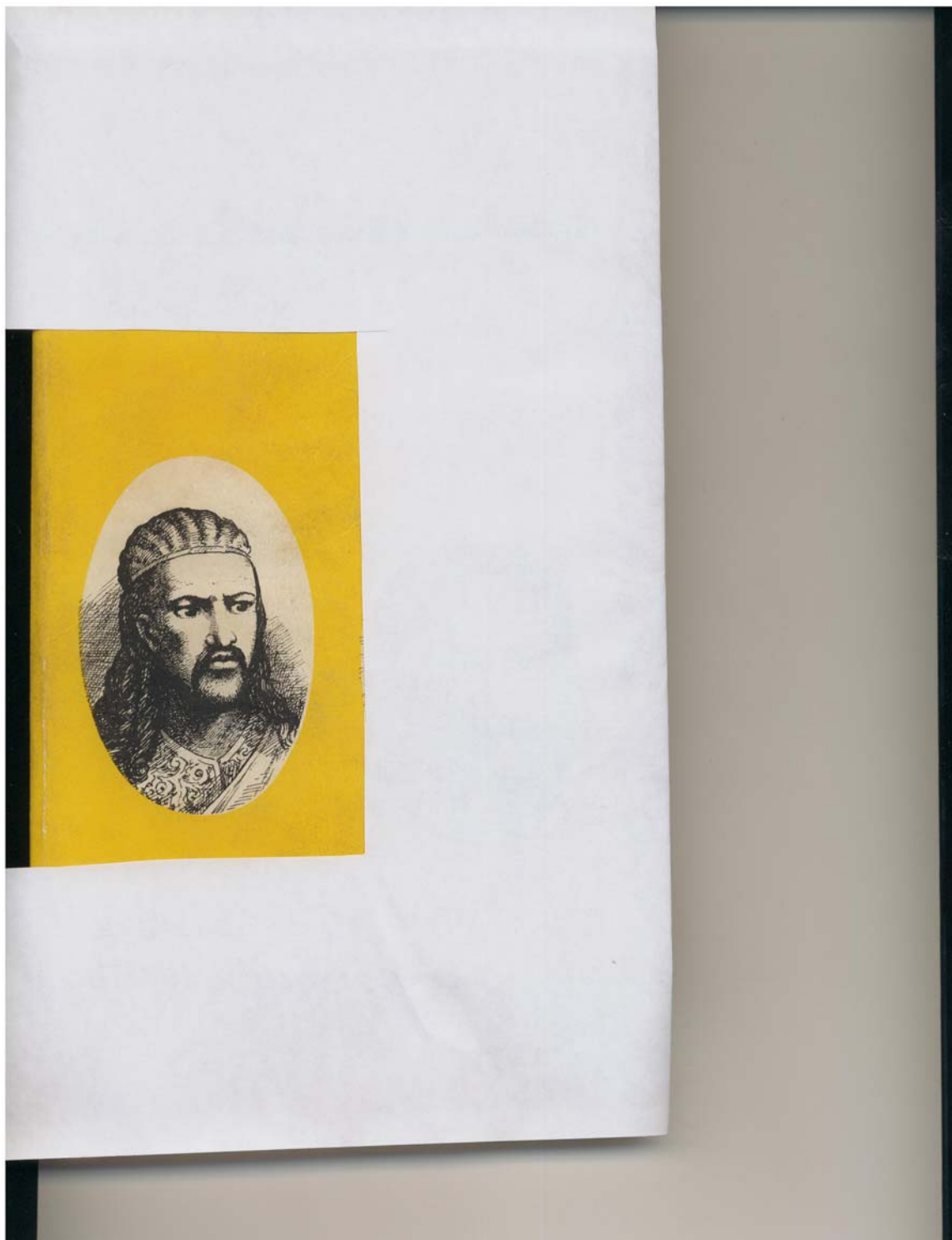


# The Great Unifier: Emperor Tewodros II of Ethiopia

Ghelawdewos Araia



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One of the most magnificent Ethiopian leaders and founder of modern Ethiopia is Emperor Tewodros II. There is abundant literature on the emperor but the aim of this article (and series of other relevant essays to follow) is to chronicle a brief autobiography of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Ethiopian leaders.

Emperor Tewodros was born as Kassa Hailu in Quara (Gonder) for Ato Hailu and Emmett Atitegeb in 1818. His father died when he was still a child and he was taken care of by his poverty-stricken mother whose only source of income was generated by the sale of Kosso (tapeworm relieving Ethiopian medicine), but later on his uncle Dejach Kinfu took Kassa to the monastery of Mahbere-Selassie for tutorial and education by the monks.

At Mahbere-Selassie, Kassa did very well in terms of overall traditional Ethiopian education. He even completed readings in Dawit (Songs of David), but he also encountered a grim massacre of his schoolmate wrought by a certain Dejach Maru, who was then aspiring to become a king. Although there are several versions to the story, Dejach Maru apparently massacred the children of Mahbere-Selassie in avenging his father who was abused by the aristocracy. Kassa managed to escape the massacre; went back to where he was born, joined the bandits and began to learn military tactics and strategies.

According to Tekletsadiq Mekuria, Kassa was accepted as a rebel leader, but he left the banditry and settled at the house of Dejach Goshu and Ras Ali and learned royal etiquette, military combat, and work ethic. Soon after, the young Kassa proved his bravery and heroism at the battle of Sennar with the Egyptians. He became so famous and earned the honorable Ethiopian title of 'Lij,' and the so-called<sup>1</sup> Etege (empress) Menen (the mother of Ras Ali) decided to give their great daughter, Weizero Tewabech, to Kassa; thus Lij Kassa and Weizero Tewabech were joined in holy matrimony in 1847. The marriage was intended to entrap and make Kassa loyal to Etege Menen and Ras Ali, but Kassa had ambitions to go beyond the Gonderian subterfuge, unite and rule the whole of Ethiopia. In brief, he had plans to end the Era of Princes and found a unitary modern Ethiopian state.

In any event, because the aristocracy was trying to denigrate the humble origins of Kassa and even ridicule him for being the underdog in his marriage relationship, once again he decided to lead a rebel life. And because Tewabech was also ridiculed for marrying a man with a low stature, she too supported her husband and both of them became rebels with a cause.

Ras Ali was furious when he learned that Kassa and Tewabech became rebels and he ordered one of his lieutenants, Dejach Wodyirad, to undertake a massive war campaign against Kassa. Dejach Wondyirad boasted in front of Etege Menen and tried to assure her

that he “will capture the son of Kosso-seller alive and bring him over to justice.” In a conventional battle at Mecho, the forces of Kassa (only 300 strong) defeated the thousands of troops of Dejach Wondyirad. The Dejach himself was wounded and captured; at the victory celebration, while Kassa’s forces were enjoying Tej and Tella (wine and beer respectively), by order of Kassa (who already heard of Wondyirad’s derogatory insults), Dejach Wondyirad was forced to drink the bitter Kosso repeatedly.

After the defeat of Dejach Wondyirad, Etege Menen ordered her son Ras Ali to stay at Wegera and she herself led a 20,000 strong army against Kassa. The battle took place at Dembia; Kassa’s forces were no match to those of Menen and she was close to victory had it not been for that fateful enemy strike that wounded her. The queen fell from her horse to the ground, captured, and was brought before Kassa. Unlike Wondyirad before her, however, Menen was treated with dignity. Upon hearing the capture of his mother, Ras Ali planned to campaign against Kassa, but on second thought he came out with an option of truce and a negotiated settlement with Kassa. He suggested that that Kassa govern Dembia and Quara in exchange of his captured mother. Kassa agreed, Etege Menen was set free; the people at large entrusted the title of Dejach to Kassa and ever since his name clamored all over Ethiopia.

Once he got his mother, however, Ras Ali, in an attempt to call off the truce with Dejach Kassa, he allied himself with Dejach Goshu, governor of Gojjam, and both of them came for a show of force to Dembia. Now, Kassa, who knew very well that he could not combat the joint forces of Ali and Goshu, decided to attack them separately.

Kassa employed some stratagem and he gave the impression to his foes that he would abandon Dembia altogether, and in actual fact he did. He retreated from Dembia and concentrated his forces at his birthplace, Quara. As soon as Ras Ali knew about Kassa’s move, he declared Dembia as the district of Dejach Goshu and the latter was pleased with Ras Ali’s gesture. Apparently, Dejach Goshu became the governor of Gojjam and Dembia, but this perfectly worked out for Kassa.

Kassa moved his forces toward Dembia and confronted the massive forces of Dejach Goshu at Gur Amba. Initially, Dejach Goshu’s troops had the upper hand, but because the Dejach was fighting at the forefront he was hit by a bullet, fell down from his horse and died instantly. For Kassa, however, this was a mixed feeling; he was pleased that he was victorious, but he was also sad to see Dejach Goshu dead, for he enjoyed hospitality during his stay at the latter’s house.

Upon the defeat of Dejach Goshu, Ras Ali dispatched the combined forces of Dejach Yazew, Dejach Belaw, Dejach Aben, and even some forces of Biru Ali of Lasta and Dejach Wube of Tigray and Simien. But these forces were defeated too. Now, Ras Ali raised 100,000 combatants and met Kassa’s forces at Gorgora, near Lake Tana in June 1852. At Gorgora, the seemingly huge force of Ras Ali began to crumble in the face of brave Kassa’s fighters. Ras Ali was defeated, and according to Tekletsadiq Mekuria the Ras is believed to have said, “this stick is God’s stick; not Kassa’s.” At this point, Dejach Kassa, following successive victories amassed a formidable force, felt like going to

Gonder and officially observe his own coronation ceremony but he could not do it without the blessing of the patriarch Abune Selama who was then residing with Dejach Wube. In fact, Kassa sent a messenger to Dejach Wube so that he let the patriarch go to Gonder but Wube, who himself was aspiring to become king of Ethiopia, refused.

Kassa had no choice but to campaign against Wube; hence the battle of Deresghe took place where huge casualty on either side was witnessed. Finally, however, following the death of his son Eshete in the midst of fierce fighting and the demoralization of his forces, Wube surrendered to Kassa. Dejach Kassa made a victory march toward the church of Deresghe Mariam and the people welcomed them with elation and applause. Three days after the victory of Deresghe, Abune Selama crowned Dejach Kassa as Emperor Tewodros II of Ethiopia on February 1855.

Before his coronation, Tewodros had already dealt with Birru Goshu of Gojjam. Compared to Dejach Wube and Ras Ali, Birru Goshu was a small and feeble pray, but Tewodros had yet to campaign against a relatively strong King Haile-Melekot of Shewa. In October 1856, with his strong cavalry and ground forces reached Menz and declared to all the people, “if you have a country and a father go back to your country and father; if you don’t have one, I will be your father.” After the defeat of Haile-Melekot, the Shewan aristocracy, serving as entourage to Sahle-Mariam (successor of Haile-Melekot and future Menelik II) planned to fight back and attack Tewodros. Sahle-Mariam was 12 years old at the time and he could only exercise a symbolic power, and he was no match to the forces of Ras Engda (Tewodros’ appointee in Shewa) who virtually created havoc to the Shewan forces. Thus, Sahle-Mariam surrendered and became prisoner of war, but contrary to his fear, Tewodros extended love, treated him well, and took him away with him. But before he departed from Shewa, Tewodros appointed Merid Azmach Haile-Michael (the brother of Haile-Melekot) as his representative in Shewa and Ato Andargachew as his lieutenant.

As soon as he went back to Gonder, Tewodros, now presiding over a reunited Ethiopia, attempted to implement a number of reforms including land reform, the introduction of a standing army, the collection of books in the form of a library, tax codes, church rules, and above all a centralized political system with respective administrative districts.

Despite his reform attempts and his relatively strong centralized form of governance, however, the Ethiopian Church opposed Tewodros that he confronted early on, and the mushrooming of revolts all over his nascent empire clearly undermined his legitimacy to power. Tewodros was not opposed to the Ethiopian Orthodox Religion as such, but he despised the conservative clergy. To be sure, he was anti-Catholic and during his early reign he declared that there should be only one Christian Orthodox Tewahdo religion and monogamy for all Ethiopians. Thus, he himself fostered enemies that include not only the conservative orthodox clergy but also Catholic and Moslem Ethiopians as well. Adding insult to injury, as mentioned above, rebel leaders emerged all over Ethiopia.

Prominent rebel leaders against Tewodros were Dejach Neguse (relative of Wube) in Tigray, Lij Gared and Ginbaro Kassa in Amhara, Abeto Seifu (the brother of Haile-

Meleket) in Shewa, and Tedla Gualu in Gojjam. Instead of continuing his reform, therefore, Tewodros was preoccupied with fighting the new rebel leaders and increasingly he began punishing his foes with cruelty while causing huge collateral damage to the innocent people. Tewodros' dream of reigning over a united and strong Ethiopia and over Jerusalem (one of his motto was 'husband of Ethiopia and fiancée of Jerusalem' የኢትዮጵያ ባል፡ የእሩሳሌም እጮኛ) clearly vanished before his eyes. But even in the middle of this crisis, Tewodros' fame and popularity was not waning yet. The following Amharic song that is sung by generations of Ethiopians to this day had its origins to the days of Tewodros:

ታጠቅ ብሎ ፈረሰ፡ ካሳ ብሎ ስም  
 ዓርብ ዓርብ ይሸበራል እየሩሳሌም፤  
 አንተም ጌታ አይደለህ እኔም ሎሌ  
 የእየሩሳሌም ሰው ካልጫነ በርመሌ፤  
 አባ ታጠቅ ካሳ ነገር ስያሰላሰል  
 ባሕሩን ያስባል፡ መረብ ጣይ ይመስል፤  
 የታጠቅ ፈረሶች እንዴት ያሸካካሉ  
 ባሕር ማዶ ጨፌ መልቀም ያስባሉ፤  
 በሱ አልተጀመረ በመርከብ ላይ መሄድ  
 ሴቷ እንኳ ማክዳ በባሕር ላይ ስትወርድ፤  
 አበሻ በመላው ምን ያጉመተምታል  
 በመርከብ ተሻግሮ ባሕር ይዘምታል፤  
 የታጠቅ ጎራዴ ብረት የነበረ  
 እየቀላ ሄደ ደም እየመሰለ፤  
 ፈረሱ አባ ታጠቅ፡ ስሙ ቴዎድሮስ  
 ጠላት የሚበትን እንዳውሎ ነፋስ፤  
 ታጠቅን ባል ብሎ ማን አምኖ ይቆርባል  
 ሴሰኛውን ጎበዝ፡ ያራቱን ማዕዘን ባል፤  
 የሸዋ የጎጃም፡ የወሎ የትግራ፡ ተበትኖ ከብቱ  
 ገዛው አባ ታጠቅ ሰብስቦ በሃብቱ።

Despite his popularity, however, the Ethiopian Church turned against Tewodros, and in retaliation the Emperor incarcerated the patriarch in solitary confinement at Meqdella. At this stage, Tewodros increasingly became paranoid and his mental capacity became questionable. He began cutting hands and legs of real and perceived enemies; he threw off people of the cliff of Meqdella, and massacred the clergy who were even in good terms with his regime. His cruel actions, thus, gave rise to various organized revolts, this time led by Dejach Bezbiz Kassa (future Emperor Yohannes of Ethiopia) in Tigray; Wagshum Gobeze (later Emperor Teklegiorgis) in Lasta; and Sahlemariam (who managed to escape from Meqdella) in Shewa.

On top of his “insanity,” Tewodros exhibited a major pitfall in his diplomacy with the outside world. In an effort to get military support during his arduous path to power, he had corresponded with the Russians, English, and French, but he always remained

skeptical of European motive when it comes to their relations with Africa. But diplomacy with the English was severed when Tewodros negatively interpreted the lack of response to his letter written to Queen Victoria. The folklore that he asked Queen Victoria to marry him is unfounded and untrue. The content of his letter in brief was, "...because God was displeased by my fathers who reigned before me, our country was divided and a part of it was taken by the colonialists. Thus, he rose me from the ashes and bestowed me power to reunite my country...what is remaining is what is still controlled by the Turks and the Egyptians."<sup>2</sup> By default or by design, this letter did not get response and Tewodros put Captain Cameron and other English envoys in jail at Meqdella. His action, quite obviously precipitated the Napier expedition from India in an effort to set free the English hostages. General Napier brought some four thousand English and eight thousand Indian troops, landed at Zula in February 1867 and headed toward Meqdella. By contrast, Tewodros had four thousand armed troops under his command and sixty thousand unconventional fighting and supporting combatants rallied around him. Given artillery and other heavy guns, however, the Ethiopian troops were no match to the English. On top of this, the Napier expedition enjoyed cooperation from Bezbiz Kassa and Seyoum Gobeze. The battle of Meqdella took place in April 1867; the English had the upper hand and in the middle of fierce fighting, the chief commander Fitwerari Gebrie was shot and killed; Tewodros became desperate and made an attempt to communicate with the English and even offered them some sort of truce preceded by the discharge of the hostages, but it was too little too late. Meanwhile, some commanders close to Tewodros suggested 'to fight till they die but to finish off the hostages first' but the emperor is believed to have said, 'I can't do that; I can't see my people pay the price for the wrong that I do.' Near the end of the battle of Meqdella, when it was obvious that the Ethiopian army was in disarray, the English commanders fighting at the forefront attempted to capture Tewodros alive at the entrance hall to his palace, but the Emperor whose name is synonymous with courage retreated to his upper deck only to shoot himself with his gun!

Unfortunately, Tewodros the great unifier and visionary laid dead after 13 years in power (1855-1868) before his dream of founding a strong and united Ethiopia beyond what he already presided over was accomplished. Nevertheless, he set forth the reunification of Ethiopia and laid the cornerstone of its modernization. Long after Tewodros is gone, however, he remained a legend and popular hero among Ethiopian youth in particular and patriotic Ethiopians in general. But because he was radically different from his predecessors, uncompromising in his principles, and at times cruel and lunatic, he became controversial in Ethiopian history.

In order to render some justice and clarity to Tewodros' personality and overall behavior, I believe it is important to explore the social background and thinking of the Emperor. It is my firm belief that we all have strengths and weaknesses and should be evaluated on our merit and demerit. Same evaluation criterion should apply to Tewodros as well. So, in hindsight, careful examination of the Emperor's biography, for instance, helps us to understand his humane qualities as testified by many observers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In his book *And LeNatu* (አንድ ለናቱ), Abe Gubegna, the famous Ethiopian novelist, documents some aspects of the qualities of Tewodros: "during his reign, Tewodros ordered the end of cruel punishment; abolished slave trade...so long his first wife

Tewabech was alive Tewodros had sympathetic humane qualities and he was happy with his life.”

Theophilus Waldemayer, the Swiss traveler, testifies the following interesting account: “one day when I was traveling with the king in the rural area, we met a woman who was semi-hungry and whose cloth was falling apart. The king stepped down from his mule, took off his own *Shama* (coat) and gave it to her. He also wanted to give her money, but upon realizing that he had no money he asked me whether I could lend him some money, and I said ‘yes Janhoy, I have five dollars and take it.’ He took the money and gave it to the woman. The woman, cognizant that she could buy many sheep with the money was overwhelmed with joy and began stomping and dancing. Later on, the emperor gave me 100 Birr in return.”

Aleka Zeneb, the Ethiopian satirist, local historian and chronicler of Tewodros says, “the cattle are 2/3 for the king; 1/3 for the army; the king’s share is for the weak, the sickly, and for invited guests.”

Aleka Woldemariam, another Ethiopian chronicler of the times, testifies Tewodros’ kindness and cruelty: “...at Yifag they closed people in their houses and set them on fire...but in the midst of all this cruelty, Tewodros encountered a five old child and his mother crying...he began crying with them and even said ‘oh my God, why do you do this to me; please take me away and let your people get some respite from their suffering.’ Then, the Emperor ordered clemency upon all who were sentenced to be burned alive.”

Apart from the controversy on Tewodros’ behavior and personality, very few chroniclers had the opportunity to document the Emperor’s vision and intellect. Tewodros had traditional education only, but he was very fluent in Arabic as testified by Professor Fusella and as verified by Hormuzud Russam, the then negotiator between the English and the Emperor; Tewodros himself was editing the Arabic version of his letters written to foreign dignitaries.

Speaking of his correspondence with foreign powers and his suspiciousness of their intentions, Muse Lejan makes a concise but cogent observation of the Emperor’s sentiments. Tewodros told Lejan on his face, “I know European deceit. When they want to conquer a part of the eastern world, first they dispatch missionaries; later they will send consular diplomats who would reinforce the missionaries; finally their army of occupation. I am not a Hindustan Raja who would be hoodwinked by this [European deception]. Before anything else, I would like to confront their soldiers.”

Consul Plowden’s testimony is also quite telling, “...his intellectual and physical strength does not show any fatigue. His physical and spiritual courage is limitless. He does not get tired of working. Day and night, he gets little rest. His thoughts and his spoken explanation are crystal clear and easy to understand. Hesitation is unknown in his own person.”

Henry Blanc, who met Tewodros in person, appreciates the physical attribute and overall condition of the Emperor: “In 1866 when I first saw him he was about 48 years old. His complexion was darker compared to the majority of his fellow Ethiopians. His nose is aquiline; his mouth is broad, but his lips are very small; his physique was medium but well built. No one was compared to him in his ability of mounted horse spear hurling; even the strongest ones, if they follow the footsteps of Tewodros, they get tired. His eyes are slightly bulging in, smooth and flickering; when he is in a good mood, people were forced to like them, but when he is angry those eyes suddenly become blood-stained and seem to erupt fire. When the king is angry, his overall condition is frightening; his black face turns ashy; his tight soft lips resemble to hold some white lining; his hair stands straight up. His overall behavior is a good example of a loose and dangerous person. Nevertheless, despite his moody personality, no one was comparable to him in his canny ability of communication and reconciling differences. Even after I met him few days before his death, he still acquired a king’s grace and charisma; his friendly spirit and personality are a result of fine upbringing that are shown in other magnanimous persons. His smile was very attractive. His words were very sweet and full of grace. One who encounters Tewodros could not help but appreciate his humility, love and grace, and would have difficulties in viewing him as a pretender hiding his bad behavior.” And that is how I would want to evaluate Tewodros through my own prism!

Note: The author makes all citation translations and he is solely responsible for their contents. Dr. Ghelawdewos Araia can be contacted for educational and constructive feedback via [webamster@africanidea.org](mailto:webamster@africanidea.org) or [ga51@columbia.edu](mailto:ga51@columbia.edu)

### **Notes and Sources**

1. The king was symbol of unity but during the Era of Princes, he simply reigned under the tutelage of the powerful regional Princes and /or Rases.
2. Egypt was part of the Ottoman Empire during this period.
3. TekleTsadiq Mekuria, *From Emperor Tewodros to Emperor Haile Selassie*
4. Abe Gubegna, *And LeNatu*
5. Ghelawdewos Araia, *Ethiopia: The Political Economy of Transition*

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