There are few countries in Africa that are as enriched and burdened by the past as Ethiopia.¹

The legacy that the victory at Adwa left to the diverse cultural communities of Ethiopia is ambivalent. To the dismay of the diverse peoples of Ethiopia, who had fought back colonial rule successfully, successive rulers sought to create a modern, unitary state on the basis of a pan-Ethiopian national culture, bent on the subordination of all of the country’s cultural communities to the language and religion of the particular culture privileged by the state. Adwa did not only engender national pride for the diverse cultural communities of Ethiopia qua Ethiopians, but also engendered resentments against a dominant cultural community that seemed responsible for their unrequited dreams and humiliations qua cultural communities aspiring for full and equal recognition, which has been a subject of gross neglect by historians of modern Ethiopia, including professional, academic historiographers down to our time. Bahru Zewde, for example, writes “In terms of national psychology, however, the Adwa Victory has continued to instill in successive generations of Ethiopians a deep sense of national pride and spirited national independence.” But this is only part of the story. Commenting on the interpretive subjectivity and consequent ambivalent legacy of Adwa, Andreas Eshete writes, “Even events and symbols commanding wide collective pride are not equally or similarly prized by all peoples of Ethiopia. Victory at Adwa earned international recognition and prestige for Menilik’s Ethiopia, an accomplishment about which conquered peoples of imperial Ethiopia, including those that fought valiantly at Adwa, are bound to be ambivalent.”²
In Bahru’s reasoned judgment, Adwa was a far cry from an absolute victory, none the less. He reasons, “Adwa failed to resolve Ethiopia’s centuries-old quest for an outlet to the sea.” He goes on to say, “The problem was solved only with the liberation of Eritrea in 1941 and its federation with Ethiopia eleven years later.” What does this say about the Eritrean question? About the dissolution of the Ethio-Eritrean federation? About Eritrea’s secession? Doesn’t this bear witness to the fact that Eritrean nationalism was the logical outcome of the less-than-absolute victory at Adwa? That the seeds of future inter-ethnic conflicts were sown then and there? I leave it to you, as it is better raised than answered. But one thing I want you to keep in mind is that what Bahru Zewde has overlooked is the loss of a people resulting from the incompleteness of the victory. He laments the loss of access to the sea, rather than the loss of a people who formed, since time immemorial, a natural part of the ancient civilization to which our motherland loves to lay claim. What went wrong with this able, prolific professional, and academic historiographer called Bahru Zewde? Nothing but he is a historian of the center and of its glory, instead of the periphery and of its agony. The problem with him is, to borrow an expression from Ivo Srecker, he is a historian of the glory of Ethiopia’s past. Strange enough, he concludes “Finally, the roots of the problem of secession, which still continues to bedevil Ethiopia’s peace and security, are to be sought rather than anywhere else in the creation of the Italian colony.” What we would expect of him as a historian is to give as a sound interpretation of the circumstances under which the creation of an Italian colony was made possible in northern Ethiopia. Though he seems to recognize that the demand by the diverse cultural communities of Ethiopia for self-determination, including secession, lies at the heart of the country’s peace and security, he fails to anticipate that it can translate itself into a legally sanctioned constitutional right shortly.

Bahru Zewde also attempts to overstretch the significance of Adwa to the 1974 Revolution. In his own words: “Ultimately, too, the fact that Ethiopia underwent what has generally been recognized as a unique process of revolutionary transformation in the 1970s has its origin in the separate destiny it came to follow as a result of Adwa.” This is nothing but an exercise in futility, inasmuch as it only shows that he engages himself in a line of analysis that does not
succeed unless he is ready to admit that the ‘national question’ was borne out of or has gotten something to do with Adwa.

Dawit Woldegiorgis captures eloquently Eritreans’ ambivalence towards Adwa in the following words:

To this day Adwa is a symbol of Ethiopian heroism and national pride. It is part of our self-definition. While this victory was important in asserting our independence and demonstrating the strength and resilience of the Ethiopian people, it was not a total victory. Ironically, it marked the beginning of the most serious threat to the unity of Ethiopia. For if Italy had won the battle and occupied all of Ethiopia, there would be no Eritrean problem today. The entire region, including Italian Somaliland, though conquered, would have been united and after decolonization might have emerged as Greater Ethiopia. Emperor Menelik did not attempt to drive the Italians back to the sea. He had just defeated one of the most technologically advanced European military powers, but at great cost. He was poorly equipped and had suffered great losses. To have attempted to pursue the Italians might have been suicidal. He quitted while he was ahead and signed a treaty recognizing Italian possession of Eritrea. ... Although Adwa was an event of great historical importance, Eritreans are a bit uncomfortable about this period. During my years in Eritrea, I noticed that, of all the national holidays, fewer people turned out for the Adwa celebrations. Adwa was a reminder of the beginning of Italian colonization. The Italians remained in Eritrea for 50 years. The Eritrean suffered severely under their rule, especially from the racist polices of fascism.5

What explains the ambivalence of Tigreans towards Adwa is Menelik II’s failure to capitalize upon the Adwa Victory, chase the Italians out of Mereb Mellash, and reunite the Tigrigna-speaking part of Ethiopia. His failure has given rise to a proliferation of speculations among Ethiopians. Three possible explanations are in order. First, a fear that his absence during a potentially extended campaign in the north would encourage rebellion in the much more lucrative south; second, his dim view of the prospects of success; and finally the Machiavellian determination often attributed to him permanently to weaken his northern rivals6.

In Tigray, Menelik II’s failure to cross the Mereb River has long been a thorn in the side of Tigrean nationalists: the spectacular show of Shoan perfidy par excellence, which only served to entrench the resentment that had already grown up at his ouster of Yohannes IV’s son Mengesha from the imperial succession. Ras Alula and his “struggle to maintain Tigrean hegemony under Yohannes IV and then to preserve its autonomy under Shoan
dominance”7 offered a decisive figure in shaping northern Ethiopian perspectives of this period. His rise to become Yohannes IV’s governor in Eritrea (1877-1887), failure to maintain the hegemony of the Tigrigna-speaking population of the Ethiopian Empire, or at least forge a common alliance between the two Tigrigna-speaking peoples on both sides of the Mereb River against Menelik II upon Yohannes IV’ death (1889-92), and finally his allegiance to Menelik II (1894-1897), continue to resonate in the northern part of the Ethiopian Empire, albeit with different impact on either side of the divide.

Even the fact that Menelik refrained from conferring the title of Negus of Tigray on Ras Mengesha Yohannes, the presumptive heir to the imperial throne, post-Adwa, whilst Menelik adopted the title Neguse Negest (King of Kings) of Ethiopia reinforced the above-cited Machiavellian motive he harbored against his Tigrean rivals. The grant of the title could have cost him very little while, on the other hand, it might have helped soften resentments of the Tigreans. Rather, Emperor Menelik II removed Ras Mengasha and appointed Ras Mekonnen of Harar to the governership of Tigray in December 1898. He also drew his last axe on the Tigrean dynasty, on 18 February 1899, by removing and exiling Ras Mengasha to Ankobar, until his death in 1906 and exiling Ras Sebhat to Harar until 1909.8 Menilek’s marginalization of Tigray in the aftermath of the victory at Adwa, therefore, corroborates the ambivalence of Tigreans towards Adwa.

This policy of marginalization was, not surprisingly, also pursued by Emperor Haile Selassie I vis-a-vis Ras Seyum Mengesha and Ras Gugsa Araya-Selassie, the two grandsons of Emperor Yohannes IV, who were vying for the title of Negus of Tigray until the death of Ras Gugsa in 1933. Emperor Haile Selassie unable to impose an effective control over Tigray, however, attempted to achieve an internal balance of power, and finally succeeded in preventing any one of Yohannes IV’s descendants from becoming Negus, through diplomacy and marriage ties. Emperor Haile Selassie, aware of the potential trouble and danger from Tigray by Ras Seyum and Ras Gugsa for being deprived of their legitimate patrimony, attempted to appease them by
marriage ties to the Shewan royal family, through matrimonial bonds. As a result marital ties were arranged between the children of the Emperor with the children of the two grand-sons of Emperor Yohannes IV, although it had little effect on the loyalty, especially, of Dejach Haile-Selassie Gugsa.⁹

The upshot of this is to say that it is such interpretive analysis as that the main impact of the secession to Italy of Mereb Mellash and the subsequent marginalization of Tigray that explains the rise of Tigrean nationalism as manifested in the Woyane I and the Woyane II uprisings in Tigray, precisely because it puts the facts into proper perspective by taking stock of the motives. It underlines Menelik II’s overriding motive of politically dividing and weakening the Tigrigina-speaking highlander’s vis-à-vis their Amharic-speaking neighbors to the south, thereby relegating them to the periphery of the polity.

To the Shoan-Amhara –the post-Adwa dominant power-holding cultural community which prevailed over much of Ethiopia's political history since the death of Yohannes IV until the Derg’s ouster in 1991 – Adwa was the culmination of the unification process carried out by Emperor Menelik II, the battle itself marked "an eloquent demonstration of national unity" and the high-point of its national independence.¹⁰ Further, by extending Ethiopia's territorial boundaries, Menelik II "pushed the frontiers of the Ethiopian state to areas beyond the reach even of such renowned medieval empire-builder as Negusa Nagast Amda-Tseyon. In the process, the Ethiopia of today was born, its shape consecrated by the post-Adwa boundary agreements concluded with the adjoining colonial powers.¹¹

To the Oromo, the country’s largest cultural community, Adwa stood for no more than a classic conflict between two colonial powers, Italy and Ethiopia, where they along with other conquered cultural communities of the South paid wanton sacrifices. In the words of Abbas Haji, “With this victory Menelik II defended not only historic Abyssinia, but also the southern colony he had already acquired through brutal conquest; conquest initiated by Shoan
predecessors, but largely carried out by himself, an act without which the triumph of Adwa would not have been possible."12

To the Wolayta, Adwa is a sad reminder of the 'bloody campaign' waged by Menelik, accompanied by some of his generals who would make history at Adwa such as Ras Michael of Wollo and Dajjach Balcha. According to Ivo Strecker, “The conquest of Wolayta and the victory at Adwa were in fact closely connected. There had been a great famine in central and northern Ethiopia from 1888 to 1892 and provisions for the Ethiopian armies were running low. Menelik therefore organized a 'campaign' against Wolayta which was in fact nothing but the monumental plunder of one of the richest and most well-organized peoples of the south. Many thousand inhabitants of Wolayta were killed and even more were taken as slaves to carry the grain and drive the tens of thousands of cattle that were looted. It was this plunder which enabled Menelik to march his troops north and defeat the Italians in the battle of Adwa.”13 In the words of Ivo Strecker, “at Adwa one oppressor fought another and it was the people of Wolayta who had to pay for the victory of the Ethiopians over the Italians.”14

Unfortunately, such an interpretive narrative sounds unpatriotic and eerily approximates the profascist propaganda employed to justify the 2nd Italo-Ethiopian War, nonetheless. The reason why it sounds unpatriotic and profascist is because the rhetoric of the Ethiopian Empire as “black oppression of black people”, though not untrue, was the very same rhetoric profascist apologists such as Baron Roman Procházka found most serviceable to their cause. In his pamphlet, Abyssinia: The Powder Barrel (1936), Procházka claims, “[T]he opponents of Imperialism should bear in mind that the numerous non-Amharic native tribes in Ethiopia, and these constitute by far the greater part of the total population of the empire, are themselves the victims of Abyssinian imperialism. It is therefore utterly mistaken to represent the Abyssinian usurpers as being in any way oppressed and worthy of protection,” albeit he rightly observes that “[t]he empire of the Negus had been built up by conquest and forcible annexation.”15
The upshot of this all is to say that it is such interpretive analysis, however unpatriotic it might sound, that can adequately account for the emergence of ethno-nationalism in Ethiopia during the post-Adua period that culminated in the formation of organized ethno-national liberation movements based the national question in the 1970s leading to their ouster of the Derg in 1991.

On the other hand, according to Donald Levine, “Adwa offers the most dramatic instance of multiethnic collaboration before the 20th century. This is because it gave expression to a great outpouring of national patriotism, foreshadowing the great patriotic struggles of 1935-41. Even from the perspective of modern world history, Adwa represented a relatively rare struggle for national independence waged by a coalition of diverse ethnic groups.”

Elaborating on Adwa’s symbolism for multiethnic patriotic solidarity by transforming itself from a site of inter-ethnic rivalry in 1871 into that of solidarity in the face of Italian invasion in 1896, Levine has this to say:

Twenty-five years earlier, Adwa had been the scene of a protracted battle between Dejazmatch Kasa, who would become Emperor Yohannes IV, and the reigning emperor, Tekla-Giyorgis II, formerly Wag Shum Gobeze. What the 1871 Battle of Adwa symbolized was the age-old struggle among different regional and ethnic groups for dominance. Yohannes, like Tewodros II before him, came to the throne determined to reunify the empire, which had been fragmented following the invasion of Ahmad Gragn and subsequent divisive developments. Although Yohannes did not live to see it, the 1896 Battle of Adwa was a tribute to his vision and to the thoughtfulness and determination with which he sought to unify Ethiopia while respecting the local jurisdiction of regional kings and lords so long as they remained faithful to the national crown.

As Dawit Woldegiorgis describes it, “There have been rebellions in Tigray for centuries. Ras Alula rebelled in 1889-1894 to make Tigray independent of King Menelik, who was then attempting to centralize his power. But Ras Alula later swore allegiance to Menelik and stood beside him against the Italian offensive in 1896.” Of course, deeply rooted antagonisms and persistent rivalries among different factions beset Ethiopia throughout the 19th century. And yet, as Sven Rubenson has written, “at the crucial moment, Menilek commanded the loyalty of every important chief in the country.” The battle of Adwa became
and remains the most outstanding symbols of what, a half-century later, a British colonel would describe as the “mysterious magnetism” that holds Ethiopia together.” Commenting on the patriotic solidarity Ras Mengasha Yohannes, the governor of Tigray, displayed in the run-up to the Battle of Adwa, Harold Marcus, the eminent historian of the times of Menelik, writes:

Isolated in Tigray, Ras Mengesha also concluded that a sovereign Ethiopia was better than a colonial state. He was frustrated by Asmera’s professions of support while Rome continued to arm the emperor. Swallowing his pride, Mengesha decided to make his peace with Menilek and arrived in Addis Abeba on 2 June 1894, ready to submit. Within the Grand Palace’s newly constructed reception hall, the emperor awaited, seated on his throne, a large crown on his head. Mengesha and his three major lieutenants, including Ras Alula, approached, each man carrying a rock of submission on his shoulder, then prostrated themselves, and asked for forgiveness. Menilek simply declared them pardoned, thus bringing Tigray back into the empire.

It should by now become evident that factors that led to the Battle of Adwa (which includes European colonialism) helped galvanize support from the regional leaders and that the actual battle and its outcome served as a spectacular demonstration of multicultural collaboration, if not Ethiopian nationhood. Evaluating the factors that determined the outcome of the battle, Sven Rubenson, for instance, contends that “To ignore the existence of an Ethiopian national identity, closely allied with and supported by the position of the Orthodox Church in the society, seems to me to be an untenable position.” Rubenson concludes, “At a time when Africans were not expected to have a fatherland, even Baratieri sensed that he was up against something unforeseen, for which he could find no better description than "a semblance of the idea of nationhood in the guise of hatred against the whites". It was more, much more than a semblance, as the outcome of the struggle and the battle showed.”

However, Adwa turned out to be a watershed in modern Ethiopian history, inasmuch as post-Adwa Ethiopia attests to a trend clearly different from that of the preceding years, i.e. demeaning centralization and homogenization since the end of Zemene Mesafint (The Era of Princes), not even witnessed under Yohannes IV’s reign as long as his approach to centralisation was different in that it envisaged a “loosely united Ethiopia, with autonomous regional rulers under an emperor exercising benevolent political suzerainty”.

During
Yohannes IV, Amharic, in lieu of Tigrigna, was the official language. Even if the Battle of Adwa and the consequent victory can be construed as a demonstration of the attainment by the diverse peoples of Ethiopia of nationhood, guided by the nation-building efforts and aspirations of its successive visionary rulers in the persons of Emperor Tewodros II, Yohannes IV, and Menelik II, its aftermath witnesses to national fragmentation, as a result of the policies of centralization and homogenization pursued by Menelik II, Haile Selassie I, and Mengistu Haile Mariam; a tendency I prefer to call ‘nation-destroying’, rather than ‘nation-building’, after Walker Connor.24

As Andreas Eshete aptly remarks:

Notwithstanding patriotic solidarity in the face of alien aggression and the state’s ardent assertion of inclusive nationalism, there was recurrent nationalist resurgence against a centrist, homogenizing state throughout imperial and military rule. During most of his regime, Haile Sellassie had to contend with nationalist rebellion by a wide range of cultural communities: Tigrai, Oromo, Gojjam, Somali, Eritrea. Under the military, armed contest by organized nationalist movements plunged the country into protracted civil war, ending finally with the defeat of the military in 1991.25

Cultivating Patriotic Solidarity and Cultural Diversity

After the demise of the Derg, Ethiopia came to have a new Constitution, which is intended to be not only an inspiring, but also an enduring constitution. As Christopher Clapham aptly observes, “… The overthrow of the military in 1991 amounted to more than the collapse of a regime. It effectively marked the failure of a project dating back to Menelik’s accession in 1889 of creating a modern and centralized state around a Showan core.” To my mind, the chief significance of the 1896 resounding victory at Adwa consists in the enshrinement of multinational citizenship in what is fated to be our enduring Constitution, which extends formal recognition to the country’s cultural diversity, i.e. *e pluribus unum* in 1994. As much as Adwa ensured both Ethiopia’s survival as an independent state by its own right and recognition in the eyes of the international community, Ethiopian federalism, prompted ironically, by the need to reverse a historical process spurred by the victory at Adwa, to borrow an expression from
Andreas Eshete, “enabled both Ethiopia’s survival and the establishment of legitimate political authority”\textsuperscript{26} in the eyes of the country’s diverse nations, nationalities and peoples.

As Andreas Eshete notes, “The roots of Ethiopia’s new political order are easier to discern in recent history.”\textsuperscript{27} To do this, I therefore propose to analyse the modern political and legal history of Ethiopia through the evolution of one major cleavage, namely: center/periphery. One novelty of the center-periphery approach to political development is “its emphasis on the crucial role of elites.”\textsuperscript{28} The national center refers to that section of society which possesses authority while the periphery refers to the region over which the center exercises its authority. The center may, alternatively, be defined in terms of the values and beliefs advanced by the rulers. A major implication of this model for deeply divided societies such as ours is that the center has to politically dominate the periphery.\textsuperscript{29}

The center-periphery cleavage, manifesting itself in various forms, has affected the political and legal landscape of Ethiopia with variable intensity since the ascension to the throne of Emperor Haile Sellassie. Mapping the history of this cleavage helps to identify what professor Andreas calls the “unfavourable conditions”\textsuperscript{30} that prompted the emergence of multination federalism in present-day Ethiopia. During the imperial era, the primary source of conflict was the endless rivalry between the monarchy in the center and the nobility in the periphery. With the overthrow of the monarchy in 1974, the ethno nationalist liberation movements came to replace the nobility as regional forces. Following the demise of the Derg in 1991, the ethno nationalist liberation movements conquered the center. This cleavage, in effect, has historically translated itself into two alternative models of state restructuring: centralist-authoritarian and federalist-democratic. Thus, the adoption, in 1991, of a multi-nation federation de facto and de jure in 1994 was a historical necessity, thereby marking the culmination of the post-Adwa history of the competition between the center and periphery of the Ethiopian polity.

What transpire from the foregoing are two important lessons for the diverse peoples of Ethiopia today. Firstly, the need to cultivate the civic virtue of patriotic solidarity that our
forefathers gathered from all corners of Ethiopia displayed gallantly at Adwa in the face of foreign intrusion. Ours and generations to come must continue to cultivate the patriotic solidarity that our forefathers displayed at Adwa not only so as to put it to use against external threats to their beloved country’s territorial security, but also to put it to use against any internal threats to our survival like poverty and underdevelopment; to attain freedom from both fear and want. As GWF Hegel put it:

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\text{Patriotism is often understood to mean only a readiness for exceptional sacrifices and actions. Essentially, however, it is the sentiment which, in the relationships of daily life and under ordinary conditions, habitually recognizes that the community is one's substantive groundwork and end.}^{31}
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Secondly, the need to cultivate cultural diversity so as to provide a legitimate basis for building a lasting political community based on liberty, equality, and social justice. In this connection, I should like to draw particular attention to multination federalism as an institutional manifestation of multiculturalism and the irreplaceable part it can play in contemporary Ethiopian public life in advancing the causes of political pluralism, social justice, and solidarity. Besides, cultivating cultural diversity, as Andreas Eshete writes elegantly:

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\text{[F]ederalism has lent support to political pluralism as well as to the cause of greater political and social equality. The wider political community manifests political cohesion and solidarity stemming from the freedom, equality and diversity of the constituent parts. Political cohesion and solidarity resting on the autonomy and integrity of the diverse parts has, in turn, galvanized the populace into concerted public engagement and action, resulting in unprecedented advance in the quest to find freedom from hunger and poverty. Material advance and the attendant emergence and spread of industrial and urban life will no doubt engender greater uniformity and mix among cultural communities. Material progress will equally encourage wider moral and political pluralism, thereby generating individual and collective identities that will compete with and cross cultural identities. To make room for the emergence, and realization of novel diversities and identities would require vigilant respect of individual and group rights in regional states as well as free and open flow of people, ideas and free associations across states. With material advance and the fulfillment of the constitutional aspiration to create a single, living political community and an integrated economy, I think we will also come to feel the need for an animated, particularist sense of our common Ethiopian identity. I submit the wisdom of reaching for a sense of the whole that is more than the sum of the constituent parts. To complement and transfigure our diverse identities calls for the cultivation of a new sense of a shared history, shared public ideals and a shared}
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identity that captures what binds us together as citizens of a single political community with a singular destiny.32

*This is an abridged draft version of a paper delivered at the 3rd Annual Conference, ‘Adwa for Africa’, Held in Commemoration of the 115th Anniversary of the Victory of Adwa, Organized by The Other Face of Ethiopia, 29 February-01 March 2011, Soloda Hotel, Adwa. I’m grateful to Prof Gebru Tareke, Prof Andreas Eshete, Ato Sebhat Nega, and Tsegazeab Kassa (ABD) for their attention, helpful comments, and encouragement as well as to the participants for assuring me that mine was a high-wire prose.

Notes
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25 Andreas, supra note 1, p.7
26 Id
27. Ibid., p. 9
29. Ibid
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