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**Title: Ras Mikael of Wollo and the Campaign of Adwa**

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**Abstract:**

Ethiopian victory over the Italian colonial expansion at the Battle of Adwa in 1896 was the cumulative result of Emperor Menelik and his efficient war generals. Among his abled war leaders was the father of Lij Iyasu (the uncrowned Emperor), the grandfather of Empress Menen (Emperor Haile-Sellassie's wife), the founder of the town of Dessie and the governor of Wollo Province – Ras Mikaelof Wollo. He played a crucial role at the battle of Adwa which was fought to defend Ethiopia from foreign colonial invasion. Thus this paper tries to examine the contrinbtion of Ras Mikael during the battle of Adwa.

**Keywords:**

Ras Mikael, Wollo, Lij Eyasu, battle of Adwa, Aste Menelik , Etige Taytu

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## Introduction

Ras<sup>1</sup>Mikael was one of the well recognized governors of the province. He is known for establishing strong affiliation with Emperors Yohannes and Menilek. This paved way for him to have a significant part in the politics of the time. He was able to be one of the great nobles of the time. Mikaél made various contributions in the history of late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Ethiopia. Most importantly he played a crucial role at the battle of Adwa which was fought to defend Ethiopia from foreign colonial invasion. Thus this paper tries to examine the part of Mikale during the battle of Adwa.

Like his predecessors, *Ras* Mikaél is said to have been a strong and brave fighter and he was known for building a strong army, recruiting soldiers from the different areas of Wollo. Written sources referred to Mikaél's soldiers as the '*Galla*' forces.<sup>2</sup> This might be misleading as meaning his forces were entirely Oromos. Many of his soldiers were recruited from the non-Oromo speaking districts of Wärä-Ilu, Lasta, Dälanta, and Amhara Sayint.<sup>3</sup>

The British traveler, Sir Gerald Portal, who came to the court of Emperor Yohannes in 1887, had had the chance to personally visit and study the military forces of *Ras* Mikaél. He estimated the army to be no less than fifty thousand strong, and the fighting men, half this number, most of them cavalry. By the turn of the century, the army grew to seventy thousand.<sup>4</sup> According to Harold Marcus, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the army of *Ras* Mikaél was considered to be one of the best in Ethiopia.<sup>5</sup>

Leading the army, *Ras* Mikaél participated in many battles and fought to defend the empire from foreign invasions. The first of these was at Saati in Eritrea. On June 3, 1884, Ethiopia signed a treaty with the British government. In this treaty, which came to be known as the Treaty of Adwa, better known as the Hewett Treaty, Emperor Yohannes agreed to facilitate the evacuation of the trapped Egyptian soldiers in the Sudan, through Ethiopia, to Massawa. In return, the areas evacuated were promised to Ethiopia. More importantly, free transit of

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<sup>1</sup> *Ras* was a local title in imperial Ethiopia conferred to the ruling families, provincial governors and high officials, below the title of king

<sup>2</sup> Gäbrä-Kidan Wäldä-Hawaryat, (1981), Historical Document Recorded by the Culture and Sport Branch Office of Wällo Region. Dessie Tourism Office, p.21. Unpublished Document.

<sup>3</sup> *Charting the History of Dessie*, Dessie city-The Official website of Wällo University, [www.wu.edu.et/dessie.php](http://www.wu.edu.et/dessie.php)

<sup>4</sup> *Yä Dessie Kätäma*, MS, No.688, Institute of Ethiopia Studies, (undated), p.7

<sup>5</sup> Täkästä Mälaké, (1984) *The Early History of Dessie 1886-1941*. BA Thesis: Addis Ababa University, Department of History, , p.4

Ethiopian goods and services through the port of Massawa was also arranged.<sup>6</sup> Even though Yohannes fulfilled his responsibility of evacuating the Egyptian army in accordance with the Hewett Treaty, instead of abiding by said treaty, the British and Egyptians left Massawa to the Italians. The Italians occupied the port on 5 February 1885, and became the sole masters of the area.<sup>7</sup>

They announced a blockade at Massawa of all arms and goods to and from Ethiopia. Moreover, the Italians, who were interested in colonizing Ethiopia, marched inland from Port Massawa in order to occupy the village of Saati, thirty kilometers away. Towards the end of 1886, the Italians expanded their frontier even further. The area they controlled was estimated to be about one thousand square kilometers.<sup>8</sup>

By this time, when the country had been invaded by the Italians, *Ras Mikaél* of Wollo marched to the north with his army to take part in the expected battle of Saati to defend his country from the invaders.<sup>9</sup> Gerald Portal estimated the number of forces who marched towards Saati to be no less than seventy thousand. By his account, the army of *Ras Mikaél* was the second largest next to the emperor's own army.<sup>10</sup>

At the time when Ethiopian forces were engaged in repulsing the invading Italian forces, the Dervishes launched another invasion from the west. In this invasion, which is considered the first major invasion towards the country, the Dervishes penetrated as far as the town of Gondär burning the town and capturing and killing many thousands of its inhabitants.<sup>11</sup>

On his way back from Saati, Yohannes was informed that the Dervishes had devastated Gonder, the western province of the country. In order to avert the situation, the emperor prepared a campaign against them. He also declared a mobilization of forces to defend the empire. Learning of the declaration, *Mikaél* joined forces with Yohannes and campaigned

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<sup>6</sup> Emishaw Workie, *Māmher Akale-Wäld and Boru-Meda Däbrä Berhane Selassé Church, 1883-1874*, (2010)MA Thesis Addis Ababa University, Department of History, , p.32

<sup>7</sup> Gäbrä-Kidan, p.23

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.; Source: *Liqä-Kahenat Tayä Şägaw*

<sup>9</sup> Tākästā, p.5; Addis Hiwot, (1975) "Ethiopia: From Autocracy to Revolution", *Review of African Political Economy*, London, Merlin Press, p.30

<sup>10</sup> Richard Pankhurst, (1964) "The Trade of Central Ethiopia in the Nineteenth and early Twentieth century", *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, Vol.2, No.2, p.73

<sup>11</sup> Assefa Balcha, (1984) *The Court of Negus Mikael: An Analysis of Its Structure and a Description of the Role of 'Ayteyef' Hall*, BA Thesis (Addis Ababa University, Department of History, , p.6; Tākästā, p.6

along with the emperor against this dangerous enemy. He led a large cavalry of some twenty five thousand warriors.<sup>12</sup>

According to the account of Wylde, a British adventurer who witnessed the battle, the Dervishes camped at Mettema and built strong defences.<sup>13</sup> On the Ethiopian side, while *Ras Mängäsha*, the Emperor's son, and *Ras Alula* commanded on the one flank, *Ras Mikaél* led his army on the opposite flank. Wylde continued to describe the situation in the fighting saying, "*Ras Mängäsha* and his troops were the first to gain an entrance on one side and, *Ras Mikaél* soon made good his attack on the other."<sup>14</sup> When Ethiopian historian Fekadu explained the fighting strength of *Ras Mikaél* and his forces he said, "*Ras Mikaél* showed the strength of his troops at the battle of Mettema by breaking into the Dervishes fortifications along with *Ras Mängäsha*." In this battle, *Mikaél* lost one of his famous generals *Ras Yimär* of *Wärä-Himäno*.<sup>15</sup>

And while, *Menelik* and *Täklä-Haymanot* plotted against the emperor, *Mikaél* stood by him to defend his country from foreign invasion.<sup>16</sup> In spite of the emperor's death on March 10, 1889 on the battlefield, the war ended by the withdrawal of the Dervishes from the country.

## **Adwa**

*Mikaél's* role in defending the country from foreign invasion continued during the famous battle of *Adwa* in 1896. In spite of their resounding defeat at *Dogali* in 1887, the Italians were unable to set aside their colonial ambitions towards Ethiopia. They thus began to conquer and occupy the northern part of the country.<sup>17</sup>

Infuriated, Emperor *Menelik* declared a state of preparation for war against the invaders. The declaration reads as follows:

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<sup>12</sup> Charting the History of Dessie. [www.wu.edu.et/dessie.php](http://www.wu.edu.et/dessie.php)

<sup>13</sup> Augustus B. Wylde, *Modern Abyssinia*. (London, Methuen & Co., 1901), p.382

<sup>14</sup> Mahtämä-Selassé Wälde-Mäsqäl, (1942E.C), *Zikrä Nägär*, Addis Ababa, p7; Assefa, p.7; Gäbrä-Kidan, p.9; Sources: *Qäsis Şägayä* Bishaw and *Ato Aläleñe Gäbrä-Amlak*

<sup>15</sup> Sources: *Ato Käder Ali* and *Ato Hassän Aragaw*

<sup>16</sup> Mahtämä-Selassé, pp.18-27; Assefa, pp.12-20

<sup>17</sup> David Levering Lewis, (1988), *The Race to Fashoda: European colonialism and African resistance in the scramble for Africa*, 1st ed., London, Bloomsbury, p.116

*. . . an enemy has come that would ruin our country and change our religion. They have passed over the sea that God gave us as our border. These enemies have advanced, burrowing into the country like moles . . . With the help of God; I will get whoever has caused me sorrow. . . Now, you who are strong, lend me your strong arms, and you who are weak, help me with your prayers, while you think of your children, your wife, and your faith . . . assemble and meet me at Were-Ilu, and may you be there by the middle of October.*<sup>18</sup>

In response to this national call to arms, *Ras* Mikaél put himself at the disposal of the emperor.<sup>19</sup>

The first battle between the two forces took place at Ambalage on December 7, 1895. As Berkley, a recorder of the battle explained, *Ras* Mikaél had lined up fifteen thousand men. The combined forces of *Ras* Mikaél, *Ras* Mäkonnen and *Ras* Mängäsha defeated the Italians and killed their commander, Tosseli.<sup>20</sup>

However, the decisive battle took place at Adwa on March 1, 1896. On the night of February 29 and the early morning of March 1, the Italians advanced towards Adwa. Their battle plan was to attack from three different directions. While the Italian major, Dabormida commanded the right flank, his counterpart Albertone led the left. The central battalions were commanded by major Arimondi.<sup>21</sup>

On the Ethiopian side, the right flank was commanded by *Negus* Täklä-Haymanot, the left by *Ras* Alula and the center by *Ras* Mängäsha and *Ras* Mäkonnen with *Ras* Mikaél at the head of the Wollo cavalry. The forces of the emperor and that of Empress Taytu, wife to Menelik, remained in reserve.<sup>22</sup> The decisive positions in the battle were given to the *Ras* Mikaél, Mängäsha and Mäkonnen.

On the center front, the forces of Arimondi were stationed in such a defensive position, that it was difficult to attack. They tried all they could to prevent the Ethiopian army from making their onward advance, but they were outnumbered. On this front, it was *Ras* Mikaél who led his Wollo infantry and smashed through the Italian battalions in the centre, along

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<sup>18</sup> Gäbrä-Selassé, p.225

<sup>19</sup> Fekadu, p.57

<sup>20</sup> G.F.H. Berkley, (1902)*The campaign of Adowa and the rise of Menilek*, Westminster, , p.135; Lewis, p.116

<sup>21</sup> Lewis, p.117; *First Italo-Abyssinian War (1895-1896)*, [www.ethiopiainilitary.com/first-italo-abyssinian-war-1895-1896](http://www.ethiopiainilitary.com/first-italo-abyssinian-war-1895-1896)

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

with *Ras Mängäsha* and *Ras Wällé*. The forces of Arimondi crumbled and he was killed on the battlefield.<sup>23</sup>

After successfully completing this offensive, Mikaél moved to the right flank to assist *Ras Alula* who was engaging with *Dabormida*. When Wylde, enlightened the circumstance, he said “*Ras Mikael’s* troops went to reinforce *Ras Alula*, who had already got in to touch with General *Dabormida* and disputed his advance with a flanking fire”.<sup>24</sup> As Mikaél joined *Ras Alula*, his soldiers chanted:

Who shall tell the Italians

That Mikaél came dressed up with fire<sup>25</sup>

As soon as the forces of *Ras Mikaél* arrived, conditions at the front changed. It is reported that when Mikaél’s frightening Oromo cavalry forces advanced, the Italian soldiers began retreating saying Reap! Reap! as they fled the cavalry.<sup>26</sup> On this front, *Ras Mikaél* and *Ras Alula* utterly overwhelmed the enemy forces and killed the commander, Major *Dabormida*.<sup>27</sup>

Then, the full Abyssinian force began an attack on *Albertone’s* brigade. The cavalry of *Ras Mikaél* took part in the left flank together with other *Ras* and their forces. They ambushed the enemy forces and those that were able, fled, leaving many dead on the battlefield.<sup>28</sup>

Fekadu’s assessment of the role of *Ras Mikaél* and his Wollo forces at the Battle of Adwa was the following: “In this battle *Ras Mikaél* and his Wollo troops had fought to save the empire from the invaders. They had invested blood for the integrity of the empire.”<sup>29</sup>

The battle of Adwa represented a turning point in Ethiopian history. *Ras Mikaél* of Wollo can be counted as one of the fearsome leaders who helped protect Ethiopia from Italian

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<sup>23</sup> Wylde, pp.206 & 208; Täklä-Şadik Mäkuriya, *Aşé Yohannes ena yä Ityopeya Andenät* (Emperor Yohannes and the Unity of Ethiopia), (Addis Ababa, Kuraz Printing Press, 1982E.C.), pp.388-393; Ethiopia Africa Black International Congress - New Jerusalem School Room - African Warriors,Wars and battles - Series Vol.1: *The Battle of Adwa*. [eabiciami.webs.com/documents/battle%20of%20adowa.pdf](http://eabiciami.webs.com/documents/battle%20of%20adowa.pdf) [accessed October 13, 2011]

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> Source: *Ato Mäkonen Ali*

<sup>26</sup> Berkeley, p.118

<sup>27</sup> Wylde, p.209

<sup>28</sup> Berkeley, p.280; Wylde, p.208

<sup>29</sup> Fekadu, p.59

advancement. Through the ages, the people have expressed their admiration for all of the emperor's chief commanders in the following way:

“... እነ ንጉሥ ተክለሃይማኖት፣ እነ ራስ መንገሻ ዮሐንስ እነ ራስ ሚካኤል እንደምን ለአፄ ምኒልክ አበሩላቸዉ! ...”

... How king Täklä-Haymanot, Ras Mängäsha Yohannes, Ras Mikaél shined for Menelik . . .<sup>30</sup>

The battle of Adwa had significant national and international consequence and occupies a unique place in Ethiopian and African Historiography. In addition to sending shocking waves to imperialist Europe, Adwa became a beacon of freedom for Africans and other freedom loving peoples in the rest of the world. When the editor of *London Times* elucidated the possible impact of Ethiopian victory over the Italians at Adwa, he underlined “This victory will arouse the spirit of the Africans who until today have been treated with contempt as pagans”<sup>31</sup> Hosea Jaffe also considered Adwa as a “watershed in the rise of African liberation movements and thinking.”<sup>32</sup> Because it encouraged anti colonial struggles in Africa or the black world generally and South Africa specifically.

According to Donald Levine the victory of Adwa stimulated the energies of South African blacks. It lifted up the spirit of anti colonial resistances among the Zulu of South Africa.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, a Nigerian Historian compared the battle of Adwa with the battle of Isandlwana, (which was the first major encounter between the British Empire and the Zulu kingdom) since both battles were fought with great courage and for the same purpose i.e. defending oneself.<sup>34</sup> So in one or the other way, spiritually or secularly, Adwa had galvanized anti colonial resistance movements across Africa generally and South Africa specifically.

## Conclusion

It is this victory of Adwa that saved Ethiopia from European colonial rule. It is this victory that reverberated soundly among the black people who were struggling against colonialism

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<sup>30</sup> Täklä-Şadik, p.268

<sup>31</sup> Aseffa Abreha, (1998) The Battle of Adwa: Victory and its Consequences, In Adwa: Victory Centenary Conference, Institute of Ethiopian Studies, p.132 131

<sup>32</sup> Hosea Jaffe. (1998) The African Dimension of the Battle. In Adwa: Victory Centenary Conference, Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa p.405

<sup>33</sup> Donald Levine. (1997) Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of A Multi Ethnic Society, The University of Chicago Press, London. P.12

<sup>34</sup> V. Bakpetu Thompson, (1969) Africa and Unity: The Evolution of pan Africanism (London) p.9

and stimulated their energy. Thus those heroes who fought with a great courage for the freedom of their country like Ras Mikaél of Wollo shall be remembered and their role be preserved.



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