

Commemorating a victory for Ethiopianism and Pan Africanism

By the Embassy of Ethiopia in Pretoria

March 2021 marked the 125th anniversary of the Battle of Adwa – the greatest defeat suffered by a European power in Africa in the 19th century (Hallett, 1974: 125). Understandably, though regrettably, this crushing defeat of a colonial force by an African army is not widely known or acknowledged outside the continent. The Ethiopian Embassy in South Africa commemorated the Battle of Adwa with a series of lectures. IFAA respectfully thanks the Ethiopian Embassy for permission to reprint one such presentation below.

Background note. In 1896 a huge Western army was humiliated in a decisive victory by African troops. The army of 19,000 Italian-led troops were defeated by an African force in what was the most shocking setback on the continent of a 19th century colonial power (Wrong, 2005:55). Italian invaders lost thousands of troops and were humiliated by “native” troops who inflicted a decisive victory against a European power during the scramble of Africa (Plaut, 2016).

Lords, serfs and slaves from all over the Empire marched to confront the Italian invaders who were recognised as the common enemy. The soldiers had to march for almost a thousand kilometres! Women joined the battle in direct combat, and organised food, water and care for the injured and wounded. The logistics and care work of war was shouldered by women.

For the Adwa victory to be decisively won, the diverse and divided people had to overcome the contradictions that confronted them to defend their own collective liberation and to affirm the self-worth, autonomy and self-reliance of black Africans across the world. This victory was won through the diplomatic skill of Emperor Menelik and Empress Taytu and laid an important foundation for the establishment



Artwork showing Emperor Menelik alongside Empress Taytu who marched to the frontline with her pistol, behind her is a woman also marching on foot.

of an indigenous modern state in Africa.

Empress Taytu in particular was distinguished in her own right as a fierce and decisive leader and key military strategist in the Adwa battle against the Italians. One of her brilliant interventions was to avoid direct military combat, at Mekele, by simply shutting off the Italians’ water supplies. Without a single shot fired, the thirsty Italians were forced out, quickly ending the siege.

Most importantly, Empress Taytu rejected a ploy by Italy to force Ethiopia to become a protectorate of Italy. When an Italian diplomat in Ethiopia warned that this might cause Italy to lose its “dignity”, the Empress replied: “We too must retain our dignity ... you want other countries to see Ethiopia as your protégé, but that would never be.”

INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the Berlin Conference in 1884/85 and at the height of the “scramble for Africa”, Ethiopia remained the only sovereign state in Africa. Italy, as a latecomer to the scramble, had to attempt its luck with Ethiopia, which triggered a major military clash between an Ethiopian army ➤

and the invading Italian forces on 2 March 1896.

The legendary battle was concluded with a resounding victory of the Ethiopian forces defending its sovereignty and effectively thwarting Italy's attempt to build its Empire in Africa. The victory was won with the heroic leadership of Emperor Menelik II and the strategic military thinking of Empress Taytu Betul which impeccably built a united and formidable alliance across ethnic, religious, cultural, language, gender and geographical divides.

The victory — the first crushing defeat of a European power by African forces — earned Ethiopians an outstanding reputation and was quickly recognised as a victory for all black people around the world. In fact, especially for Africans in the continent, one way of paying tribute to Ethiopia's contribution to Pan-Africanism and African independence has been adopting Ethiopia's tricolour national flag into their own flags and emblems.

Now, 125 years later, this emblematic victory still holds an important place in the hearts and minds of Africans and black people all over the world as an illustration not only of the wonders Africans have accomplished in the past, but also what they can do in their future.

One of the primary strategies of the Italian colonisers during the invasion was to exploit the rich diversity of the Ethiopian people, although that proved rather futile. Ethiopians have always believed that the victory of Adwa would have been unthinkable had we been a divided nation along religious, racial or political lines. International scholars too have noted that the exceptional unity Ethiopians demonstrated was the core driver of this pre-eminent African victory that reversed the history of colonialism in the continent. In his book *The Battle of Adwa: African Victory in the Age of Empire*, historian Raymond Jonas had this to say:

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‘We too must retain our dignity ... you want other countries to see Ethiopia as your protégé, but that would never be.’



It was a national epic, the founding event in the modern life of the nation. The stately northward march of Menelik and Taytu not only consolidated their rule but called upon the Ethiopian people — Tigrayans, Shoans, Oromo, Welayta, and others — to set aside their differences and, in recognising a common enemy, recognise a common nationhood. Nations, if they are to endure, are defined not by religion, ethnicity, or race but by the scale at which freedom can reliably be defended. Only on the scale of Ethiopia itself could resistance have succeeded.

It is within this context, therefore, that the Ethiopian community, under the auspices of the Ethiopian

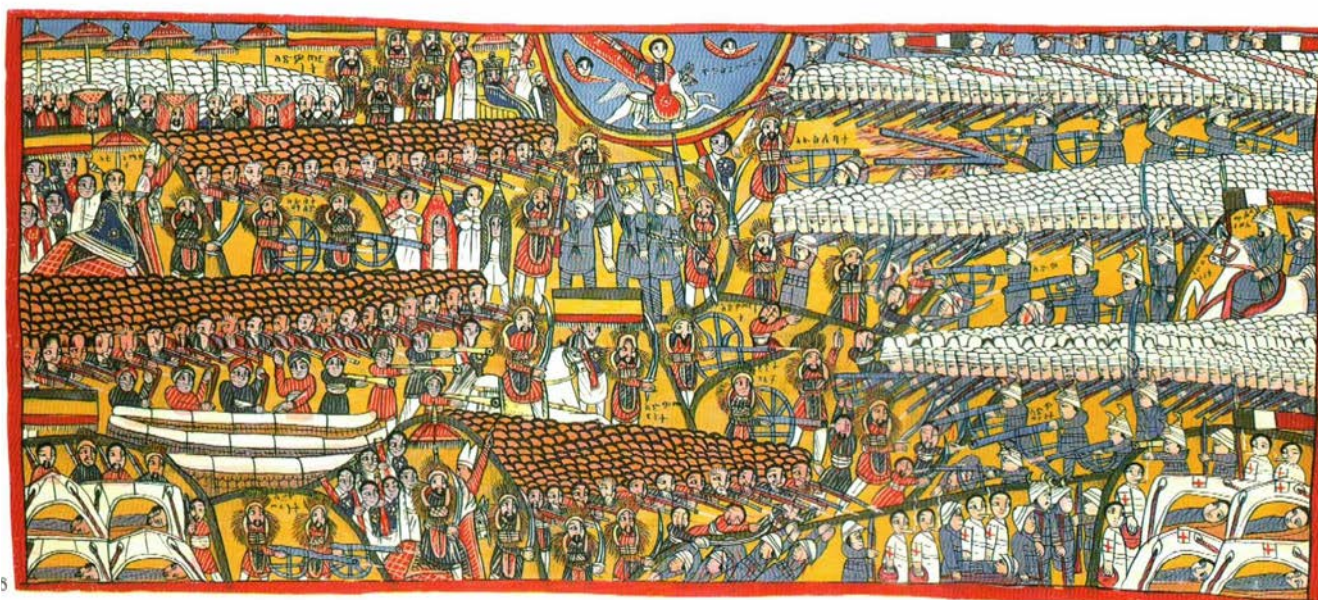
Embassy in Pretoria, celebrated the victory of Adwa to intensify and renew our commitment towards a more united Ethiopia and Africa. The 125th celebration of the Adwa victory under the banner, “Adwa: An Emblem of Unity in Diversity”, continued for the entire month of March. Against this backdrop, the Embassy organised a virtual dialogue under the theme: “The Victory of Adwa: Implications for Ethiopian Unity and Sovereignty and Pan-Africanism”.

THE VICTORY OF ADWA, ETHIOPIANISM AND PAN-AFRICANISM

The victory of Adwa has left a lasting impression not only on Africans in the continent but also on Afro-Cubans, Haitians, Afro-Brazilians, Jamaicans, the Rastafarian community and other Africans in the Diaspora. In 1897, Dr Benito Sylvain – a Haitian journalist and diplomat – visited Ethiopia to congratulate Emperor Menelik II on his victory. Dr Sylvain later became one of the founders and organisers of the first Pan-African congress in London in 1900. The ultimate pride that the black community took from the Adwa victory is manifest in Marcus Garvey's “Back to Africa” movement and the subsequent development of Pan-Africanism as an idea and a movement.

In the decades that followed, the black community drew lessons and inspiration from this historic victory in their struggle against colonialism, racism and apartheid. They armed themselves with self-belief and self-reliance to engage in resistance movements. It is precisely for this reason that Adwa is considered a turning point in modern African history.

Reiterating the significance of the struggle of the people of South Africa, the late President of South Africa and the legendary anti-apartheid revolutionary, Nelson Mandela, had this



to say in his 1992 address to the Free Ethiopian church of Southern Africa:

Fundamental tenets of the Ethiopian Movement were self-worth, self-reliance and freedom. These tenets drew the advocates of Ethiopianism, like a magnet, to the growing political movement. That political movement was to culminate in the formation of the ANC in 1912. It is in this sense that we in the ANC trace the seeds of the formation of our organisation to the Ethiopian Movement of the 1890s.

Equally important is the speech delivered by the late Ghanaian President, Dr Kwame Nkrumah, at a state dinner in honour of Emperor Haile Selassie in Accra on 1st December 1960, where he said:

Ethiopia, because of her existence as an ancient and free state in Africa and the oldest continuously independent country in our

continent, has always stood as a symbol of our political aspirations as a people. Ethiopia, in our minds, has stood for African freedom, African independence, African dignity and African self-respect. Even when we were not free, the struggle of Ethiopia to maintain her independence and integrity was regarded by us as our struggle. We always felt that so long as Ethiopia remained free, there was hope that we too would be free.

Besides the emotional and historical significance of the victory of Adwa to the emancipation of black people around the world, Ethiopia has also strategically leveraged its political independence and territorial sovereignty to extend its support to Africans in their bitter struggles for independence. In the aftermath of the liberation of quite several African countries, Ethiopia – through the able leadership of Emperor Haile Selassie – once again played a crucial role in bridging the

ideological gap between the newly independent countries in the course of forging a continental organisation. The Organisation of African Unity (OAU) was established in 25 May 1963 and Addis Ababa provided a permanent home for this Pan African organisation of the people of Africa.

Ethiopia's long history of civilization, uninterrupted statehood, and ancient history of international diplomacy, along with its contributions to the emancipation of the people of Africa, have placed the country in a pivotal position to project Pan-Africanist leadership for the decades to come.

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