

THE OTHER FACE OF ETHIOPIA

&

ITS DETRACTORS

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By all reckoning, no place-name invokes as Adwa does an intense patriotic feeling and national pride across the Ethiopia's multitude of religious and cultural communities. This is indeed as it should be. For it is at Adwa where in 1896 a determined Ethiopian army assembled from every part of the realm smashed a European power fortified by state-of-the-art war machine. As well known, Adwa frustrated Italy's grand ambitious scheme of colonizing the once only remaining free country in the non-western world. Worse still, news of the rout that Italy suffered at the hands of a 'forgotten' nation sent shock waves across Europe as the debacle was without precedent. The frightful alarm that pervaded the metropolis was the inconceivability of a scenario of such an utter European ignominy. Not even the most farsighted among its elite could have foreseen a possibility where a 'hoard of ill-equipped primitive warriors' in a remote part of the 'Dark Continent' could decisively crush a well-provisioned modern European army that ever set foot on African soil. After the initial shock subsided, grim forecast saturated Western media amid nervous apprehension of Adwa's implications to the global colonial *status quo*.

Trepidation was certainly in the air that Ethiopia might grow to become a powerful African nation as Imperial Japan did a few years later, following its victory over Czarist Russia's army at the 1904 battle of Port Arthur. In consequence, not unlike the prescient predictions that preceded Japan's post-1904 rise to become a giant rival to the West in Asia, Ethiopia's image, for one brief moment in modern times, loomed large as an emerging Sub-Saharan contender on the African continent. The country was believed to have leaped into new heights to a point where no outside power could even covet much less try to dismember with impunity. Humbled by Adwa, Europe felt that the principle of "Effective Control" that governed the 19th century European Scramble for Africa could not apply to Ethiopia. The resultant modesty in European disposition triggered a flurry of diplomatic recognition, ushering in Ethiopia's eventual acceptance into the League of Nations as the only non-European member state. In the rest of the colonized world, on the other hand, Adwa was hailed as a momentous watershed of immense historical, psychological and political significance. Africans and their descendents in the entire span of the Diaspora greeted Adwa as a shining feat of valor and Hannibal-like military ingenuity that finally exploded the Eurocentric myth of the innate inability of the 'Negro' race to unite, mobilize, strategize, engage and defeat a white army. More importantly, in the eyes of the millions condemned to suffer under alien captivity, Adwa elevated Ethiopia into a veritable symbol of emancipation, beckoning Africans to rise and free themselves from demeaning colonial yoke legitimated by a flawed ideology of racial supremacy. By the 1960s, after years of sweat and blood, the awakening kindled at Adwa culminated in the liberation of the bulk of African states. As a tribute to Ethiopia's unique

role in Africa's journey to freedom, the founding fathers of the newly decolonized states chose Addis Ababa as the new headquarters to spearhead the struggle for the continent's future unity. Thus, as an epochal historical limestone with enduring continental dimension, the date on which the battle of Adwa was fought has, since 1897, been reverentially set aside as a day of remembrance in an annual public anniversary. Though not commensurate with its far-reaching global import and durable saliency, historical narratives, memoirs, poems even plays have and continue to be dedicated to the heroes of this African Waterloo.

All this is, of course, well and fitting for no other historical event has afforded posterity the luxury to bask in its crowning glory. Alas, so far at least, Adwa has remained just that -- a mere occasion for ritualized official celebrations of ancestral sacrifice. In other words, not much effort has been exerted to explore new ways of reanimating the ethos of Adwa to prevail against Ethiopia's other erstwhile domestic foe. That is why Adwa's triumphal will has not been so far rejuvenated to conquer the paralytic syndrome of inertia---an inertia that seem to have immobilized Ethiopians in the face of the ravages of want and dearth which they for decades endured in shame and humiliation. Space does not permit here to adumbrate how Adwa could be reinterpreted as a galvanizing impetus to subdue deprivation in the same vain as the forbears of the present generation humbled the enemy at the epic battle. Indeed Adwa bears testimony that, when they act in unison, Ethiopians and --- by extension all Africans -- are capable of surmounting any seemingly unassailable challenges that not infrequently exposes them to injustice and external hostility. Suffice it to mention, for instance, that the Adwa generation of Ethiopian leaders had never seriously raised the question how and why Italy dared to invade their country in the first place. And what guarantees could have been provided to prevent similar attempts in the future. Sadly, none of Ethiopia's crown heads have ever posed this question. Or tried to identify their country's underlining weakness and mobilize their resource to address its Achilles Heel. Instead, ever since Tewodros' botched attempt, successive Ethiopian ruling elites have been prone to harbor a false sense of security in the mistaken belief that they could always purchase the arms by which they could defend their centuries-old national sovereignty. Proof of the fallacy of their pre-20th century thinking pattern on matters of national security was not long in coming. Within barely a 40- year span after Adwa, emboldened by its armament industry, Fascist Italy not only lay claim on Ethiopia but was also able to defeat its archaic army at the battle of *Maichew*. The moral of the story is that, admirable though it is, heroism alone is no sufficient deterrent against foreign invasion.

Patriotism has to be backed by credible policy of accumulation of national asset through an enabling environment of a quickened rate of productivity where decisions of national defense is informed by public input drawn from open political space. In the absence of such peace-time preparation, no nation is able to ward off or withstand external aggression. At any rate, had the question been posed in this manner, Ethiopia would have discovered that the answer to its vulnerability to external danger and equally threading internal challenge laid in narrowing the huge material productivity gap that separated it from the good part of the world. Maybe then, the county might have had a better chance of avoiding a frontal armed clash which it was compelled to engage on unequal footing in

an era where victory in war had long become a function of economic strength. As not so long as the early decades of the post-fascist period leading up to the mid-1970s, there seems to have been no sense that Ethiopia's snail-paced economic reform was no solution to its weaknesses that has rendered it prey to expansionist ambitions. Nor do many seem to realize that the reason why Ethiopia had to depend on forging military aid to reverse the second 1984-85 irredentist onslaughts was a direct consequence of the downward-economic spiral that the country suffered in the 17 lost years between the collapse of the Solomonic dynasty and the advent of the federal democratic republic. But there is no better indirect illustration of the deterrent effect that a robust economy has on external aggression than the 1989-2000 border war. A war that Ethiopia was forced to fight despite her best efforts to diffuse and avoid its inevitable repercussions. As it will be recalled, this needless fratricidal showdown occurred before Ethiopia had begun its upward economic trajectory and was least prepared for war. As it will be further remembered, Ethiopia's main preoccupation at this juncture was rehabilitating its war-torn economy and the imperative of restructuring its obsolete governing institutions. Fortunately today those entrusted with the country's safety have no illusions about the hazardous nexus between failure to ensure development and foreign aggression. It is in part apprehension of the possibility of another intolerable external provocation why Ethiopian officials are determined to accelerate the country's rate of development. This is neither a conjecture nor by no means unique to Ethiopia. The Development State literature underscores that concerns about external threat has been a major factor behind the economic miracle witnessed in the late developed nations of South Korea, Taiwan, even, albeit indirectly, China.

Again the present leadership is keenly aware that without a strong economy, neither the sovereignty of the state is secure, nor does pride in Ethiopia's moments of glory make much sense. Indeed past glory that has no warrant in the present is hollow. It is this realization that has fired up the Ethiopian government to combine the cherished legacies of the past with the promising prospects of present to usher in a virtual Renaissance. A spectacular scope of imagination as doubtlessly as it is, the aim is nothing less than lifting Ethiopia to approximate the level of international stature and acceptance it once enjoyed during the better part of the first millennium. Similarly, at non-governmental level, there seems to be a complementary change in mindset in respect to new and creative ways of honoring Ethiopia's tradition of national resistance that resonates with the current war Ethiopia is waging against deadliest of all enemies -- poverty. One such voluntary association that seeks to break new ground in terms of how the spirit of Adwa should be re-appropriated is '*The Other Face of Ethiopia*'. Among other projects designed to draw attention to the less known salutary side of Ethiopia, *The Other Face of Ethiopia* is dedicated to immortalize the spirit of Adwa through a comprehensive modest and ambitious projects that includes construction of an Adwa Cultural Center at the actual battle site. Parallel to this grand and ambitious project but, nonetheless, a fitting homage to the gallantry of those who fell at Adwa, *The Other Face of Ethiopia* has other plans. Chief among its future activities include commissioning academic publications and organizing scholarly seminars in the hope of recasting Adwa as: A) a shared heritage that belongs to the entire people of Africa: And, B) as a permanent living reminder of the

untapped collective potential of the people of Africa to fully overcome the legacy of colonialism and ultimately realize their loftiest aspirations.

It is as part of this project that on Feb 21, *The Other Face of Ethiopia* held a fundraising/ book launch -- *Adwa for Africa* -- at the National Theater attended by a huge audience of businessmen, academics, writers, public figures, young students as well as media practitioners. As any activity that bears the name of Adwa instantly sparks great titillations, the whole audience eagerly bought the new book no sooner than it was open for sell. As can be expected, most among the attendant businessmen in particular, swept as they were by a surging sense of solidarity, purchased thousands of copies earmarked for disbursal to school libraries throughout the country. Unfortunately the write-up on the book launch that appeared in the Feb. 27 issue of the English weekly- *Fortune* - had a lot to be desired in that it failed to capture the prevailing upbeat mood of the occasion. In an eyebrow raising departure from the universal sense of patriotism that any activity pertaining to Adwa generates in Ethiopia, the *Fortune* article that appeared under no less an inauspicious title -- *The Fine Line* -- chose a sarcastic tone of reporting prejudicial to all concerned. Through insinuations and innuendos, typical of the private press, the writer first goes to great length to impute crass motives behind the business community's decision to purchase huge quantities of the book in question. Consider, for instance, the following paragraph which constitutes the linchpin of the article's contention.

Gossip could not help but wonder what all these businessmen saw in the book that garnered such enthusiasm as not many of them could have read it. What could possibly be the motives behind their generosity? Sneered at and apprehensive due to resent actions taken by the government, many of the businessmen are seen in the gossip corridors as wanting to buy political favor from the powers that be. Suffice it to note that Sabela is known to have an intimate friendship with Sebhat Nega (a.k.a. Aboy Sebhat), a father figure and one of the founders of the TPLF, who now runs a foreign policy think-tank. His presence at the National Theater last week, together with Speaker Kassa and Andreas Eshete, was a clear show of the political weight put behind the launch of the book.”

There you have it. What could be more cynical than this? Had the Ethiopian business community not been known for its generous contributions in every imaginable fundraising event, one might have been tempted to credit the writer's albeit unwarranted second-guising. But, the whole society, including *Fortune* knows the social consciousness level of the private sector in Ethiopia, particularly its unselfishness when it comes to funding deserving public causes. To interpret its generous contributions during the Feb 21 fundraiser as a clever gesture of ingratiating itself with the “*powers that be*” is, therefore, an insult to everyone's intelligence. What is even more odious is the subtle allusion, implying that political figures in Ethiopia throw their weight around to browbeat the business community to underwrite whatever petty cause they might be associated with. To begin with-- *The Other Face*

of Ethiopia-- is a worthy cause which deserves the support of all Ethiopians. What could be a more noble public undertaking than to use the past to change the present as *The Other Face of Ethiopia* has set out to do in its own modest way? Only a moral dwarf bereft of any sense of patriotism could criticize the presence of high profile political personalities at an Adwa fundraising activity. Who else would distort the spirit with which these officials attended the *Adwa for Africa* book launch as a ploy intended to squeeze fat checks from the rich? The irony is that for years public officials were, unjustly no doubt, criticized for lacking reverence to Ethiopia's historical symbols and icons.

Now that some are visibly engaged in a voluntary initiative dedicated to, as in this particular case, enlivening the saga of Adwa, changes nothing as far as the private press is concerned. All the same their mere presence at fundraising occasions for worthy causes is interpreted as extortionist indirect pressure designed to milk the wealthy. On a closer inspection, the writer of the *Fortune* article seems to be uncomfortable with the effort to change the old image of Ethiopia. This, of course, is not new to the private press. It is common among its practitioners to lash out with vengeance whenever they think that this country is making progress in any area of endeavor. What, even by the standards of the shrill Addis Ababa's tabloids, struck many as shocking was that the *Fortune* article would be unsparingly harsh on a topic that involved Adwa — one of the few subjects that unites all Ethiopians despite their dissimilitude regarding creed, ethnicity or political persuasion. However, no matter the intensity of the negative media campaign, *The Other Face of Ethiopia* is bound to achieve its goals as the source from which it draws its strength is the spirit of Adwa. The decent thing for *Fortune* to do is, therefore, to right the wrong done by apologizing to the business community and the volunteers of the *Adwa for Africa* book launch which it harmed in a manifest lapse of judgment.

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