. I had sent to London, and have received a friendly answer, perhaps you have heard of it" (pp. 5).

However, as the British assumed that all the territory through which its Expeditionary Force planned to pass would be under Dejzasmach Wagshum Gobeze of Lasta who served at the court of Emperor Tewodros, the British did not take advantage of Minilik's proposed assistance. The British also believed that Minilik's territory (Showa) was not easily accessible from the coast (Zula) and was far from Mäqdäla. This time, Wagshum Gobeze had sent a letter to Werner Muzingar, the French Vice-Consul and intelligence officer in Massawa urging 'to make him a friend with the British'.



Photo – Emperor Yohannes of Ethiopia (from British Royal archive) Again, the British discovered that Wagshum Gobeze who was supposed to be able to take the field at the head of 30,000 armed men, was no longer in control of Tigray as it was under the authority of Kassa Mircha (later Yohannes IV). The British found out that Wagshum Gobeze's authority had never extended over the territory beyond the Mereb river (now Eritrea), which was under the authority of Dejzasmach Hailu Tewoldemedhin who was appointed by emperor Tewodros.

In any case, Wagshum Gobeze sent a letter to Napir, which was received on February 27, 1868. This time, Napir sent a mission to inform Wagshum Gobeze to send some influential person to meet Napir at Lake Hashenge to facilitate communication and provide supplies to the British army. Accordingly, Dejzasmach Meshesha Tedla (Gobeze's uncle) was sent to

receive Napir and his 4000 army. Dej. Meshesha and Mestewat, a widow of Immam Liben and rival within the lordship of Wollo, had also agreed to cut off Emperor Tewodros' line of retreat towards the east or north.

But, where was Kassa Mircha when all these happened? The stark truth is that he was neither well known by the captives at Mäqdäla or by the British. In fact, he rallied a large force in Tigray and rapidly gained widespread popularity; particularly after he gained victory over the governors appointed by Emperor Tewodros in eastern and western Tigray, and eventually declared as autonomous ruler of the whole Tigray.

By the time the British Expeditionary Force had landed at Zulla in October 1867, Kassa obtained the submission of Dejach Hailu Tewoldemedhin of the Mereb Milash who was appointed by Tewodrose. Kassa was perturbed by the situation fearing that the British would remain permanently in Abyssinia; hence, Kassa send a letter with Mircha Worqe, a Bombay educated envoy from Tigray, clarifying his position by stating:

'The operation against Tewodrose should be successful, that the English then leave the country as soon as possible, that they should not assist the Egyptian enemy and no consul should be appointed'' (pp.13).

In this case, neither Minilik nor Wagshum (Teklegiorgis) dared to tell the British in such a manner. It was only Kassa Mircha who raised concerns of sovereignty before offering his cooperation. And as a result the British, through Muzingar mission, assured Kassa that it will comply with his request. In fact, the British received news that Kassa has about 8,000 men and that he intended to oppose their advance through his territory. Although the British had no fear of Kassa's forces, it was paramount importance to gain his will to cross his territory (Tigray) and reach Mäqdäla.

By doing so, the British Expedition Force met the forces of Wagshum Gobeze led by his uncle Dej. Meshesha and finally arrived at Mäqdäla. The Expedition forces stormed the fortress and defeated the 3,000 to 8,000 fighting men, Emperor Tewodrose killed himself, his fortress was burned, and valuable manuscripts and national relics were confiscated and transported to England. After the successful completion of the expedition, Dej. Meshesha was offered to take Mäqdäla on behalf of his master Wagshum Gobeze. But he declined and preferred to take other gifts as large territory would require more troops to defend.

Accordingly, Dej. Meshesha was given 200 of the muskets captured in Mäqdäla while the chiefs of Delanta and Daunt who cooperated with the British Expeditionary Force were given 100 each. The fortress of Mäqdäla and the Medhanialem church was handed over to Mestewat. Napir on his way back out of the country was supposed to travel through Tigray where he met Kassa for the second time and gave him arms (6 howitzers, 6 mortars, 725 muskets).

After the death of Tewodros, Gobeze crowned himself at Gondor as Emperor Tekle Giorigs and wrote a letter to Queen Vitoria in which he stated:

'Earlier, when your people came, I sent them my 'brother' Dej. Meshesha to receive them. Since an enemy of throne had risen, I set out to fight and by the power of Christ and your guardian spirit, I killed Dej. Tisso of Begemdir. Intending to meet the British, I then sent a messenger, but they had left, because they were in hurry '' (pp: 9).

Yes of course! They were in hurry, thanks to Yohannes IV, the British had to keep the promises and leave the country. Although Wagshum Gobeze and Napir never met, the latter issued a proclamation in April 1868 before he crosses over Tigray stating:

“Dejazmach Gobeze is the friend of the British. He appointed Dejach Meshesha as his representative here. Those who would be treated as friends of the British commander should obey Dejazmach Gobeze, the officers appointed by him, and no other. We desire there should be peace in the country” (pp: 11). This proclamation is a clear testimony that the British had given recognition to Gobeze’s authority over Abyssinia for the service he rendered in the fight against Tewodrose. However, Gobeze, now Emperor Tekle Giorgis, was not happy with the reward he received and wrote a letter to Napir stating:

“Last year, when you came here, I met with you before anyone else. I showed you the road. Through my herald, I gave orders to my subjects to provide to you grain, sheep honey, and goats along your way to Mäqdäla. After this, you order me not to mix myself in your fighting. Having a rebel in my country, I went to fight him. When you were at Mäqdäla, I was in Semien, so it came to pass that I could not see you though before everyone I befriended you” (ibid: 12).

Again Minilik wrote a letter to Queen Victoria, on 4 March 1889 and its reads as follows:

መልእክት የተላከ ከንጉሥ ምኒሊክ ሀገረ ሸዋ፡

ይድረስ ወደ ንግሥት ቪክቶሪያ፡ እንዴት ነሽ እጅጉን፡፡ ደህና ነሽ፡፡ እኔ እግዚአብሔር ይመስገን ድህና ነኝ፡፡ ሰዌም አገሬም ደህና ነው፡፡ ቀድሞ የሰድድሽልኝ ደብዳቤ ደረሰልኝ፤ እጅግ ደስ አለኝ፡፡ መልእክተኛዎም አቶ መክብብ ደህና ገባልኝ፡፡ ያንኛን ወዳጅነት እና ምክር እጅግ ወደድሁ፡፡ እኔም ያንኛን ፍቅርና ዝምድና ተፈለግሁ ብዙ ቀን ነው፡፡ መልእክተኛዎ ሳይመለስ ወደ አንቺ የላኩት እኔ ራሴ ወደ መቅደላ ዘምቼ የታሰሩትን ሰዎችሽን ለማስፈታት፡፡ ነገሩ ባይመቸኝ ተመልሼ አገሬ ገባሁ፡፡ ደግሞ ሁለተኛ ሰዌን አዝምቼ የናን ተወሬ ቢርቀው ያገሬ ሰው ፋሲካን ከዘመቻ መዋል አለመደምና ተመልሶ ገባ፡፡ ሰዌ በገባ በስምንት ቀን እንግሊዞች ድል አደረጉ ቴድሮስ ሞቱ የሚል የምስራች መጣልኝ፡፡ ደህን ብሰማ እጅግ ደስ አለኝ፡፡ እኔም በፍቅር ለመገናኘት ተሰዎችሽ ጋራ ስነሳ ቸኩለው ተመለሱ ቢሉኝ ቀረሁ፡፡ እስረኞቻችን እነ አቶ ዳርጌም ደህና ደረሱልኝ፡፡ እግዚአብሔር ይስጥልኝ፡፡ እኔ ስለፍቅር ያደረግሁትን ሁሉ ነገር ራስም ያውቃል፡፡ መስተዋት የመቅደላን ነፍጥ ሁሉ አስበጅታ ክርስቲያንን ሁሉ ትወጋለች፡፡ አንድ ብር ካራ፣ አንድ ቢላዋ ሰድጄ አለሁ፣ ለንግሥት ይጠቅማልብዩ አይደለም፣ ለመልእክተኛው ምልክት ነው፡፡ ሽፍታ አምባ እየያዘ አስቸግሮኛልናበዚያ መስበሪያ ይፈለግልኝ፡፡ እጽፍልሻለሁ የሰላምታ ደብዳቤ፣ እኔ ንጉሥ ሚኒሊክ ወደ ክርስቲያን ጉባኤ፣ ወደ እንግሊዝ ንግስተ ጸጋ ይሁንልሽ፡፡ ሰላምም እግዚአብሔር አብ፣ ከጌታችን ከእየሱስ ክርስቶስ፣ ከመንፈስ ቅዱስም፣ አንድ አምላክ፣ አሜን፡፡ የሚኒሊክ ማህተም፡፡

The truth is that as opposed to the popular feeling that we have toward Emperor Tewodrose today, he, due to his violence and cruelties, has never won the hearts and minds of his subjects, including the princes of other regions and the powerful Orthodox Church. And it would not be surprising if all his rival princes with competitive advantage collaborated with the British. Therefore, Dej. Zewdie is correct for saying that it is not fair ‘to single out Kassa as a sole actor’ while his role in collaborating with Napir was negligible as compare to the other rivals, Minilik of Showa and Waqshum Gobeze.

Emperor Yohannes IV remains the greatest unifier and protector of Abyssinia in history. No amount of distortion and deception will change this truth. Those who still chose to fabricate and distort Ethiopian history should understand that their deceit won’t sustain anymore as original evidences are available for those who seek the truth. Let me conclude by an everlasting message of the great emperor, Yohannes IV of Ethiopia.

«የኢትዮጵያ ህዝብ ሆይ!! ኢትዮጵያ የተባለችዉ ሀገር፡-

፩ኛ እናትህ ናት፤

፪ኛ ክብርህ ናት፤

፫ኛ ሚስትህ ናት፤

፬ኛ ልጅህ ናት፤

፭ኛ ሙቃብርህ ናት።

እንግዲህ የእናት ፍቅር፣ የዘዉድ ክብር፣ የሚስት የዋህነት፣ የልጅ ደስታ፣ የሙቃብር ከባድነት እንደዚህ ሙሆኑን እወቅ።» አፄ ዮሃንስ ፬ኛ 11 July 1871 – 10 March 1889።