

Vol 9, no 1, (2017): pp (91 -94)**Book review****The Battle of Adwa: African Victory in the Age of Empire. By Raymond Jonas.****Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press**

By

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Menelik II is the best known African ruler, a distinction earned out of his sparkling victory over invading Italian forces at Adwa in 1896. The battle of Adwa was the first hitch on European colonial aspirations and the severest blow on the 'scramble for Africa'. Raymond Jonas, Professor of History at University of Washington in his 2011 book '*The Battle of Adwa: African Victory in the age of empire*' recasts the story of Adwa; in his words: 'the story of a world turned upside down'. At the outset [from the cover-blurbs to the author's promotional *YouTube* interviews] the book purports the impression of an African story told in African perspective and thus strives to distinguish itself from the regular genre of European historical constructs on Africa. The author employs critical and laudatory measures to meet this objective. However a careful reading reveals efforts towards a well-balanced rendering designed to keep the European reader (even the racially inclined one) comfortable.

Paleontological evidences abound in placing Ethiopia as the most likely site of human origin. Historical accounts suggest her cultural precedence in the region. Egyptian references to Ethiopia are at least as old as the first pyramids. Scholars like Richard Pankhurst believed Ethiopia traded with ancient Egypt - to which ruins of a tree stump in Queen Hatshepsut's temple claims testimony. From the early days Ethiopia carefully nurtured symbols, myths, landmarks, religion, a powerful language, writing system and literature towards building a distinct Ethiopian identity that would place her as the moral, historical, scholarly and civilizational spark of Africa. Tewedros Kiros acknowledges and recognises the philosopher Zara Yacob as the founder of the African enlightenment.

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The Canadian scholar Claude Summners found Zara Yacob's work to be richer than that of Hegel.

This historico-cultural edge, coupled with a long lineage of able and powerful monarchs consolidated Ethiopia's position as a nation-state in modern times. Thus Ethiopia's 'perennial independence' had been inevitable rather than accidental. Raymond Jonas while confirming this view by tracing history from Tewodros (the unifier King) to Menelik II in the backdrop of the first Italo-Ethiopian war; devotes a greater part of his narrative analysing factors leading to Italian defeat and substantiate. Thus the book leaves a feeling of discontent as it tends to deviate from the promises made in the introductory chapter on a pro-African point of view:

“. . . This book seeks not to explain away the exception of Adwa but to embrace it. Patterns abound in history, and it is tempting for us to discern in an accumulation of instances and otherwise inscrutable underlying pattern. Exceptions create that rare opportunity to separate the contingent from the inevitable, to recognize in discrete choices and chance occurrences the branching paths of human endeavour. The story of Adwa represents one such opportunity, for in pitting one of the most integrated of African states against a latecomer to the scramble for Africa; it strips away the gloom of inevitability and – like the battle itself – puts history back into play.” (p.6)

Jonas's book has 21 chapters organised in three parts. Part 1 begins with an awe inspiring account of Menelik and his well-balanced relationship with Taytu. It briefly touches upon Ethiopia under Emperors Tewodros and Yohannes, the 'Italian toe hold' at port of Massawa, Ras Allula's victory over invading Italian force at Dogali being a 'legitimate response to a blatant act of trespass', Italians exploiting Menelik's rivalry with Yohannes who subsequently died at the hands of the invading Sudanese Mehdi in Metemma, Menelik assuming Ethiopian throne side-lining Yohannes' son Mangasha, friendship with Italy leading to signing the treaty of Wuchale with Count Pietro Antonelli of Italy in the town of Wuchale, on 2 May 1889. The colourful personality of Ras Makonnen is introduced and a detailed account of his diplomatic mission to Italy detailed. One wonders whether the real hero of the book is Makonnen!

The book focuses on Article 17 of the Wuchale Treaty as a base for analyzing the Battle of Adwa and leaves the impression that Makonnen, won over by the Italian reception and honour bestowed on him, gave silent consent to the Italian claim that the Amharic and Italian versions are perfectly matching. If the Treaty was not what it said in the Amharic version, why did Ras Makonnen knowingly or unknowingly address King Umberto of Italy on behalf Menelik saying, "I Ask the Protection of Your Majesty, so that peace and

tranquillity reign in Ethiopia and in the neighbouring Italian possessions (pp86-87)?” Why did the translator who accompanied Ras Makonnen, Joseph Negussie (p. 82), not notice the inaccuracy of the translation? Thus the book rather inadvertently places Menelik at an awkward position. This doesn’t appear to be plausible, given the personality of Makonnen: upright, erudite, sharp witted and committed to Menelik; especially since it ate upon the international reputation hard-earned by Menelik. Makonnen’s act could have amounted to treason. This section of the book demands a little more clarity.

The second and third parts of the book detailing the war, heavily leans on Italian archives. The importance given to war is justified by the focus of the book, namely the battle of Adwa. In fact this is the well-researched section of the book and hence stands in stark contrast with the sections detailing Ethiopian story, which appear as rather plain narrative. Non availability of quality translations of original Ethiopian archives (in Amharic) could be the reason. But those versions were well worth consulting.

The battle took place in the highlands of the northern province of Tigray and began shortly before dawn on 1 March 1896. The Ethiopians had mobilised 120,000 men against a mixed force of 19,000 Italians and locally recruited colonial troops known as askari. Such numerical disparities were common in colonial conflicts in Africa and were generally offset by superior European weaponry. Adwa was different. The Ethiopians were equipped with modern European guns, many of them supplied by the Italians, and they proved superior in tactics and leadership. Under cover of darkness the Italians had advanced in three columns over mountainous terrain. The plan was to take the enemy by surprise, but their maps were so bad the Italian commanders could not find their destinations and lost touch with each other and with the reserve. As a result the Ethiopians were able to pick off the columns one by one, and although the Italian and askari units fought courageously, by mid-afternoon the battle was over and the survivors were in full flight. Between 4000 and 6000 Ethiopians died and 8000 more were wounded. Proportionately, Italian losses were much greater: 4600 Italians and 1000 askari were killed on the battlefield and in the retreat that followed, and 500 and 1000 respectively wounded. A further 1900 Italians and 1500 Askari were taken as prisoners.

In spite of the evident mammoth scholarly research that has gone into the book there is uncertainty about some of the details of the actual course of the battle, and controversy about the factors that lead to Ethiopian victory. General Baratieri was tempted to fight as a result of pressure from Rome combined with his reckless optimism mis-leading maps, Ethiopian deception (perhaps some may not agree), imprecise orders, and (again maybe or maybe not) a covert conspiracy by a couple of generals deliberately to disregard Baratieri’s intentions –about which there are also differences of opinion. The outcome was a

devastating defeat. Going against the exhortations of Menelik (“ . . . bring me the man, not testicles . . .” p. 228), the victors castrated dead and living Italians on the battlefield. The captives marched into an imprisonment which turned out after initial hardships to be remarkably agreeable as they and their captors got to know and appreciate one another. After Italy paid a ‘ransom’ of 10,000,000 lire for the costs of their ‘hospitality’, the last group of prisoners landed at Naples in May 1897.

The brief introduction befittingly summarises the book and prepares the reader for the feast ahead and introduces the main characters: Emperor Menelik II, Empress Taytu, the Swiss engineer Alfred Ilg who would play the role of Menelik’s advisor and ambassador in Europe and the French freelance journalist Casimir Mondon-Vodailhet playing Menelik’s unofficial press agent who created the image of ‘Africa’s Christian Monarch’ for him. In the ensuing chapters more characters with greater importance would appear and tilt the balance of the story to the Italian side. The Ethiopian advantages such as: Taytu’s quick wit and shrewd political sense balancing Menelik’s acute strategic imagination and cautious and deliberate style, the geographical balance achieved through their unity, the soft power of propaganda campaign and Ethiopia’s Christian heritage winning European public opinion etc. are discussed in contrast with Italian folly as a combination of: frustrated careerist administrators, ambitious officers, failed characters seeking sanctuary or redemption in overseas exploits, privateer merchants in pursuit of the killer deal, political leadership seduced by the idea that empire was where personal and national greatness could be found.

On the whole, the book is a thoroughly researched and impressively executed scholarly work. It doesn’t put on scholarly airs but reads like a novel. The language is lucid, un-pretentious and in the military jargon where it so demands. The book offers an intimate reading and sustains reader’s interest from chapter to chapter. At times it transcends from being a military history to a war thriller. However the book leaves the lasting impression of a European story written for European readers. Also the serious reader is left at disadvantage by not providing a list of reference, in the absence of which most of the end-notes appear ineffective

Finally as an Indian reader, I consider Adwa Victory a distinguished achievement that countered the European Scramble for Africa. It is the true African historical record of defiance, victory and triumph. Adwa victory is to the African imagination the resource and medicine for decolonising Africa to bring total liberation, independence, dignity and self-worth. It will continue to provide every African with the spiritual food for liberation from degradation, commodification and humiliation. Adwa Victory is a real African historical resource that continues to provide Africans and all colonised peoples of the world to draw lessons never to be subjugated by any imperial and colonial venture. Raymond Jonas deserves applause for his efforts for bringing to life the story of a battle fought in the interest of the whole of Africa, which in effect ‘turned the world upside down’.