

Mersea Hazen Wolde Qirqos, *Yehayagnaw Kifil Zemen Mebacha: Yezemen Tarik Tizitaye Kayhutena Kesemhaut, 1896-1922*. In Amharic. (Early Twentieth Century Ethiopian History Based on Eyewitness and Reported Accounts) Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: Addis Ababa University Press, 1999 (E.C.), 455 pages.

A Review Essay

By

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In a newly, though belatedly and posthumously, published book, Bilata Mersea Hazen Wolde Qirqos eloquently narrates how Ethiopia entered the 20th century by decisively repulsing external enemies, but, at the same time, by tragically embroiled in an endless internal power struggle among royalties and regions. We learn from Bilata's extremely well documented and well-referenced book that there were primarily two contending forces for power. I characterize these forces as Shoa and Wollo forces and their respective allies and supporters in other regions of the empire. The deadly clashes between the two set the stage for the country to plunge or to be pushed into the twentieth century unprepared or with haphazard plans.

While Shoa insists on the indivisibility of the monarchy and Tewahedo Christianity, Wollo pushes for religious tolerance where Christians and Muslims live and work cooperatively and peacefully within the country. While Ras Teferi represented Shoa, Lij Iyasu was the brain behind the Wollo model of governance. Shoa prevailed after tragic and destructive civil war. Ras Tafari assumed the throne as Emperor Haile Selassie and ruled as an absolute monarch for almost 50 years. In 1974, the monarchy abruptly and effectively ended with him. Lij Iyasu, the legitimate heir to Emperor Menelik II, was vanished and later murdered. His remains have yet to be found. In post-monarchy Ethiopia, it is apparent that Ethiopia is heading towards a multi-religious and multi-ethnic federally constituted nation. Ethiopia is experimenting with the idea of separating the state and religions. That means the idea originally proposed by Lij Iyasu is assuming a center stage in the new Ethiopia or as one observer suggests *addisutu Ethiopia* (New Ethiopia).

Bilata Mersea Hazen Wolde Qirqos, who received his educational training under the auspices the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, put his education into good use by writing an extremely important book on Ethiopian history. Several prominent scholars regard the book has been as a gem to students of Ethiopian Studies. The book also exemplifies the scope and capacity of traditional educational institutions in training able scholars and in developing methodology to document historical events and deeds. In other words, the traditional institutions have been capable of training scholars to be well versed both in spiritual and secular knowledge. *Bilata* received his education in a church school where he began by studying Book of David. He studied Zema (St. Yared's chant), and Qene (poetry). He began working as a secretary in the palace. It is this aspect of our tradition and legacy that we neglected in our attempt to modernize our society and country. The most logical strategy of social transformation should have been the incorporation of ideas into the established tradition from other models of modernization. The copying of modernization without taking into consideration the compatibility with traditional institutions, however, have led to stunted social, economic and political development in our country.

Bilata defines history as a telescope, which enables a person to zoom objects from afar or to magnify small objects. The process helps the viewer to achieve clarity. The relevance of history is further elaborated when *Bilata* writes: A person who studies history is in a position to look back and reflect on the contributions of the wise elders to their country and government. One is also inspired to do likewise for his country and government. He/She also becomes obligated to document the good deeds for the next generation. Children who grow up learning from the documented deeds become motivated to continue the good tradition.

It is, in fact, this historical lesson that *Amha Mersea Hazen* puts into practice when he published the great work of his father. In so doing, he fulfilled the responsibility that he assumed. He also made a great contribution by publishing the book, improved and updated with extensive editorial work. The book has new appendices, index and additional photographs. Moreover, the book is updated with explanatory footnotes. He and his relatives worked with distinguished Ethiopian scholars to ensure a publication of an extraordinary work, both in literary and historic sense.

According to the distinguished Ethiopian scholar *Bilata Hiruy Wolde Selassie*, a person, regardless of his natural talent and skill, ought to have

teachers and books to express his knowledge. Bilata was endowed with natural talents. At the same time, he studied under the most renowned church scholars, such as Aleqa Wolde Qirqos, Aleqa Gebre Medhin, and Aleqa Taye Gebre Mariam. Aleqa Wolde Qirqos was his father and his first teacher. Aleqa Taye taught him the art of writing history. His *Ge'ez* scholarship and Amharic grammar were obtained from the teachings of the great Aleqa Gebre Medhin, who taught particularly *zema* and *qene*, was highly sought by students or *deqe mezamurt*. He led the church scholars who translated the Bible from *Ge'ez* to *Amharic*. Aleqa Gebre Medhin's remains are found in Asebot monastery in the Afar lowlands.

Amha has organized the book as follows: The original cover has a title of '*Yezemen Tarik Tizitaye Kayehutena Kesemahut*,' and includes passport size (*gurd*) photograph of his father. The picture is utterly appropriate, for it presents a modern confident person who at the same time endowed with tradition and historical information. At the bottom of the cover, there is a verse from the Bible quoted both in *Ge'ez* and *Amharic*: "If we live, we live for God." This profound quote poignantly captures the purposeful life of the author.

The book begins with Amha's introduction followed by great forward, testimonies by distinguished historians: Zewde Gebre Selassie and Bahru Zewdie. Under the title Historical Note, Professor Getachew Haile, a close friend of the author, presents biographical accounts. In fact, Getachew Haile compares the author with St. Yared, the great composer of the sixth century AD and Abba Giorgis of Gascha, the great theologian of the medieval period. The testimonies of these distinguished scholars not only enrich the book, but it also demonstrates the greatness of the author.

The book has three main sections covering the reigns of Emperor Menelik II (the last part from 1896 to 1906 E.C.; 12 chapters), Lij Iyasu (from 1905 to 1908; 7 chapters), and Negeste Negestat Zewditu (1909 to 1922; 14 chapters). The section of Negeste Zewditu is not only the longest, but it narrates mostly the deeds of Ras Teferi, who was the regent and crown prince and de facto ruler of the country during this period.

The book also carries 60 photographs. The photographs are not entirely the selections of the author. Some of them are new additions. The photographs are immensely rich in visual stories, expressions and projections. They convey a variety of messages. The photos range from the spectacular to the

bizarre, from images full of conservatism, pomp and drama of the royal family to scenes of first appearances of a motor vehicle or airplane in the country. The photos also document coronations and palace activities. Even though the photographers are not completely identified, the sources of the pictures are included in the table of contents. In addition, the book has the genealogy list of King Sahle Selassie, copies original documents, seals of kings, appendices, such as glossary, samples of *Ge'ez* poetry with their meanings and a list of obituaries. Quite significantly, the book has an index, which is a rarity in Amharic books. The book also lists the works of the author. He has written 13 books. He has translated both the Bible and the Quraan into Amharic together with other scholars.

The book chronicles and analyzes major events associated with the palace and the church from 1896 to 1922 E.C. by assigning a chapter to each year. For instance, the year 1900 begins with the following sentence: *Meskerem 1 gen 1900 amete mehret zemene yohannes belete hamus batte* (September 11, the year of John began on Thursday). Each chapter also begins with main titles that are contained in them. At the end of each chapter, *Bilata* records under a title of miscellaneous items, such as promotion and demotions, new buildings, and obituaries. The obituaries include age and cause of death. We learn that, in general, church scholars live long; some even have lived over a century. Diabetes and heart ailments are some of the causes of death mentioned in the book.

Bilata presents himself in the third person singular as 'the writer of this story.' He has carefully and beautifully narrated eyewitness historical accounts or reports that he heard from reliable sources. His sources include *Tesema Ishete*, a close confidant of *Lij Iyasu* and a great Amharic *gene* poet.

Regarding his method of historical research and writing, I like to cite the following examples. For instance, a special militia known as *mehal sefari* that was loyal only to *Ras Teferi* petitioned *Negest Zewditu* to declare *Ras Teferi* as king immediately. *Bilata* included the lengthy letter of demand in his book with the following explanation: "I felt that the reader would be interested to read the entire letter and, besides, by reading the whole text, the reader would be able to fully understand the issues at stake."

Some of the palace events were witnessed and penned by the author. The writer of the story, for instance, witnessed and recorded in 8 sections the royal wedding of Ms Romaneworq Teferi and Fitwarari Beyene Merid, a

divorcee. *Ras Teferi* received the wedding narrative of his daughter through *Aleqa Gebre Medhin*. *Bilata* is not only an outstanding prose writer in Amharic, but he is also a man of details. Regarding Ms Romaneworq, we learn that her mother was a daughter of an aide to Ras Makonnen. Her mother's name was Weizero Woinetu Amede. Ras Teferi had the affair with Woizero Woinetu prior to his marriage to Woizero and later Empress Menen Asfaw. Woizero Woinetu was not allowed to attend the wedding. The details are relevant in relation to the accusation made against Lij Iyasu. Lij Iyasu was accused of being a womanizer.

If the account he has written about was reported to him, he provides detailed explanation of his source. With regard to King Mikael's decision to jail Dejazemach Abate Bwayalew twice, *Bilata* writes: This historical information was told to me by Dejazemach Gobena Amede, who, in turn heard it from Liqemeqwas Abegaz. *Bilata* highlights the responsibility of a historian to write both the good and the ugly, particularly regarding tragic wars. He believes such a commitment is critical and useful, for the lessons may help the next generation to draw valuable lessons and to avoid making the same tragic mistakes. *Bilata* has written about the Segele war. He states: "In this chapter, I am writing about a history of war between two brotherly regions, Shoa and Wollo. The history is not admirable and I am reluctantly narrating the tragic event. I felt that the massive destruction that it brought to the country ought to be an integral part of the history of the period. The next generation should know about the war and its consequences. The historian is obligated to record the event and pass it on so that future generations may be spared of similar tragic occurrences."

Bilata's book covers a whole range of fields besides history. It is a book of Amharic literature and poetry, Ge'ez *qene* and *zema*, Government, Religion, Anthropology, Social Science, Military, Agriculture, Political Science, Journalism, and International Diplomacy during the reigns of three leaders from 1896 to 1922 E.C. The book, in fact, is a celebration of great Amharic literature. It is written with concise grammar, poetic prose. It reads very well. Ethiopian customs and way of life as well as expressions are narrated elegantly and informatively.

It is safe to state that the last part of Atse Menelik's reign, post-Adwa's reign, was relatively peaceful. The princes, *Rases* and other nobilities were at peace with him. The people have also accepted his leadership. This relative peaceful moment was cut short by serious illness and protracted

power struggle, which started in earnest among the members of the royal family. Itege Taytu's attempt to replace her husband as a leader was quashed quickly by Lij Iyasu and Shoan nobilities.

Atse Menelik has extensively expanded on modernization that began with Emperor Teodros and Atse Yohannes. These two great nineteenth-century leaders unified the country and secured the northern borders. Menelik expanded the country southward and has introduced secular schools, automobiles, railroad, postal service, ministerial cabinet, telegraph and numerous other firsts. His effective leadership is in part, due to the good advisors he surrounded himself with. Advisors, such as Fitawrari Habte Giorgis, Itege Taytu provided him with critical advice that further strengthened his rule.

Atse Menelik made a conscious decision to marry Itege Taytu, his fourth wife after learning about her skill, cleverness, courage and spiritual strength while he was in custody by Atse Teodros at Meqdela. As a teenager, Menelik had a chance to witness the many battles Atse Teodros fought and won.

Atse Menelik's southward expansion has come at the expense of the people of the south. Many lives have been lost and many autonomous and self-governing communities were disrupted and destroyed. *Bilata* did not include the consequences of Menelik's expansion in his book. I believe Adwa has expanded the scope and depth of national identity because it was a battle that was fought and won both by the conquered and the conqueror. We still need to atone for the past mistakes and seek national reconciliation.

Atse Menelik's reluctance to designate one of his three daughters as heir apparent exemplifies the deeply entrenched gender inequality present in the society. Illness forced him to choose his grand son, Lij Iyasu for the throne. The choice did not go well with the Shoan nobility, including Ras Teferi and the Church's leadership who conspired to remove Lij Iyasu from power at enormous human and property cost to the country.

Lij Iyasu's forceful removal from power triggered the Segele Battle in 1909 E.C. All together, directly and indirectly, thousands of people lost their lives at this and related battles. It took four years to capture and arrest Lij Iyasu. It took several battles to subdue the people of Wollo and their allied regions.

Bilata has witnessed the power struggle and, in fact, included some of the statements and letters issued or written by both sides in his book.

The book is unique because, perhaps, for the first time, it attempts to present a comprehensive and balanced assessment of the rule and life story of *Lij Iyasu*. One of the main reasons for the disapproval of *Lij Iyasu's* leadership, according to *Bilata* was the decision to centralize and control Government's revenue. He appointed a treasurer and ordered investigation regarding Government's revenue and property. Besides, *Lij Iyasu* learnt first hand from the people that they were overtaxed and burdened by the inconsiderate and limitless demands of the nobilities and governors on them.

Lij Iyasu introduced some fundamental reforms, including the abolition of *quragna* and *lebashai*. These were traditions where a victim and victimizer are bound together until a crime is resolved. If a murder were committed, then a relative of the victim would be chain bound to the killer until the court hears and decides the case. He also abolished the confiscation of inherited properties for bad loans.

Lij Iyasu's enemies quickly and systematically spread a rumor that he allegedly converted to Islam. They manufactured and distributed a photo of *Lij Iyasu* with a Moslem dress. They also distributed to all regional governors a statement accusing *Lij Iyasu* of abandoning Christianity and converting to a 'foreign' religion. The conspirators wanted to incite a religious war, labeling the young leader and his followers as enemies of Christianity.

Bilata presents all sides with regard to the allegation and then he adds his own assessment of the charge. For instance, *Bilata* writes about the activities of *Lij Iyasu* at the time of the accusation. *Iyasu* was attending churches and presiding over *qidasse*.

Bilata also includes the response of *Lij Iyasu* to the accusation made against him. *Lij Iyasu* declares, "Shoans have accused me of converting to Islam and then conducted a conspiracy to remove me from power. I have attempted to establish good relationships with Muslims with the intent of securing our national border and seeking a sea outlet, but I have not converted to Islam." In an effort to ascertain the validity of his statement, *Lij Iyasu* swore to the Cross-and the Bible in front of priests.

Bilata also expressed his own view on the matter. In his view, *Lij Iyasu* made some mistakes as a result of his young age. Lack of good advisors around him also contributed to his isolation. He has also offended the nobilities personally. *Bilata*, however, does not give us the impression that *Lij Iyasu* has actually converted to Islam.

Ras Teferi collaborated with the Shoan nobilities and Tewahedo religious leaders as well as *mehal sefariwoch* to remove *Lij Iyasu* from power. *Mehal sefariwoch* literally run the palace; they are in charge of security, and all other palace details. As a result, they are in a position to read the tempo of the palace and intervene politically at the opportune time. *Bilata* included the letter *Ras Teferi* wrote to the militia seeking their support against *Lij Iyasu*. *Ras Teferi's* letter attributes the removal of *Lij Iyasu* from the throne solely to conversion to Islam and marrying a Muslim woman. He also writes that the action is carried out to save the Ethiopian religion. He declares that self-interest was not the issue.

It is clear that the conspirators present Islam as foreign to the country. Their unequal treatment of religions would have triggered tragic religious wars. *Lij Iyasu* sought religious equality and as such he felt the need to work with Muslim brothers and sisters. He paid in his life for his vision. But it appears that the post-monarchy Ethiopia seeks to ensure religious equality. I also believe that it is a good thing for the Ethiopian Church to formally separate itself from the Government. The Church will have more opportunities to serve its followers and to also promote cultural and educational activities.

Bilata's book is exceptionally rich in content and style. It is indeed a gem to scholars of Ethiopian Studies. It is also an important historical document and narrative which should be read by all Ethiopians.

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