

Professor Mesfin Woldemariam Interpretation of Ethiopian History: Standing on a Slippery Slope

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I read response article written by Abdurahman Ahmedin (አብደራህማን አህመዱን) concerning the historical interpretation made by Professor Mesfin Woldemariam. I counter checked the published article of Professor Mesfin and read his explanation surrounding the battle of Adwa and Mai Chew. I am surprised by the arguments of the Professor. I never expected Professor Mesfin entertains such subtle ethnic interpretation of historical events. I do not know whether this is done intentionally or as a lack of skills to critically question his sources of information. Whatever the reasons I found the concern of Abdurahman Ahmedin legitimate and I do not concur with Professor Mesfin interpretation of the events.

Writing history is not easy. It is not as easy as scribing ones view after reading a book in one-and-a-half days. Writing history requires mastery of both source criticism techniques and theoretical construction to filter and relate facts from arguments and ideological interpretations. Interpreting historical facts should be left to professional historians to avoid misjudgment. If there is an urge to propound historical arguments it is better to base arguments on researched and published historical works. I do see the reason why non-experts take unnecessary responsibility and risk of misunderstanding. My purpose in this article is not to mediate between Ato Sebhat Nega and Professor Mesfin Woldemariam. I want to put the historical record straight. I am hard pressed for time just like you but felt duty bound to respond.

Professor Mesfin raised two arguments: the first refers to the prelude to the battle of Adwa and his second point refers to “Tigray shefta” attacking campaign soldiers during the Mai-chew war against Italian fascist invader. In what follows I will use my own work and Professor Donald Crummey’s article to examine the arguments of the Professor.

Concerning about Adwa professor Mesfin wrote the following:

ህምሳላ የአዴዎን ጦርነት እናንሳ አፄ ምኒልክ ከኩብ-ብ፣ ከምዕራብና ከምስራቅ ጦራቸውን ሰብስበው ህጦርነት ሲ ጋጁ ምን ያህሌ ጊዛ ፈጀባቸው? መንገድ ምን ያህሌ ጊዛ ወሰኖባቸው? የምኒልክ ጦር ከኢጣሊያ ጦር ጋር ሲወዲዮር ምን ያህሌ የሰህጠነ ነበር? የምኒልክ መሳሪያ ከኢጣሊያ ጋር ሲወዲዮር እንዳት ነበር? ስብሐት ለመሌሰው የሚገባ ላሊም በጣም በጣም ዋና ጥያቄ አሆነ፤
...አፄ ምኒልክ ጦራቸውን ሰብስበው በእግርና በበቅል ከኩብ-ብ ተነስተው ትግራይ እስቲዮርሱ ኤርትራና ትግራይ ምን አዴርገው ጠበቁቸው? የኢጣሊያ ጦር ትግራይን ሰንጥቆ አምባ አሊጌ እስቲዮርስ ማን ለያቆመምው ሞከረ? የኢጣሊያ ጦር መቀላ ገብቶ ሲመሸግ ማን ተከሊከህው? ስብሐት እስከዚሬ ሳይገህጥህጥት ቀርቶ ከሆነ የኢጣሊያንን ጦር ከአምባ አሊጌ ያስወጣው የምኒልክ ጦር ነው። ከመቀላም ምሽግ ያስወጣው የጣይቱ ዳና የምኒልክ ጦር ነው። በኢትዮጵያዊ ይለኝታ ተሸፋፍኖ የቆየውን እናፍረጥርጠው ከተባህህ ህማን አሳፋሪ እንዮሚሆን ግሌጽ ነው።

Professor Mesfin started the discussion by noting the logistic needs and capability of the Ethiopian army led by Emperor Menelik. Following his logic and point of departure I was expecting that he will describe the economic system used to support military expenditures. Instead he started to blame the people in the regions of Eritrea and Tigray for failing to contain the Italian invasion. The people of these regions have fought against colonialism and foreign aggression long before the battle of Adwa. One can mention the battles against the British military expedition at Mekdela (1868), against Egypt at Gundet (1875), and Gura (1876), against Italy at Dogali in 1887 and against Mahdist Sudan at Metema in 1889, against Italy at the battle sites of Kuateet (1895), Ras Mengesha 12,000 man near Senafe (1895), Debre Alia (1895), Emba Alage (1895), and Mekelle (1895). In a matter of just 27 years the people whom Professor Mesfin blamed fought 10 major external aggressions. The battle of Adwa in 1896 was a culmination of those wars.

If we study the frequency of troop movements in northern regions of Ethiopia (including Gonder, Gojjam and Wello), in the period between 1868 and 1895 alone, i.e., before the start

of the battle of Adwa, one can count 35 major internal conflicts involving an average size of 15-20,000 men. In a matter of one generation, Northern Ethiopia saw 10 major wars against external aggression and 35 medium sized conflicts among claimants to throne. On the eve of Adwa, the people in northern Ethiopia were tired the human and material costs entailed by incessant wars.

The 45 major internal and external wars which lasted for three decades were based on an economic system identified as Rist-Gult. This economic system was geographically entrenched in what was commonly called Mesafint Hager (present day highland Eritrea, in the regions of Tigray, Gonder, Gojjam and Wello). The ownership rights, fiscal and administrative properties of Rist-Gult economy system were not conducive to maximize military expenditures at the scale and frequency of the wars. It is not surprising if the system exhausts its capacity to withstand Italian aggression in 1895. I really do not understand why professor Mesfin attributed the failure of the system to the people of the region. What else could they have done given their context and limitations?

By contrast, the economic system on which the imperial army of Emperor Menelik was based, identified as Gebar Maderiya system (in central and southern Ethiopia), was suitable to mobilize sufficient resources for war purpose. Land tax was not privatized as in the Rist-Gult system. It was under the direct control and administration of the king and served as the most important source of revenue for the imperial army. Direct control over taxation helped to increase tax as the need arose and made it possible to transfer resources from areas of surplus to areas of scarcity. This flexibility was hardly possible in the Rist-Gult economic system.

Compared to the Rist Gult system, the revenue produced by the Gebar Maderiya system was very considerable. Emperor Menelik was wealthier than Emperor Tewedros and Yohannes. The total annual court and army revenue extracted from the Gebar Maderiya economic system was estimated at 10 million Maria Theresa Thaler (MT\$). From the Rist-

Gult economic system, Emperors Tewedros and Yohannes were able to collect annual revenue amounted to a quarter of a million and half million respectively. The resources of war were different in northern and southern Ethiopia. If we follow the logic of Professor Mesfin, who should be responsible for this glaring difference and who was to be blamed for?

Concerning “sheftanet” Professor Mesfin wrote the following:

የቼኮኬሊቫኪያ ጎበዜ የጻፈውን የሃበሻ ጅብደ የሚሉ መጽሐፍ ተጫካ ጅብሬ መኮንን የተባሉ ሰው የተረጎመውን አዳስ አበባ የኒቨርሲቲ አሳትሞታል፤ አቶ ስብሐት ብቻ ሳይሆን ማንበብ የሚችሉ ሁሉ ሉዩነብበው የሚገባ መጽሐፍ ነው፤ እኔ ፈረንጅ ስሆኑት የጻፈውን ማንበብ ከተውሁ ብዙ ዓመታት ሆኖኛለሁ። ይህንን ግን በአንዴ ቀን ተኩሌ ጨረሰሁት፤ የኢትዮጵያን ማሻች ከኋላ እያጠቁ ስሆነበኛት ..የትግራይ ሸፍቶች.. ማን ይናገር? የነበረ፤ ነውና እንዲህ ይላሉ፡-
....የትግራይ ሸፍቶች) ታምን ወንዴሞቻቸውን ይገደላሉ?... ከመሀሌ አገር ስዴስትና ሰባት ወር ሙሉ ፍዲውን እያየ ሲጓዙ ከርሞ እዙህ የቀረሰው ወንዴማቸው፤ የነዙህን ምስኪኖች ህይወትና ንብረት ከጠሉት ታመከሊከሌ የገዢ ህይወቱን አሌጋ ሊይ ጥል፤ ቤት ንብረቱን በትኖ መከራውን ባየ ታምን ይገደላታል?... እነዙህ ሸፍቶች ወንዴሙን የገዳለበት አብቹ የሚባሉ የአሰራ ስዴስት ዓመት የሰለላ ማች በጣም ተናድ የራሱን የግሌ ቡዴን አቋቁሞ ያሳዴዲቸው ነበር።

I really do not know why Professor Mesfin purposely selected this paragraph from the book and presented sheftanet (outlawry) as if it was unique to the people of Tigray and specific to the given period. Was the Professor not aware of the existence of Sheftanet in the social and political landscape of northern Ethiopia since the nineteenth century? I will quote at length from the excellent and well documented article of Professor Donald Crummey.

It reads as follows “Shefta (bandit or rebel) was mentioned in the European sources since 1810s. Nathaniel Pearce wrote about Goju who turned to Shefta, and in 1840s, Walter Plowden used the term to noblemen embroiled in political struggle. Plowden material comes from Gojjam province. In many parts of northern Ethiopia, starting from Hamasen in Eritrea, the Mereb valley, in Tegre province, in Wagara, Wag, Lasta, various parts of Begemder sheftanet was highly prevalent.”

Sheftanet was endemic to northern Ethiopia and it was used as an institution by ambitious nobles to acquire power and by peasants as a form of social protest and by venal highwaymen. Emperors Tewedros and Yohannes IV were shefta before they became emperors. Professor Donald Crummey concluded as follows “If many Ethiopian leaders of the nineteenth century

rose through sheftennat, their examples serve to remind us of criminal origins of all state power”. The interpretation of Professor Mesfin is however different in its implications. Why is there such a fundamental difference in judgment between two knowledgeable persons?

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