Title: Ras Mikael of Wollo and the Campaign of Adwa

Misganaw Tadesse¹

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 able 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 Mikael of 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 contribution of Ras Mikael during the battle of Adwa.

Keywords:

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

¹PhD Student, University of Western Cape, Department of History, Cape Town, South Africa: Email yesmisge@yahoo.com
Introduction

Ras 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. 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-Illu, Lasta, Dälanta, and Amhara Sayint.

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. 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.

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

1 Ras was a local title in imperial Ethiopia conferred to the ruling families, provincial governors and high officials, below the title of king
4 Yä Dessie Kätäma, MS, No.688, Institute of Ethiopia Studies, (undated), p.7
Ethiopian goods and services through the port of Massawa was also arranged. 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.

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.

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. 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.

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.

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
along with the emperor against this dangerous enemy. He led a large cavalry of some twenty five thousand warriors.\textsuperscript{12}

According to the account of Wylde, a British adventurer who witnessed the battle, the Dervishes camped at Mettema and built strong defences.\textsuperscript{13} 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.”\textsuperscript{14} 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.\textsuperscript{15}

And while, Menelik and Täklä-Haymanot plotted against the emperor, Mikaél stood by him to defend his country from foreign invasion.\textsuperscript{16} 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.\textsuperscript{17}

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

\begin{quote}
14 Mahtämä-Selassé Wälde-Mäsğäql, (1942E.C), *Zikrä Nāgār, Addis Ababa*, p.7; *Asseфа*, p.7; Gābrä-Kidan, p.9; Sources: Qäsis Şägayä Bishaw and Ato Aläleñe Gābrä-Amlak
15 Sources: Ato Käder Ali and Ato Hassän Aragaw
16 Mahtämä-Selassé, pp.18-27; *Asseфа*, pp.12-20
\end{quote}
... 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.  

In response to this national call to arms, Ras Mikaél put himself at the disposal of the emperor.  

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.  

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.  

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 Ṭaytu, wife to Menelik, remained in reserve. 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

---

18 Gäbrä-Selassé, p.225  
19 Fekadu, p.57  
21 Lewis, p.117; First Italo-Abyssinian War (1895-1896), www.ethiopiarmilitary.com/first-italo-abyssinian-war-1895-1896  
22 Ibid
with Ras Mängäsha and Ras Wällé. The forces of Arimondi crumbled and he was killed on
the battlefield.23
After successfully completing this offensive, Mikaël 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”.24 As Mikaël joined Ras
Alula, his soldiers chanted:

Who shall tell the Italians
That Mikaël came dressed up with fire25

As soon as the forces of Ras Mikaël arrived, conditions at the front changed. It is reported
that when Mikaël’s frightening Oromo cavalry forces advanced, the Italian soldiers began
retreating saying Reap! Reap! as they fled the cavalry.26 On this front, Ras Mikaël and Ras
Alula utterly overwhelmed the enemy forces and killed the commander, Major
Dabormida.27
Then, the full Abyssinian force began an attack on Albertone’s brigade. The cavalry of Ras
Mikaël 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.28
Fekadu’s assessment of the role of Ras Mikaël and his Wollo forces at the Battle of Adwa
was the following: “In this battle Ras Mikaël and his Wollo troops had fought to save the
empire from the invaders. They had invested blood for the integrity of the empire.”29
The battle of Adwa represented a turning point in Ethiopian history. Ras Mikaël of Wollo
can be counted as one of the fearsome leaders who helped protect Ethiopia from Italian
advancement. Through the ages, the people have expressed their admiration for all of the emperor’s chief commanders in the following way:

“. . . እን የጉነሥ የተከለሃይማኖት፣ እን የራስ መንገሻ ሊያክስ እን የራስ ማካኤል እንደምን የአፄ ማኒልክ አበሩላቸዉ! . .”

. . . How king Täklä-Haymanot, Ras Mängäsha Yohannes, Ras Mikaél shined for Menelik. . .

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”31 Hosea Jaffe also considered Adwa as a “watershed in the rise of African liberation movements and thinking.”32 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.33 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.34 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

30 Täklä-Šadik, p.268
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.
References

London, Merlin Press,


Berkley, G.F.H. (1902) The campaign of Adowa and the rise of Menilek, Westminster,

Charting the History of Dessie, Dessie city-The Official website of Wollo University,

www.wu.edu.et/dessie.php

Emishaw Workie, (2010) Mämher Akale-Wäld and Boru-Meda Däbrä Berhane Selassé Church, 1883-  
1874, MA Thesis Addis Ababa University, Department of History,

First Italo-Abyssinian War (1895-1896), www.ethiopiamilitary.com/first-italo-abyssinian-war-  
1895-1896

Gäbrä-Kidan Wäldä-Hawaryat, (1981), Be Wollo Kefleä Hagär Bahelna Sport Guday Minister  
Kerenchaf Mäsriyabet Bätarik Zerf yeteseru Serawäch. Historical Document Recorded by the Cultutre and Sport Branch Office of Wollo Region. Dessie Tourism Office,

Unpublished Document.

the scramble for Africa, 1st ed., (London, Bloomsbury,

Mahtämä-Selassé Wälde-Mäsqäl, (1942E.C) Zikrā Nāgār, Addis Ababa,

Pankhurst, Richard. (1964) “The Trade of Central Ethiopia in the Nineteenth and early Twentieth  


*Yā Dessie Kätäma*, MS, No.688, Institute of Ethiopia Studies, (undated)