

LIJ IYASSU AND THE AFARS¹ (PART 1)

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Lij Iyassu's relationship, as a Ruler, with the Afars, the attitude of the Afars at the time of his impeachment and subsequent escape and refuge in Awsa remain largely unknown.

In this contribution, we shall try to shed some light on this episode which traces the contours of an unusual alliance between an Abyssinian Ruler and the Afar people. We shall begin by broadly describing the situation of contemporary Ethiopia and of the Afars as a backdrop to the rise to power of this young Ruler. We shall then consider the policies of the latter during his short reign toward the Afars, especially those living in the foothills of the highlands of Shoa and Wollo. We shall see the attitude of the Afars was at the time of his overthrow and subsequent exile in Awsa but also the consequences incurred by the Afars for their foray into this struggle for power at the center. We shall also evoke the support they gave him at the time of his departure for Tigray, where he was to be arrested and turned over to the central government.

We shall conclude by briefly evoking the story of Menelik III, a character through whom the memory of *lij* Iyassu was long preserved among the Afars.

This contribution is the result of a judicious use of various written sources as well as of oral traditions.

The situation of Ethiopia and of the Afars in particular

*Lij*² Iyassu was proclaimed heir to the throne in 1909 by his grandfather, the emperor Menelik, who had been bedridden for two years. The choice could be explained by his being the sole male descendant of the emperor by his daughter Shawaragga and *Ras* Mikael of Wollo. *Ras* Tassama Nadew, from the ranks of the Shoan conservative aristocracy, was designated as his tutor.

This royal decision was not appreciated by the empress Taytu Betul who intrigued in the background but an aristocratic coalition, mindful of tradition, finally overcame her objections. In May 1911, at just 13 years old, *Lij* Iyassu refused to accept the tutor that was to be imposed upon him as a replacement for Tassama, who had just died. In the course of his first year of rule, serious contestation broke out against his budding authority. The underlying reasons for this were to be found in individual ambitions and sparring regional motivations.

1 ¶ This contribution will be published shortly in the Proceedings of International Symposium on "Life and Times of *Lij* Iyasu: New Insights" held at Wollo University at Dessie in November 2009.

2 ¶ An Amharic term that literally means "boy," generally attached to the name of the children of noble families, and which then serves as a title.

Ethiopia had enjoyed partial sovereignty since 1906, when the European colonial powers set up on the shores of the Red Sea and of the Gulf of Aden (France, Great Britain and Italy) had agreed among themselves to split its territory into spheres of influence.

This agreement was based on their desire to protect their investments and any capital sums that would be placed in this country. In respect to France, its interest carried upon the railway for which it saw its right to build the second leg from Dire Dawa to Addis Ababa, after the one from Djibouti to Dire Dawa itself.

The *Compagnie du Chemin de Fer* continued to finance a private militia that operated under the orders of a French adventurer called Pierre Carrette-Bovet. Its official mandate was to insure the safety of the rails and of the worksites but unofficially, it participated in the uprooting and displacement campaigns aimed at removing the Afar from its route. More precisely, Rosanna Van Gelder de Pineda (1995:253) thinks that during the lifetime of *Ras Makonnen*, the governor of the province of Harar who died in 1906, the influential position of Pierre Carrette-Bovet at his side was due to his power as a « warlord amongst the Issas. » In effect, a strategic military alliance had been cemented between the French, the Abyssinians and the nomadic Issas all along the railway line. This explains why, in 1906, engineer Ozil, the leader of a mission sent by the minister of colonies to undertake the feasibility studies of the second leg, between Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa, rejected the Afars as possible labour for the works (Rosanna Van Gelder de Pineda, 1995:13).

The young prince was inheriting an empire of which the territorial limits were more or less tangible only on paper with the real integration of these different elements into the state leaving much to be desired and without effective authority. When it came to the Afar political entities in which we are interested here, emperor Menelik II had managed, by playing off the rivalries of the European colonisers against one and other to have his sovereignty recognised over a large part of the Afar territories situated between the coast and the highlands of Abyssinia. However, he had not sought to directly administrate the inhabitants of these lands nor to integrate the Sultans and the Chiefs of the territorial federations into the system of feudal privileges. His decision could be explained by the continued existence of an attitude characterized by what could be called the « Adal syndrome » that Hussein Ahmed (2001: 9) describes for the medieval period in these terms:

The threat of raids into the territories of the Christian kingdom by the nomads of the lowlands remained a perennial source of anxiety for the medieval rulers. It also influenced the evolution of provincial administration and frontier defence policies and strategies.

We should replace « *nomads of the lowlands* » by « *Afar nomads of the lowlands*, » for it was indeed the Afars that were being talked about for having been the vanguard of the Muslim conquest of Abyssinia in the 16th century. The perusal of the Chronicle of the Wars of Amda Sion, from the XIVth century, brought an historical confirmation to this suspicion.

Awsa, the main Afar sultanate, both economically and militarily, had been weakened by more than a decade of a fratricidal succession war. It had been divided into two distinct parts each ruled by an autonomous sovereign.

The Afars were perceived on the Christian highlands not as fellow citizens, but as latent enemies. They continued to designate them as Adal, in order to perpetuate towards them an enmity that stretched back to the Middle Ages. This negative image of the Afars explains the organisation by *Lij* Iyassu, soon after his direct accession to power following the death of his tutor, of several military expeditions against those of them who lived in the Abyssinian

foothills. The one of March 1912, undertaken at the request of the Oromo Warra Jille,³ was not only particularly deadly, as the attack took place by surprise and caused much human loss of life but also weakened them economically as their cattle was seized. Marcus (1995:260) remarks that two years later, on the 14th of March 1914, another expedition was led against the Afars populations:

While at Zuqwala, Iyasu was informed of the massacre of 300 Karayya Galla by the Afar at the village of Sadimalka on the Awash River. By the time that he reached the scene, the raiders had fled. There upon Iyasu decided on a general chastisement of the Afar, and en route to Ankober he devastated the land and killed many people, sparking off a general uprising among the population. Much booty was acquired and divided among the men when they reached Ankober.

Lij Iyasu and his new policy towards the Afars

After the death of emperor Menelik, which occurred on the 13th of December 1913, Lij Iyasu initiated a new policy towards the Afars and other populations living on the margins of the empire and which sought to facilitate their integration into the Ethiopian State. This was in direct opposition to the policies of his grandfather Menelik II and of his predecessors. Even on the part of the young heir to the throne, it constituted an important shift. One of his first gestures took the guise of the creation, in Afar land, situated in northern Shoa, of a royal town bearing the evocative name of Wayna Hara.⁴ During his first visit to this site, located to the south east of the village of Rassa, he came in the company of a reduced entourage. It was a great surprise to the Afars, whom would have then forgiven him his recent military expeditions against themselves. The impact of the young Ruler's act was emphasized by the court chronicler in these terms:

*None of the old Nägarit, nor the large army (Chifra),
He came into Wäynä-Hara with just ten men;
He did not fight against them [Afars] for he felt sorry for them⁵.*

Soon after, Lij Iyasu undertook a second visit to Wayna Hara and its region, this time with several objectives in mind. He wanted to reassure the Afars about his desire to integrate them into the imperial political system. He recognised their claim to the neighbouring lands that the Oromo Warra Jille were contesting them and gave their chiefs to right to oversee these localities with all the attributes of power.

Another objective of this visit had the pacification of interethnic relations in mind. To this effect, Lij Iyasu personally took part in the negotiation process of their conflicts. He announced his project of establishing a town on the site of the actual Sanbate which had been

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┆ It is one of the four branches of the Oromo Karayyu, also known as Jille Suba.

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┆ An Afar expression that literally means : « The forum that we have been missing. »

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┆ Quoted by Ahmed Hassen Omer, 1997 : 140.

the main area at the heart of the conflict between them in 1912. He named the site Tenaye, after his own war name.⁶ This town was to be mainly inhabited by his Muslim Argobba, Oromo and Afars subjects and as such was to become an important symbol of his new policy of cementing good relations between nations.

Lij Iyassu also used his stay in the region to extend to the Afars the old arranged marriage policy in order to establish blood ties with the important families. He took wives in two of the large confederations of this region (Dok^Ca⁷), Modayto and Debne (Berhanou Abebe, 2001 : 320). He had two daughters⁸ with the Modayto women. Another child of *Lij* Iyassu, Melake Tsehai, who was to be crowned emperor on the 2nd of September 1937 by a group resisting the Italian occupation, was also born in the region of the lowlands of Ifat. Menelik Iyassu evokes in an interview Melake-Tsehai « (a) *half-sister of mine from an Adali woman who was said to have died while fighting with patriot forces led by Ras Abebe Aregai* » (*The Ethiopian Herald*, October 30, 1974: 3)

In the course of the interview, Menelik Iyasu spoke in afar and the translation from amharic to afar and vice-versa was undertaken by one of his cousins from maternal side, Alwan Abdulrahman who Menelik raised like his child. This mistake about the gender of Melake-Tsehai could come from either the interpreter or the journalist. Some of the genealogies of the imperial family that we have consulted on the Internet give the Muslim name of his mother: Momina. The latter could be the woman from the Debne confederation.

Later, probably in 1915, *Lij* Iyassu wed a third Afar woman, Fatuma Abubakar. She was born from a rich family of traders, harking from the north cost of the Gulf of Tadjourah, that had dominated throughout the XIXth century the intermediary trade between Abyssinia and the shores of the Red Sea and of the Gulf of Aden. Her father was *Naggadras* Abubakar Mahammad, the governor of the commercial town of Channo⁹ which had taken Aliyu Amba's place after that locality's decline. Her grandfather was *Naggadras* Mahammad Aboubakar, the governor in the last quarter of the XIXth century of the commercial town of Aliyu Amba, then the representative of the interests of Menelik II on the coast and in the new port town of Djibouti that he would have granted, following certain sources, in 1888, to France (Dubois, 1999:55). Her great grandfather was non other than the famous Abubakar Ibrahim Chehem, pasha of Zeyla (Fontrier, 2003). From the end of the XIXth century, the members of this family lost their role as obligatory intermediaries in favour of European traders supported by their respective states. However, one of them, *Naggadras* Mahammad Abubakar, continued to enjoy the trust of Menelik, who was unwilling to rely solely on the Europeans. Ahmed Hassen Omer (2007: 396) insists upon his exceptional role « as he combined the management of the commercial and diplomatic affairs [of Ethiopia] with those of the interests of his family and of his enduring loyalty to Menelik ».

Lij Iyassu made the acquaintance of Fatuma upon the occasion of a reception that *Naggadras* Abubakar had organised for his honour in his home, some say in Addis Ababa and others, in

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† Tena was the name of his horse.

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† This geographical term designates here the escarpment of the highlands of Shoa inhabited by the Afar.

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† One of them, named Fatuma, was later wed by Nasra ^eUndé [^eUndé (son of) Nasra, the name of the mother], a great Afar chief from the escarpment of north Shoa. Cf. Ahmed Hassen Omer, 1997 : 141.

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† Situated 40 km to the east of Debre Birhan, on the plateau's escarpment.

Channo. It is said that he immediately asked for her hand in marriage and a ceremony was later organised to celebrate their union. Fatuma became his favourite. It is for her that he asked when in 1922, after his arrest and imprisonment in Fiche, he had obtained the authorisation to have by his side the woman of his choice (Gebre-Igziabihier Eliyas, Reidulf K. Molvaer, 1994:417). Fatuma Abubakar¹⁰ was to give *Lij* Iyassu an heir named Menelik,¹¹ about whom we shall describe more later.

If today, most agree that these marriages of *Lij* Iyassu had as objective to consolidate his empire in its marginal regions, they were perceived at the time by Shoan Amhara as a long term threat to their interests. The young sovereign's words to the contrary did not assuage their suspicion as it continued to be exteriorised as in the following couplets by an anonymous author:

*Listen, Iyyassu Abba Tena; only one word,
Your intimacies are with the Galla [Oromo]
and Your marriage with the Adal [the Afars]!*¹²

Lij Iyassu was not the first Ethiopian sovereign to wed one, or even several, Afar women. Without seeking too far, he had an illustrious precedent in the person of the emperor Yohannes IV. The latter had wed Halima Sirra Ali,¹³ the sister of Yâkumi Sirra Ali, the chief of the Herto country in the oriental escarpment of the highlands of Tigray. Rebaptised Tibebe Sellasie, she died soon after having given birth to just one son: Araya Sellasie. The emperor himself had Afar blood by his great grandfather in the maternal line, the *shum* Weldu of Agame. From this stems his family's closeness with the Afars, which is emphasised by certain authors (John Young, 1997). Yohannes IV, in similar fashion to his predecessors, had recourse to kidnapping to realise his marriage as the parents of a Muslim cannot give their consent to an union with a Christian. The fact that *Lij* Iyassu had been granted an exception to this rule fired the suspicion held towards him by the Christians inhabitants of the highlands. However, in the case of Fatuma Abubakar, Gontran de Juniac (2001 : 63) asserts that « *on the eve of her wedding with Yassou (sic) although a fervent Muslim, she had had herself baptised in secret in the Abo church behind the French legation in Addis Ababa and had insured herself that her baptism was inscribed in the parochial register in order, if the need arose, to dispose of a document she could avail herself of* ».

Lij Iyassu frequently sojourned in Afar country in the foothills of Shoa and regularly showed himself beside its chiefs. For example, in one of these photographs, he is shown dressed in similar fashion to them, bearing the famous cutlass in his belt. Prayer beads in hand, he

10 ⌈ She was the second cousin of Ali Aref Bourhan who was the vice-president then the president of the Council of government of the French Territory of Afars and Issas (June 1960-17 July 1976).

11 ⌈ An interview with Béchir Abdo in Addis Ababa , December 7, 2009 and the interview of Menelik, "Who is Menelik Eyasu?" *The Ethiopian Herald* , October 30, 1974, pp. 1 et 3.

12 ⌈ Ahmed Hassen Omer, 1997:142.

13 ⌈ His name is quoted by Teshele Tibebe (1995 :172) to illustrate how by arranged interethnic marriages, the Ethiopian political system tried to prevent ethnicity from becoming the base of political supremacy : *This policy was sometimes pushed to extremes. For example, Muslims were forcibly baptized and brought into political and matrimonial bonds. Emperor Yohannes IV's wife, Halima, an Afar, and negus Mikael of Wollo, are cases in point.* This information is confirmed by the interview of the author of these lines with Commander Mussa Yasin Mahammoda, an ex marine officer, diplomat and minister during the Derg regime. Addis Ababa, August 15, 2006.

entered many times the compound of existing mosques and undertook the construction of new ones as elsewhere in Muslim lands. These gestures are now perceived in hindsight as resulting from the young sovereign's intention to give his Muslim subjects the right to see themselves as being full members of the Ethiopian unity and hence favour Islamic-Christian relations. For the Amhara of Shoa, they formed another worrying trend. They saw, behind the initiatives of the young Ruler, that were in opposition to the attitude of his predecessors towards their Muslim subjects, as for example have already been mentioned, his father, *Ras* (later *negus*) Mikael of Wollo, an Oromo whose conversion to Orthodox Christianity was about one generation old at the time of his son's rise to power. They insinuated that he was simulating being a Christian but secretly remained in reality a Muslim. For example, a rather banal fact, the Arabic inscription on his *Negus'* sceptre stoked the suspicion of Shoaan Christianity against him. This was however a common practise in the north of Ethiopia.

As we related above, during the lifetime of Menelik, *Naggadras* Mahammad Abubakar and his son *Naggadras* Abubakar continued to gravitate in the imperial entourage, even if their influence was diminished. While the father mostly lived on the coast, the son, himself, had his high quarters close to the imperial palace, more precisely in Arat kilo, on the plot now occupied by the building of the ministry of Education, which was then called *Naggadras Abubaker safar*. His status evolved with the marriage of his daughter to *Lij* Iyassu and he became an influent unofficial adviser to the latter. In July 1916, he was part of a small group of personalities who accompanied *Lij* Iyassu on his visit to Djibouti, considered unexpected and somehow unwelcome by the French colonial administration. Upon this occasion, the presence in this port town of the Afars chiefs from the north of the Gulf of Tadjourah, with whom the young sovereign would have held talks lets one think that the *Naggadras* Abubakar and his father had made preparations in advance for this trip. Upon their return, he was nominated as chief of the surveillance police of the railway between the frontier of the French colony and the Awash, in effect replacing Ato Mercha, an Ethiopian from the Christian highlands.

Abubakar officially took his post in Dire Dawa but very quickly returned to Addis Ababa where the political fault lines lay, leaving his brother Abdulkader to represent him. This decision of the young Ruler was judged by De Mazérieux, an administrator of the Cie, as being very menacing to the railway.

« Ato Marcha had held for many years, the function of chief of police between the border and Awash, and his replacement by Abou Baker, a Danakil long aligned with Abyssinian policies. With Ato Marcha who was conversant with the customs and methods of the Cie, and to which he was especially completely devoted, difficulties were quickly ironed out. Abou Baker is very well known in Abyssinia and in the Cie so that the same will not be expected from him » (Rosanna Van Gelder de Pineda, 1995: 590).

The nomination of Abubakar in Dire Dawa was concomitant with the removal of *Dedjachmach* Tafari Makonnen from the eastern province of Harar that the latter considered as being his family fiefdom. It menaced a tacit agreement that prevailed between the French administration represented by the railway company and *Ras* Makonnen Welde Mikael and his family which was detrimental to the Afars of the region. On a symbolic level, it signified the return to affairs of the descendants of the Pasha Abubakar Ibrahim Chehem in what could be called now eastern Ethiopia.