The Rise and Fall of Abyssinian Imperialism

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The collapse of the government of Haile Selassie represents the disappearance of the last stronghold of native imperialism in Africa. There was a time when it was thought that European civilization, instead of being imposed on the peoples of northeast Africa by the Great Powers themselves, might reach them indirectly through the expansion of the Turkish, Egyptian and Abyssinian empires. The first of these disappeared as a vital force in Africa when it was supplanted early in the nineteenth century by the Egypt of Mehemet Ali. Mehemet extended his rule to Nubia, Sennar and Kordofan. One of his successors, Ismail, who became viceroy in 1863, was very ambitious to extend Egyptian rule still further. His troops pushed up the White Nile, and down the east coast of Africa until he controlled it as far as Cape Guardafui. Mehemet had ruled his empire largely with Turkish, Albanian and Circassian officers; Ismail preferred Europeans and Americans. Of the latter, mostly veterans of the Civil War, no less than forty-eight served him between 1869 and 1878. But Ismail’s grandiose projects, including the building of the Suez Canal, had led him to mortgage Egypt up to the hilt. The inevitable consequences ensued: bankruptcy, European intervention and civil war, the last culminating in the British occupation of 1882. The Sudan was lost with the fall of Khartum in January 1885. The Red Sea from Massaua south was abandoned to the Italians in the same year. Thus ended the attempt to create an Egyptian Empire in Africa.

That Abyssinian imperialism did not succumb so easily is partly accounted for by geography. The center of Abyssinian power was located in a virtually inaccessible highland surrounded by deserts and it was not believed to be especially rich in readily extractable resources. Hence, the cupidity of the European Powers was naturally directed into more lucrative fields. The only imperialist states that sought to subjugate Abyssinia were Egypt (Abyssinia represented a constant danger to the Egyptian colonies in the Sudan and on the Red Sea), and Italy, who as a late-comer in the scramble for Africa had to take what the larger Powers disdained. Geography alone, however, will not explain the vitality of the Abyssinian state, and especially its ability to expand. This was due above all to the series of outstanding men who have ruled Abyssinia since the middle of the last century: Theodore (1855–1868), John (1872–1889), Menelik (1889–1913) and Haile Selassie. Of these, Menelik was the most remarkable. To him goes the major credit for the creation of the empire of the Abyssinians—Ethiopia, as it has come to be called.

During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the traditional Abyssinian kingdoms of Tigré, Amhara, Godjam and Shoa were in chaos. The country was torn by the struggles of the feudal aristocracy; the monarchy ceased to exist in all but name. From this state of decay it was rescued by the energy of one Lij Kassa, the son of an Amharan chieftain, who eventually became Theodore III. At his coronation in 1855 Theodore is said to have sworn
that he would reunite under his authority all the ancient provinces of the empire. During his turbulent reign he succeeded not only in reaffirming the imperial power over traditional Abyssinia, but in initiating the process of permanently subjugating the peripheral peoples. In 1846 he soundly defeated the army which Mehemet Ali sent against him from the Sennar. Among Theodore's most persistent foes were the Moslem Gallas of Wollo, who during the previous century had been lording it over Amhara and other Christian provinces. They were especially troublesome when Theodore was engaged with the Egyptians or was bringing the ruler of Shoa into line. Expedition after expedition he sent against them, finally reducing them to some semblance of obedience. Towards the end of his reign Theodore began to dream of new worlds to rescue from the infidel: Nubia, the Somali country, Egypt and Jerusalem. But no sooner would he undertake expansion in one direction than his vassals and the Galla would rise in his rear. His megalomania, coupled with heavy drinking, finally unbalanced him to such an extent that he committed grave acts of violence against foreigners, which were avenged only by Napier's march in 1867–1868. When the British reached Magdala, Theodore, rather than surrender, blew out his brains.

Following his death there were several years of chaos while the various claimants contended for the throne. Kassai of Tigré, aided greatly by the rifles and artillery left him by the British, won in the end and was crowned as John IV. The new Emperor, like Theodore, had an intense desire to extend his realm, partially as self-protection against Ismail's expansionist activities. Two Egyptian armies sent to invade Tigré were defeated by John in 1875–1876. Twice in the next three years Colonel Charles Gordon went to John's court to make peace for the Khedive, but received scant satisfaction either time.

John's principal internal preoccupation was the suppression of Menelik, youthful Negus of Shoa, who had been a serious contender for the imperial crown after Theodore's suicide. He made no secret of his ambitions. However, since he was not yet in complete control of his own domain, he had to bow before John and await his opportunity. This was furnished with the arrival of Italy, who began in the late seventies to send explorers to Shoa, and in the eighties to indicate political ambitions along the Red Sea. Menelik used the Italians and other foreigners for his own purposes. Before granting them the right to explore his domains he demanded the gift of large quantities of modern arms and munitions with which to seize the imperial power. That he consorted with the Italians naturally annoyed John tremendously, especially after the Italian occupation of Massaua in 1885. This proved to be merely the opening wedge for an Italian advance into the northern highlands of Abyssinia, John's homeland. Menelik never lost an occasion to weaken the emperor's position when the latter was called into some far corner of the empire; and when in 1889 John was killed at Gallabat in a battle with the Mahdists, Menelik at once proclaimed himself Negus Neghesti. At the same time he signed with Count Antonelli the treaty of Uchiali, which according to the Italians placed Abyssinia under their protection. But once he was solidly ensconced in power Menelik pursued a strictly national course. This "ingratitude" led to the war between Abyssinia and Italy which culminated in the battle of Adowa on March 1, 1896. This victory over the Italians removed the last serious external danger to
Menelik’s power. He was now free to continue with the consolidation of the empire of Ethiopia, a process virtually completed in its territorial aspect by the beginning of this century. Let us examine more closely the circumstances surrounding the establishment of this empire.

First of all there was the personality of the man himself, a rare combination of astuteness and ruthlessness. Menelik was a born ruler. But that in itself would not have sufficed. The fact that he was ruler of Shoa, rather than of another of the ancient Abyssinian regions, was very significant. Like Prussia and Piedmont, with which some have gone so far as to compare her, Shoa was a frontier region par excellence, where several peoples, religions and languages came together and where a dynasty had to be resourceful and strong in order to survive. The Christian, Amharic-speaking population of Shoa was in fact in a minority. Ruling thus over diverse subject peoples, the Shoan ruling class governed, in a way, an imperial state in miniature.
Menelik's Abyssinian dynasty of Christian power exceeded any previous African dynasty. When the Tigréans and Amharans sought to expand into non-Christian territory, they were forced to leave the plateau for the desert lowlands, where they encountered the fierce tribes of the Sudan and the Danakil and a climate they could not withstand. Godjam was somewhat more favorably situated for expansion, as along her southern frontier lay the best parts of the high Galla country — Kafa, Jimma, Walega — the happy hunting ground for Abyssinian raiders. But Godjam was separated from the Gallà by the deep valley of the unbridged Blue Nile; and she was completely cut off from communication with the outside world, whence could come the firearms that alone would subjugate the primitive peoples of southern Ethiopia. Shoa labored under neither of these handicaps: the southern Ethiopian plateaux lay open to her, unprotected by any appreciable obstacles of terrain; and, thanks to Italy up to 1890 and to France thereafter, Menelik was able to obtain vast quantities of modern firearms. In a very real sense Italy made possible the inception of Menelik's empire, and France made possible its completion — which is interesting in view of the events of the last twenty months.

Menelik realized perfectly that he could achieve the imperial dignity and power if he were able to muster sufficient military force to overcome his rivals. Therefore, the arms he obtained from Europe were employed not only in fighting his Abyssinian competitors, but in acquiring new lands to the south, east and west of Shoa on which he could draw for additional supplies of man power and food. Thus as a step in his conquest of the central power in Abyssinia he acquired "colonies." Once having achieved the imperial title, he proceeded to conquer more "colonies" in order to entrench his position, both at home and as a power in the world.

It must be emphasized that this process was, like most historical processes, not fully understood by those who participated in it. Like his ancestors, Menelik expanded because it was either expand or perish. His family had created Shoa as the House of Savoy had created Piedmont, piece by piece. In Shoa most of the pieces were inhabited by the Galla. Consequently the dynasty had developed a technique of ruling alien peoples, which was to stand it in good stead when the Shoan kingdom had become the Ethiopian empire.

The technique of Shoan expansion was typically African. The neighboring non-Christian peoples were periodically raided. Cattle, grain, slaves, and other useful property were seized to the accompaniment of much wanton destruction of life and property. When the Galla had been stronger, they had inflicted such treatment on the Abyssinians; now that the latter were on top, they acted in the same way, only with more devastating results because they possessed firearms. Whole regions were pillaged and depopulated. In the official chronicle of Menelik’s reign we find the description of a razzia of this sort that took place against the Galla in 1881: "He marched all night and fell upon them suddenly. He took a large amount of cattle as booty, and exterminated a great number of Galla. . . . On the following Friday he pillaged the high plateaux of the Arusi. It was impossible to count the number of cattle which were taken and that of the Galla who perished that day." But the
Galla, "who were as numerous as the sands of the sea," returned to the attack. They were again defeated. "Not a single Galla escaped, for they were pursued to the top of their great mountain called Tchilalo and exterminated. The number of cows captured was 65,712." 1 Even making considerable allowance for the enthusiasm of the chronicler, it is plain that these raids in grand style were very profitable adventures for Menelik and dire calamities for the Galla. They were euphemistically called "tax-gathering expeditions." Just what services the Shoans rendered in return for these "taxes" is difficult to say. Until the late eighties they did not occupy these "colonies" permanently. The French explorer, Jules Borelli, reported that in 1887 there was not a single stable Shoan post south of the Hawash.

By that date, however, Menelik's policy had begun to change. He found that if he were to ensure his supply of booty and slaves he would have to set up a permanent administration in the lands where he gathered his taxes, for others were poaching on his preserves. John, to keep Menelik in check, had invested the Negus of Godjam with the rich empire of Kafa. But when the Godjamites sought to invade their new possession, Menelik defeated them. In 1887, Menelik, fearful lest the Italians or British forestall him, conquered Harrar, where he razed the famous great mosque and erected a Coptic church on its site. These new territories he proceeded to garrison with troops according to the gebbar system, which was a form of slavery. In the conquered area each Abyssinian soldier and his family had attached to them one or more families of the subject people, who thereby became gebbar. The latter were obliged to support the Abyssinian family, giving them not only all the food and shelter they required but every sort of service, for which they received no compensation. These gebbar were thenceforth attached to their Abyssinian owner and could be taken by him wherever he went.

Thus Menelik embarked on the new policy of territorial acquisition among the Hamitic tribes of southern Ethiopia, a policy he pursued with ardor after becoming emperor in 1889. The Arusi Galla, the Sidamo, and the kingdom of Walamo had been subdued by 1895, when he had to turn his attention to the Italian invasion in the north. After Adua, expansion was resumed, aided by the French, who hoped to employ Menelik's power in their designs on the Sudan. Upon his accession, Menelik had been asked by the Powers where he thought his boundaries were. Though this problem had never presented itself to him before, he naturally decided to give himself plenty of leeway. On April 10, 1891, he therefore sent a circular to the Powers containing his version of Ethiopia's boundaries. On the west, for instance, they extended as far as Victoria Nyanza and down the White Nile to Khartum. French and Russian agents accompanied the various Abyssinian expeditions sent to annex these territories. One actually reached the White Nile above Fashoda, but had to turn back before effecting a junction with Marchand. Another succeeded in overthrowing the centuries-old empire of Kafa. Thus one African empire was absorbed by another. These expeditions—gigantic razzias—had by 1900 at least nominally reduced Walega, Boran, Bale, Ogaden, the Nilotic tribes in the southwest, and the Beni Shangul in the west—thus virtually completing the creation of the Ethiopian Empire. There remained only two gaps: Jimma,

a rich Moslem state ruled by the Sultan Abba Jiffar as an Ethiopian protégé until 1935, when the country was annexed by Haile Selassie; and the Danakil and Aussa sultanates, which formally submitted in 1909, though they had for some time been de facto under Shoan suzerainty.

Needless to say, the "colonial administration" of Menelik was of the crudest sort. Even with the best intentions on the part of the court at Addis Ababa, it was not easy to disabuse the governors in the conquered provinces of the ancient Abyssinian notion that they could do as they pleased with the land and the people they ruled. In the nature of things they became so many local despots, only very distantly controlled by the monarch. The type of government the subject provinces might have, therefore, depended on the character of their governors, many of whom devoted their principal energies to extracting as much from their charges in the form of ivory, gold, slaves and other movable wealth, as they possibly could before being recalled or sent to another post. Haile Selassie sought during his brief reign to ameliorate this state of affairs, and to that end created several "model" provinces, governed by men chosen for their intelligence and integrity from among the younger elements, Abyssinian or Galla. This admission of representatives of subject peoples into the imperial administration was in itself a marked innovation. But it was the beginning of what must have been a very slow process and one may well wonder how long it would have taken to regenerate Ethiopia through the medium of its own ruling class.