

Title: Bad men of the Borders: Shum and Shifta in North Ethiopia in the 19th century
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PART 1

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Outlawry was an avenue to office frequently pursued by neglected members of the office holding families.

Outlaws who took advantage in their careers of the borders between Christian cultivators in the highlands and Muslim pastoralists towards the Sudan and lowlands near the Red Sea are particularly well documented.

p41 Labour service by the women ground the grain which permitted an office holder to feed daily the armed following which gave him security and eminence. Also official and his escorts had to be given hospitality when on the march.

The poverty and political impotence of the later Solomonic ruling from Gondar and domination of the empire by regional warlords from 1769 to 1855 gave rebels great scope for attacking rivals who obtained appointment from the emperor's nominal subordinates.

Shifta from the gentry could rise a greater following as they were politically dangerous and provoked large expeditions against themselves. So, the countryside suffered more from rebellion than of activities of mere robbers.

Araya Dimtsu of Enderta, maternal uncle of Yohannes IV was probably the most distinguished senior family member in the court, and died standing his ground when the emperor's baggage train and corpse were overtaken by the Mahdist garrison of Metemma in 1889. This heroic loyalty to the dead master and Araya's statesmanship are what's usually remembered as an ideal nobleman. The means by which he had risen have been obscured.

Like many of his generation, Araya b. 1810-11, fought his way to prominence as a youthful rebel rather than having office and revenues bestowed upon him and revolted against Wibe of Semien.

In the 1840s whenever Wibe's troubles in the Amhara lands of central Ethiopia, it kept him from personally campaigning in the north. Araya's horse Meqtcha, hence him being called Abba Meqtcha "Master of the punishers"

Another Amhara warlord, the well-born ex-bandit chief, Ras Kassa Hailu of Quara defeated Wibe in 1855.

Kasa Mircha (Yohannes IV) acquired a personal following of expert musketeer, had the nickname Abba Bezbiz (master of the sackers). and he had an Irob wife while an outlaw among the christianised Afar of the Agame escarpment.

p45 In the Mereb Mellash(to the highlanders), their trouble were reported from mid century by missionaries and other foreigners. Their evidence suggests that the imposition of a higher

lordship added to the circumstances hindering peaceful pursuits.

Civil war bore heavily upon the common people. Corps were destroyed by loyalists and by adherents of the rebel tigrean gentry in 1858-60 as Tewdros struggled against Negussie, a nephew of Wibe in eastern Tigray and Mereb Mellash. The troops of minor lords hid in the mountains siding with neither when a powerful commander of Tewdros or Negussie was nearby. Afterwards, these timid soldiers swooped down upon the lands of both sides.

p 46. Usually rich areas of the Anseba valley and eastern Mereb Mellash and Tigray suffered annual descent of locusts every August in the 1860s. Weakened already by hunger, the human population had little resistance to the virulent outbreaks of cholera from October 1865 to mid January 1866

Not to starve, survivors of the epidemic dispersed. Some from today Eritrea descended to Massawa to sow during the lowland rainy seasons in December-January, and graze their animals. Natural disasters did not halt raiding between Muslim herdsman and Christian villagers along the northern borderlands or between the highland Christian villagers.

Young men continued to steal cattle to prove themselves, to avenge their families' earlier losses or to enrich their herds at the expense of their neighbours.

Reprisal was an entrenched custom which clerical mediation did not always temper. Several times the original number of head of stock might be taken when the wronged raided in return.

In the beginning of the dry season of 1859-60, peasants in the Mereb Mellash and eastern Tigray with their any large stock left were (s)welling their animals in order to buy shields and spears. (Biancheri to Sturchy, Keren 18 November 1859. Annales 1860, 19).

Troops of Wag Shum Gobeze and their local partisans pillaged the most fertile parts of Akele Guzai in the dry seasons of 1865-66. After the rains, just as harvest was drawing near, Gobeze himself ravaged Shemenzana between Agame and Akele Guzai. Villagers loyal to Tewdros' tigrean partisans fled before the invader. When the notable whom Gobeze had appointed over Akele Guzai deserted him, Gobeze fought a major battle at Adi Queyeh against his faithless ally in mid November 1866. the farming population fled with whatever they could carry. (Bel to Etienne 6 January 1867, Annales 1867).

Not all who left their homes for a long time could grow crops in the lowlands. Many seem to have driven to rougher expedients. By 1865-66, traders dared not travel to Gondar from Massawa, by way of highland Akele Guzai.

Those of the farming population there who had any remaining strength after the famine and despoliation of armies had given up all occupation save rapine. An Ethiopian catholic from the central provinces gloomily wrote from his refuge at a mission station along the Eritrean escarpment. (Fusella, Debtera Aseghagn)

p47 Conditions worsened as Tewdros' end and Kasai's superiority replaced the emperor's on both sides of the Mereb. In a parochial tour of eastern Akele Guzai and Agame towards the ends of rains of 1867, the head of the catholic mission, Louis Bel saw whole families with but a single cowhide to furnish their huts. In many places, only the sick and dying stayed on.

Everywhere the population appeared to him to be walking corpses. People ate locusts in spite of their horror of apostasy and by what they considered unclean, Muslim habit. These

infestations of these pests coincided with recurring drought in these years and with epidemic disease.

Whole herds had disappeared by later 1867 by bandits and of infection. Robbers and raiding soldiers tortured the farmer, and if they caught him near his home, to discover where he buried grain. Hives provided the means for bartering for grain in an emergency. They had been smashed by intruders when no honey was left. Agriculture became unimproved, Bel argued, as farmers had to master the use of spears and shields. Carpenters and skilled were found only near big centres as Adoa. The soldiery "Here the army's pay chest is the peasant's hut, his butter, his honey, his dourra, sheep cows. The brave warrior has but to pillage and draw his pay." (Mgr Louis Bel, Hebo, September 1867, Archives of the vicar apostolic, Asmera)

The story of eating locusts seems to derive from Keren. Picard to Genin, Massawa September 1867, Annales 1868, 218.

Commanders did not restrain the avarice of their men, they shared in the best of what was being taken, Bel states.

p 48 Victims " we are about to be devoured by wolves...we have become like wild beasts", catholic Irob lamented in petitioning to Bel's successor a week before Napier reached Mekdela. They had been driven from their widely scattered settlement of east Agame by pillagers. Meanwhile, close by them, Kasa Mircha aided the protestant British to build a road for their army.

The Bilen (Bogos) and their neighbours in Anseba were better off than the people near Kassa's headquarters near Adoa. Armed men owing alliance to no one continued to fill the land in April 1868. Kassa's soldiers had visited the Anseba only once since the rains ended in September 1867. In the parts of Mereb Mellash nearer to Adoa, soldiers from Tigrai made frequent demands. (Delmont to Etienne, Massawa 26 April 1868, Annales 1868, 490-1)

p. 48 Although in places half the seed sown had been eaten by locusts, after the rains of 1868, each family in the Mereb Mellash was being assessed one silver dollar for their new Tigrean overlord. Kasa Mircha needed cash to send to Egypt for replacement of the bishop who died in Megdela and to be crowned Yohannes IV, for tens of thousands of Maria Teresa. This extraordinary tax came on top of the standard levy in kind on the grain harvest. Officials acting locally on behalf of Kasa kept most for use as rations for their men and households.

Tribute on land grain is misleadingly called Asrat (Amhric 10th). Officials and their armed escorts took whatever they could. Grain levied this way was worth 5-6 times in cash Kasa collected in the Mereb Mellash that year. He also received butter and honey along the tribute of grain.

p. 48 A village head who refused to assist an assessor at the villagers' threshing floors or while grain stood in the fields was chained until the peasants met the assessment. Meanwhile, official and escorts had to be fed and housed. The soldiers chose the food and men, women and children risked having their cloths sold off their backs in the markets if those quartered upon them found no other way of getting hold of the fixings of meals they fancied.

Returning through Akele Guzai from Adoa in 1868, Delmonte noted whole households reduced to beggary. Kasa Mircha left to Adoa too.

p.49 at that moment he was moving through Serae in the bend of the Mereb exacting taxes

and hospitality. Daily, his troops were supplied with heaps of unleavened bread with meat, butter and honey beyond of what was being assessed as tribute, and other customary levies. Like rebels and bandits, loyal bands of soldiers required gifts of cash and even guns. It was said that they carried off young girls. (Delmonte 3-29 November 1868, Annales 1868)

Farmers were resourceful in hiding grain and stock unless it was harvest time or were surprised. Missionaries reported cases of villagers standing to fight with staves against small parties of soldiers with firearms sent by their governor or from Massawa. In similar encounters, the Irob themselves had firearms took care not to provoke an expedition against them by shedding of blood. They disarmed their persecutors. (De Jacobis "Abyssinie" Halay 1856, recalling how the Catholics of Agame had driven off Kasa Sebagadis in 1855, Annales 1858, 86. Delmonte to Etienne, Massawa 16 January 1866, that Catholics of Akrur had disarmed 4 Egyptian irregulars sent by the governor of Massawa to retrieve cattle taken by the youths of Akrur from the Assawerta, Annales 1866, 585).

The communes of eastern Akele Guzai mobilised under their semi-elected heads (Kentiba) in the last year of Tewdros' reign. Governors appointed by loyalists in the north, or by partisans there of Wag Shum Gobeze and then Kasa Mircha each demanded gifts of installation – cash and livestock and duplicate taxes. For a time in mid 1867, the villagers of Hebo on the verge of the escarpment drove out the loyalist governor of Akele Guzai and his escort. The people fell on squabbling among themselves, however. The soldiers took this opportunity to come down from their mountain retreat and the Kentiba of Hebo himself became a fugitive. (Fusella "La lettere Debtera Asseghegn p 89-90, Mgr Louis Bel, unpublished diary, Hebo, July 1867 AVA 4:6 fol 88).

Their neighbours at Segeneiti – a parish of 1,200 in 1867 – awoke that July to find 6-7,000 loyalist troops camped nearby. They had little choice in delivering up a 100 herd of cattle and other supplies. (Mgr Bel 15,18,19 July 1867).

p 50 Unaccustomed or untimely demands were met with resistance. In march 1869, Kasa required early payment of the tribute normally due at harvest time after the rains. This led to skirmishes between his soldiers and the villagers in eastern Akele Guzai. (G. Douin, *Historie du regne du Khedive Ismael III*, p 305-6, 1938 Cairo).

Missionaries report also of Christian highland farmers fighting the northern most Muslim Afar (Assawerta) pastoralists in the country running down to the sea. (Barthez to "N", Segeneiti 6 august 1871, Annales 1872, p 110).

Seasonally moving to the uplands and even to the plateau with their herds, the Assawerta contested grazing land with the herders from the sedentary commoners. The 1,400 people of Hebo and its associate hamlets who drove off in 1867 the governor collecting Tedros' taxes suffered such frequent imposts by Kasa Mircha's soldiers, thereafter, and by his commanders resisting his claims for lordship, that a number of them withdrew with their herds into the lowlands. All 250 inhabitants of Hebo itself had come wholly to rely upon a nomadic way of life by the end of the dry season of 1868. (Delmonte to Etienne, Massawa 26 April 1868, Annales 1868 p 490-1), on the size of this parish which included Akrur, Annales 1867 p549, 554.

Beginning of dry season following Tewdros' death, 13 April 1868, many Tigrean speakers still had no livelihood but theft. Flying ants and locusts fastened upon the crops, sprouting as

rain end in 1868. Where anything could be bought, prices rose so high that it was rumoured people murdered to eat.

The major cause – anarchy – the catholic mission believed. In the middle of the years, gentry on both sides of the Mereb who refused to subordinate themselves to anyone had marched through cultivated lands. Dependent upon pillage alone to supply their men, they were "worse than birds of prey" (Delmonte to Ethienne 26 April 1868).

In the maintainances of his lordship was inevitably onerous in the extra burdens it imposed in constant rebellion against him by Shifta from gentry necessitated Kasa's keeping large armies at hand. Akele Guzai was much devastated before the rains of 1868 had begun by an ex-bandit Kasa Gulja- son of an official from near Adoa. Known as Abba Kaisi – he named his horse "the deceiver" after the serpent who beguiled Eve and noted for his wit and for his refusal to serve any master – assumed the title of Dejzmach during a brilliant career of brigandage before Kasa mircha tried to make use of him. (Delmonte to Etienne, Massawa 15 December 1868, Annales 1869, p 251, Douin 296, 306-7)

p 51 Hailu of Tsezegga had submitted to Kasa Mircha in October 1867 in order to preserve the position and revenues as governor of Hamassien and Serae – resorted by Tewdros to him in 1855. While the Napier expedition still was in Ethiopia, Kasa Gulja seduced Haylu from his new alliance – which led to Haylu's being arrested before the end of the rains.

In September 1868, Kasa Mircha appointed Haylu's arch rival Welde Mikel of Hazzega (Kolmodin "with battle Tesfa Hanes") and during the rains Mircha pardoned Gulja appointing him over Akele Guzai but fearing supposedly the favor shown the recently released Araya Dimtsu, he refused to attend the annual court at rain end in September to pay tribute and renew his alliance.

On 9 October 1868 Gulja declared his revolt openly, the reason that Delmonte did not find Mircha waiting for him in Adwa. A third of the soldiers under Gulja in Akele Guzai left his service rather than risk rebellion, and Mircha returned to Adoa, as he could not find Gulja. p51 "All lions and brigands are being controlled" Mircha wrote in November 1869, on the eve of the second harvest since Tewdros' death. (Kasa Mircha to Munzinger 17 November 1869, Paris)

This was hardly the case. Great numbers of soldiers were without commanders and thus without rations, wandered over to the Trans-Mereb in search of a master to feed them. Kaisi had been robbing caravans and pillaging farm lands – as he could not tax as a governor to support the remaining followers. In 1869, a year after being appointed, Welde Mikael of Hazega was arrested because of his unconcealed discontent at not being given more of the lands beyond the Mereb. Exasperated with the Hamassien gentry, Mircha placed an outsider – Gebru, over them.

p52 during this governor's frequent absence, Welde Mikael's partisans put themselves under his two sons and continued to war against the Tsezega clan. Dispossessed of their village, they took refuge with others of Haylu's party, including the governor's deputy, in Serae, west of the upper Mereb. Kaisi also returned up there and they welcomed him as their general. Together they went down to defeat Hazega. (Kolmodin p 230).

At end of March 1871, Dej Gebru visited his province with 10,000 men, half as many female

camp followers and hundreds of babies in arms. His marches with his hungry host must have cost the peasant dearly. Yet, Gebru did not succeed in his plan of cornering Kaisi. Nor was civil war between the Hazega and Tsezega checked for long. (Picard to Genin, Massawa 13 April 1871, Annales 1872 p 103)

The sons of Welde Mikael fled before Gebru to the camp of Wag Shum Gobeze – now Emperor Tekle Giorgis, but he had no bishop to crown him. Having been rebuffed in his overtures to renew Mircha's dependence by negotiations, he was preparing to invade Tigray from the central provinces. To confront his menace, Kasa recalled Gebru. Before the rains of 1871, therefore, Golja established himself unmolested on the Belesa where south west Akele Guzai borders on the Agame. There, in broken country astride the caravan routes leading to and Adwa and Tigray, he waited until the many supporters of the uncrowned emperor and their retainers poured over the Tekeze in June 1871. For a second time, meanwhile, the Hazega drove their rivals from Tsezega and occupied the place. Like them, Kasa Golja must have expected Mircha to be overwhelmed by Golja's large force. While battle raged in the west of Adwa, along the Asen (?) on 11 July 1871, Golja advanced with 3,000 to the middle of Mereb north of the town. When Mircha triumphed, Golja fell back through Serae to Hamasien.

In his retreat, Golja abducted the daughter of the detained Dej Haylu. Having freed Tsezega from Hazega interlopers, he took up residence with the unwilling wife as the champion of her clan. At harvest time after the rains of 1871, he levied taxes as if he were the governor of Hamasien. Before the coronation of Mircha in Axum in January 1872, Dej Gebru returned to restore the prince's authority and gather supplies. Prudently, Golja retreated to Anseba valley, leaving Gebru to punish and levy tax in Serae and Hamasien as Araya the elder was doing in Akele Guzai.

The Bilen of the Anseba had paid tribute on that year's grain harvest twice already. Abba Kaisi demanded a third payment, and then another. When he tried to take for the fourth time, the people fled taking their herds with them. (Lagardelle to Paris Lazarists, but from Keren, between the burning of Segeneiti in September 1871, and the defeat of Abba Kaisi, Annales 1872, p118).

p53 Near the monastery of Debre Sina on 9 December 1871, Gebru caught up with the rebel. Hamasien tradition remembered clearly into early 20th century the severity of Kasa's defeat, but that he had not been captured. (Kolmodin p253, Douin p335)

Kasa Golja's further extortations as a fugitive returned Hamassen against him. He remained at large for two years after the Gebru battle with the aid of the Egyptians.

In June July 1872, they marched up from Massawa island (occupied 1866) and built forts at Keren (Senhit), west of Anseba. Until Egypt's African empire collapse a decade later, the enemies of Yohannes IV in the Mereb Mellash never wanted for help. Hearing perhaps that these sponsors were offering to surrender him if Yohannes would abandon Ethiopia's rights in the Bogos country surrounding the Keren forts, Kasa Golja gave himself up to the emperor's deputy before the rains of 1873. Yohannes had been campaigning the central provinces south of Tekeze since the beginning of 1873. Sent to his camp, Golja was blinded as an incorrigible.

"This Kasa, the outlaw, had improvised many parts of the land of Hamasien and took the wealth of the poor by force and killing the cattle of the land, he fed the meat day after day all

the outlaws who followed him", thus Yohannes' official chronicler comments upon the trial of Abba Kaisi. (Bairu, Chronicle p 119).

p.54 Catholic mission was re established in Ethiopia before mid 19th century by the Lazarists who succeeded in founding stations, despite the princely opposition in eastern Akele Guzai and Irob, east of Adigrat in Agame. These swelled of converts from the Ethiopian orthodox during the famine years of 1860s.

Whole villagers transferred their alliance. Destitute from famine, pillage and natural disaster, converts expected material aid. First, the catholic bishop had promised Lazarist order would pay for the upkeep of the mission relieving the parishes of ecclesiastical tithe and contributions for priests' houses., church buildings and other costs. (Bel to Genin, Hebo, 11 September 1867, Annales 1868 p 187) that converts looked to the French consul in their disputes with the lowland Muslims claimed by Massawa as Egyptian subjects.

p. 55 In the beginning of 1870, Mircha published an edict in the bishop's name, commanding Catholics to recant and the dissidents and the Ethiopian clergy to be chained. Property of those who refused were confiscated. Prodded by the patriarch in Cairo, Kasa renewed the edict in late April and authorized Araya the Elder, the governor of Akele Guzai to seize property of resisters and expel those foreign teachers.

Halay, an important crossroads of the caravan trade numbering over 1,000 inhabitants and hamlets had converted to Catholicism and lapsed several times. Fewer than one fourth were counted devout Catholics in the late 1880s. The missionaries despaired of such commercial centres taking religion seriously. Confronted with the governor's army, and given the prospect of having their taxes remitted for a year, villagers at Halay expelled convert priests.

Araya the Elder shielded the common people in more steadfast places among the escarpment by ordering his soldiers to arrest only the notables. He forewarned the missionary stations of his arrival, so they, the missionary and their determined followers might take flight. Lieutenants advantaging for the unrestrictive violence and also Araya's near kin were restrained by the governor.

In Agame no one moderated the carrying of the edicts, before rains of 1870. Officials "became like wolf after sheep" in harrying Irob Catholics.

This troubled Kasa with France and became some consequence after the Egyptians occupied Keren in 1872, and he cast about for diplomatic support against them.

Four of the leading Catholics of Akele Guzai stood as guarantors for their communities and let themselves be taken before Araya in early June 1870. One of them, Kentiba Redda of the supposedly worldly Halay, denied that Catholics were rebels. They paid their taxes and recognized Kasa Mircha as their lord, he said acting as spokesman for the four. But Kasa was lord of their bodies, not of their souls. His companions repeated this speech.

All four were taken before Kasa and the bishop at Adwa in chains. Again, they declared God lord of their souls, and Kasa's subjects only in bodies. Araya smoothed over their bold defiance by testifying to their loyalty.

p. 56 While Redda and his companions were being interrogated, the French consul's assistant arrived with a reminder of Louis Napoleon's warning - no friendship with the Ethiopian

princes who impeded the catholic mission.

In an unaccustomed show of temper, Kasa shouted at the prisoners that he knew full well about France's armies. His rule did not depend on French powder and cannon, he stormed but upon power of St Mary's of Zion, the cathedral church of Axum, which he had adopted while an outlaw as his patron. Araya calmed this outburst by advising his nephew not to disoblige the emperor of the French. The four prisoners returned with him to Akele Guzai. For some months, the Catholics lived in false peace. (Picard to Etienne Keren 8 July 1870, Annales 119-20. Duflos to Chinchon, Hebo 12 august 1870, Annales 1872, 88-91)

From their victory over the Wag Shum in July 1871, Kasa sent his army swarming over the Mereb Mellash. Along with Abba Kaisi's sympathisers, Catholics were singled out for chastisement in the months proceeding the coronation. From 15 august, after a series of false alarms, the Catholics at Halay, then those of neighbouring Segeneiti and other neighbours were in their turn surprised. Araya's cavalry arrived in such suddenness in each places that these Catholics had barely time to take their herds to the lowlands.

In December 1871, three weeks after Kaisi's defeat, horsemen from Segeneiti fell upon the Hebo. The two or three hundred farmers who had settled there since 1868 were chased by some of the mounted soldiers. They reached rocky ground, however, and were armed and dissuaded the soldiers from further pursuit. The check was uncommon. Many notables were imprisoned. Farmers who had ventured to reappear near their fields at harvest were stripped naked by waiting soldiers. Churches, schools and missionaries' residences were burnt. "Not a goat, not a grain of barley, not an earthen pot" was left to those who refused to improvish themselves, like the very numerous Catholics at Segeneiti, to ransom homes and crops. (January Annales 1872 p397-8, 109-110, 112-3, 119).

p. 57 while the refugees ate up their stores in desert hideouts in the midst of wild animals, surrounded by Afar raiders – to steal their herds, Araya's soldiers harvested their fields after the crops ripened and carried them off!

Understandably, the people seemed to the missionaries to be dominated by fear. Their first thought was to distance themselves from the governor's soldiers. (Annales 1872, 397-8, 400-1)

Catholics with other farmers of the Mereb Mellash got a respite from supporting the Tigreans when Kasa recalled his commanders to Adwa for the coronation.

People who recanted in the persecutions of 1870-1 returned only slowly to Catholicism. (Touvier to Bore Keren 15 June 1877, Annales 1877, p528). but the habits of violence which had become necessary since the later years of Tewdros' reign did not die out simply because a new emperor had been crowned. The men of Akrur, a village of some 800, armed themselves and marched to attack Hebo, fewer than 300 persons. (Annales 1874,1867, p554. Crouzet at Hebo ca 1870-74).

Cattle theft may have altered the fortunes of a hamlet or village. How much necessity as well as daring moved neighbours to prey upon each other in this way needs investigating.

The amount of damage done by sporadic and communal raiding was dwarfed by what the emperor wrought when he returned to Tigray in 1875. (From Azebo and Raya Oromo?) immediately. Yohannes sent his lieutenants to feed on the Mereb Mellash and other districts

of the north.

Before the end of may, Hamassen had been so badly pillaged that the inhabitants looked to the Egyptians as deliverers even before they invaded following the rains. (Touvier to bore Keren 1 June 1875, Annales 1875 p 596).

Yohannes' struggle with the menace was much complicated by the collaboration of his own subjects led by rebel members of the gentry and provincial nobility.

Rebel of the 1870s was Welde Mikel Selomon of Hazega "there is nothing to recommend him, an intriguer of the lowest description, cruel, unfaithful, untrue to his country and religion, dirty in his habits, and an Abyssinian monster in every sense of the word" – judgement of a British admirer of Yohannes who knew of Welde Mikel only from hearsay having visited north Ethiopia for the first time, four years after Welde Mikel's second and definitive arrest. Wylde 83-7, "in the Sudan with an account of Sir W. Hewett to king John of Abyssinia" 2 volumes, 1888, I p 335).

p58 That Welde Mikael was a rank opportunist is clear from Hamassen traditions collected by one of the Italian colonial officers at the beginning of 1890s. (Perini, Da qua dal Mareb) by those more systematically gathered in 1910 and in contemporary report. (Erlich). Yet, Welde Mikael never lacked followers, and more than once received pardon and died in his bed.

In his youth, Welde Mikael treated with apparent ingratitude the patronage offered by Hailu of Tsezega. These early incidents are revealing of relations between a rival for appointment and his expectant following.

In 1855 Tewdros made Hailu his governor in the Mereb Mellash after defeating Wibe who had kept the head of the Tsezega clan in prison for 16 years (having promoted him Dejazmach in a first experiment at governing the Trans Mereb)

The widow of Selomon of Hazega, Elleni, took the fields during the years of Hailu's incarceration to assert her sons' rights over Hamasien against Haylu's immediate kin. Wibe had agreed to sponsor the careers of Welde Mikael and his brothers after their intrepid mother had courted his principal rival below the Mereb, Araya the Elder. Despite the enmity of their partisans and over objections of his lieutenants, on his release by Tewdros, Haylu gave his young rival his protection.

Welde Mikael sided nevertheless with Wibe's nephew who in rebelling against Tewdros took Haylu hostage in 1859 and held him until the emperor arrived in dec-jan 1860-1 to quell rebellion in Tigray and Mereb Melash and to execute the rebel leaders. Haylu reinstated Welde Mikael in some of the Hazega feifs after being restored over Hamasien and Serae.

Four years later, Welde Mikael declared himself and fled to the lowlands between Hamasien and the sea before the rains. At the end of rainy season of 1865, he raised a large army among his wife's kinsmen in Akele Guzai and among numerous malcontents from Serae and Hamasien, burnt Tsezega in Haylu's absence and massacred prisoners from the rival clan before retiring down the Anseba. Haylu inflicted such slaughter upon Welde Mikael's partisans that he fled to Tigray first to serve Wag Shum Gobeze and then Kasa Mircha.
p. 59 In 1910 it was said that Welde Mikael 's followers in Hazega forced him to challenge Haylu by grumbling that his indulgent patron had not been generous enough. In 1865 they had

wanted Welde Mikael to add to the fiefs granted him from which they drew provisions. (Kolmodin p174-5, 188,213).

Although the relationship of leader to followers is little discussed in the sources, it accounts probably for as much as a commander's ambitions.

Welde Mikael proved unreliable as an alternative to Haylu in his first appointment over Hamasien 1868-9. In his discontent, he tried to make friends with the catholic missionaries, the French consul and possibly the Egyptians. (Picard to Etienne 3 September 1869, Annales 1870, p 361).

Nevertheless Yohannes made him a Dejazmach and promised him reappointment when scouring Tigray for troops as the Egyptians advanced across Hamasien to Serae after the rains of 1875, and Welde Mikael excelled in the fighting in which the invaders were routed in November. Once back in Hamasien, he longed for the whole of Mereb Melash. He was foremost amongst the notables from Hamasien, Akele Guzai and Agame who went to bargain for honours from the much larger expeditionary force the Khedive sent to Akele Guzai early next year to avenge the Battle of Gundet.

The dissident gentry scattered after Yohannes defeated the second Egyptian battle in Gura in March 1876. Welde Mikael styled himself as Ras, highest of Ethiopian rank, on basis of Turkish title he secured on the eve of his allies defeat and he depended upon them thereafter.

On 17 July 1876 he killed Haylu of Tsezega, whom Yohannes had released on retiring from the Mereb Mellash to win loyalty of Hamasien. Arms and cash were supplied from Massawa. The victors took such murderous revenge on supporters of the house of Tsezega that rivalries in the whole of Mereb Melash were much embittered long afterwards. (Kolmodin paras 243-251, Rubenson, Survival of Ethiopian Independence p 322,327,333. Gustav Aren, Evangelical pioneers in Ethiopia p 198-201)

Once more Yohannes sent an army from below Mereb to Trans Mereb under an outsider, Alula of Tembien. When Yohannes visited Hamasien briefly in October 1876, he promoted Alula (b. 1847) from Balambaras to Ras.

p60 Welde Mikael had not been brought to look before Alula went south with Yohannes and his armies to subdue Menilik of Shoa in march-April 1877. Like Kasa Keisi, Welde Mikael was protected by the Egyptian outposts while on the run.

When Alula was away from Mereb Mellash, the Egyptians built up Welde Mikael's treasury and his stock of arms when Charles Gordon visited the frontier as newly appointed governor general of Egyptian Sudan in October 1877, he intended briefing Yohannes. The Massawa protege would not promise raiding Ethiopian territory until he was offered a lavish stipend.

Gordon estimated the camp he saw in near Keren to have 7,000 soldiers and 3,000 of them had Remington rifles. In the Anseba valley Welde Mikael was stronger than the governor of Egypt. (Erlich, Ethiopia and Eritrea p13, Rubenson p 340). The burden of supporting him was not Egypt's alone. The emperor's subjects also paid. They could ill afford it at Gordon's visit.

In September 1877, beginning of dry season, the whole of the north east down to Tekezie and Mekdela was again gupped by famine. Conditions worsened over the next 12 months

until the appearance of epidemic disease. It was poor rain that year. Grain planted after Alula's departure from Mereb Mellash was stunted. Cattle and livestock could not be watered.

The period between a rainy season and the harvest when the grain from the previous year had been exhausted was always the hunger time. Rich farmers survived this period in 1877 only by slaughtering their animals. The less prosperous starved. If they could, cultivators and pastoralists migrated towards the less popular borderlands in a desperate search for grazing and water holes for the left stock and themselves. From Hamasien people moved by the thousands down the Anseba rapidly eating up its reserve.

As during the cycle of drought, famine and disease a decade earlier, the misery of the later 1870s was partly man made. The grain crops of 1875 had p. 61 been ripened when Yohannes and the Egyptians converged in Gundet. The two armies left farmers little to tide them until the next grain harvest. Locusts ate the plantation in the rains of 1876.

The Bogos country, Hamasien and Akele Guzai and eastern Agame were without any grain. Many had only goats to keep them alive or lived on roots. Herding was of particular importance near the escarpment into the highlands. Stocks could be driven down the lower slopes to make use of the lowlands's different rainfall.

Since 1873, however, an outbreak of animal disease had infected herds. In some places, 9/10th of the animals died in five years. The campaigns of 1875-6 took from these weakened herds. Natural disasters and social factors, the north Ethiopian people went hungry in mid 1870s. Inhabitants of eastern Agame and Akele Guzai had little resistance as result of the infection of fever in 1878. There were daily deaths. (Touvier to Bore, Keren 15 June 1877, *Annales* 1877 p 531, 1878 p 132-3, 301-3).

Yohannes wars with the gentry compounded the vagueries of nature and added to the costs of war which foreign invaders imposed. Lots of livestock were looted by rebels and those sent to support them. In a raid of Welde Mikael 's camp on the Aylet midway down to Massawa in February 1877, a leutenant of Alula deprived the rebels of 4,000 cattle and as many sheep.

Reportedly, these thousands of animals were remanent of what had been stolen over the proceeding months by Welde Mikael's band of followers. Like the missionaries letters, the Gordon papers preserve rare testimony from the victims of the Ethiopians warring gentry.

The notables of Tsezega had returned to their village during Yohannes' visit to Hamasien in Oct 1876. (Kolmodin para 242)

Put in danger anew by Alula's departure before the rains of 1877, some from the Tsezega clan appealed to Gordon for Egyptian protection until the Emperor should return north to shield them. They had lost 2,000 cattle, they said and in this petition and feared for the rest, the inheritable and usually inalienable usufruct in which highland Christians took great pride and which gave farmers a check upon the gentry's accumulating land. (Gordon papers).

p62 Yohannes had left a Tewdros partisan, one eyed and redoubtable Ras Bayrau at Adwa in 1877 to police the whole north for him. This deputy died fighting Welde Mikael on 20 may 1878. The week before Bayrau wrote from Hamassien to complain to Gordon who was once more visiting Massawa. Welde Mikael had plundered Serae, Akele Guzai and Hamasien, - the richest part of Mereb Mellash and Tigrina speaking population of Christian cultivators, - no less than 30,550 cattle according to Bayrau.

The very scale Welde Mikael's irregular levies and Egypt's subsidies may explain Welde Mikael's success in attracting recruits in great numbers. He also benefited from the general misery of later 1870s. In July 1878, he was not able to bring grain from Massawa for the famished soldiers who camped with him at Aylet because Gordon's subordinates were following his orders at last to cease aiding Yohannes' enemy. (Erlich, Eth & Erit p22).

The highland harvest promised to be exceptionally good and much of the rebel forces began to melt away. Those who left were farmers who had turned to free-booting it was reported. The flotsom of professional soldiery had no other employment apparently. On the eve of Alula's return to the Mereb Mellash with an enlarged garrison of Tigrians, Welde Mikael still commanded some 4,000 men. They could not all have been professional retainers.

Welde Mikael's punishment was no less severe than Golja's – probably his continued popularity in the Mereb Mellash and his local connections. Confronted with Alula's army of 20,000, he sent begging for pardon. This was granted. His ill got title was confirmed by Yohannes in return for a humble act of homage. In spite of the damage w m had done, he returned alone to Mereb Mellash in January 1879 as Alula's deputy.

Alula trumped up charges against him. The prospect of succeeding to his command, tempted w m's nephew to testify against him. Only then was w m removed for good. Hamasien tradition sees Yohannes acting deviously in all this to rid of an influential recalcitrant without arising rebellion. Contemporary report held that the arrest angered Yohannes (Kolmodin para 261, Perini p 132, Erlich p 23-5).

In any event w m and his sons were sent to a mountain top in south west Tigray for the rest of his reign.. (He lived in resettlement in Axum from the death of Yohannes until his own death in 1906).

p65 Common robbery and outlaws of commoner origin.

Not all shifta were pretenders to governorships. Most robbed for a living. An Armenian jeweller lost his cloths while he slept on his return from Gonder in march 1766, a day's journey from Digsä on the Adwa road in Akele Guzai.

Tewdros ruthlessly exterminated one group who said they had inherited this profession from their fathers. (Rubenson, Tewdros p55)

p. 66 In western Akele Guzai – where the Armenian was robbed – whole stretches of the plateau were unsafe for traders in the first decade of Yohannes' reign. (L.H. Mitchell – Report of the seizure by the Abyssinian.. 1878 p 109, 44,49,51).

There was much banditry in Hamasien at the end of 1870s. Women and children being carried off by slavery and sold in the Yemen according to reports reaching the coast (Aren, evangelical pioneers p 213) p. 66 Brigandage sharply decreased in the Anseba after the Turko-Egyptian occupation of 1872.(Picard to Genin 12 July 1873 Annales 1873, p487-8, 1874, p256).

Brigands and lions made the routes inland from Massawa dangerous, however throughout the near two decades of Egyptian rule of the island ended in 1885. (Picard Annales 1886, p. 433).

North of Massawa to the Anseba, the Habab Muslim pastoralists numbering some 20-25,000 at the beginning of 1860s and two sections of the Tigre, Bet Asgede were nominally subject to the Naib of Arkiko, on the mainland opposite Massawa. He was an Egyptian client. But Habab bands robbed the settled population along the coast. (Wylde '83 to '87 I p62)

The neighbours of the Bet Asgede on the highlands, the Tigre speaking Mensa were cultivators and said they were Christians. In the late 1860s they paid token tribute to Tewdros, and the Mensa numbered some 5,000. Their settlement east of Anseba could grow two grain crops a year. They had much butter to sell from their herds of cows. Like the other Tigre speakers living around Keren route, the Mensa turned their hand to robbing caravans if these were not escorted by riflemen. (Bel to Paris Lazarist, Massawa 23 april 1866 Annales 1866 p606)

The Agew speaking Bilen (or Bogos) across the Anseba lost many of their animals to disease in 1864-5 and then to drought. They paid on small annual tribute to the governor of Hamasien but were left unprotected. Until the Egyptian occupation of Keren in 1872, the 12 feuding clans of the Bilen numbering some 13,000 of whom some were nominally Christians, suffered much from raids by Muslim neighbours towards Kessela who were under the Egyptian protection.

Like the Bet Asgede, the Bilen had no firearms. Despite their difficulties, they continued to sell great quantities of butter and milk and honey. A great part of Bilen wealth reportedly came from livestock they stole. (Picard to Martin, Keren 21 July 1867 Annales 1868, p222, Bel to Paris Lazarists 608,612,1866)

p. 67 Cattle rustling was a full time profession for some of the Mensa and Bet Asgede. This was quite apart from raids which villagers and clans of herdsmen mounted against their neighbours time to time. Much of the rustlers time was spent away from their more settled kindred. They shared exceptionally large thefts of stocks, however, with their relatives. A tenth of stolen cattle went to the clan head. (Kentiba, among the Mensa and Bet Asgede).

Something was given to any notable in the village where they made their permanent camp, and among the Christians, to the local priest. The lookout, the butcher, the bandit's cook, the spies accomplished in finding likely herds for raiding got an extra heifer when stock was apportioned. The apportioner also took some extra. the rest of the band shared equally after giving the largest portion of the meat and animals to their leaders. Taboos particular to the rustlers regulated their life together. Popular culture did not make any pretense that the exploits of professional cattle thieves served social justice by settling accounts.

At the beginning of this century, a son of a Mensa bard recalled a sanguinary parody of prayer in Tigre which rustlers were said to offer up when taking leave of their homes.(Eino Littman trans. Leyden p202-3)

"O God give us the property of old weak men,
the property of the blinded and limping
the property of the orphans and women
the property of whom who has no power and does not remember
the property of him who curses/but does not act/ give us
I am an unkept orphan; hoping in thee, I have risen":

p. 68 Bahta Hagos of Segeneiti became prominent in Italian colonial administration after 1889, and died leading an abortive revolt against the Italians in mid Dec 1894. (Caulk, Black snake white snake) The circumstances by which this bandit of common origin became an outlaw in 1875 have been set down. He was already in his early 30s and married by 1875. He had no knowledge of the use of rifles and muskets with which the north's multitude of professional soldiers were becoming armed and had no reputation as a hunter and was not a contender to office.

A blood feud with Araya the Elder's family, the governor of Akele Guzai and became Ras after his nephew's coronation, disrupted Bahta's life as a prosperous farmer. He was left with only livelihood as predator.

Early in October 1875, a month before the battle of Gundet, 18 year old Embaye, son of Araya visited Segeneiti, a cluster of hamlets of some 900 people among whom the Catholic mission had been established in 1866. (Touvier to Bore Keren 18 June 1877 Annales 1877 p 529. Bel to Etienne Massawa 6 January 1867 Annales 1867 p559).

He already made himself hated by his avarice and quarrelled with officers whose troops the Ras had quartered in Segeneiti. During the rains, Araya's son exhausted the district near Segeneiti which his father had assigned him and was on his way back to court in October 1875. For fear of exciting his cupidity, the villagers of Segeneiti refused his demand for a paltry 40 dollars.

Araya's commander, Fitwerari Hagos, prevented Embaye from chaining the elders to enforce his extortions. The next day Embaye's men set to rifeling the huts. A woman screamed to stop the theft of butter. Assuming a graver offense, men of Segeneiti came to blows with the intruders. The village's catholic priest and Fitwerari Hagos were wounded when they intervened.

A brother of Bahta's late father took hold of Embaye by the throat from behind, and the prince fired over his shoulder and killed him. This unloosed a fury. Two dozens of Embaye's soldiers were killed. Armed only with staves and spears, the villagers gave Embaye's retainers no time to reload after they had fired their single shot muskets. (These were loaded with stone bullets for lack of lead).

A half a dozen Segeneiti men died and other kinsmen of Bahta, while Embaye's retainers were being driven to the outskirts of the village. He was called to the scene to avenge his family by killing Embaye with a spear. Bahta had come to be regarded as a hero who rid the province of a notorious womanizer who had maltreated the common people. Contemporary accounts show that Bahta's embroilment was fortuitous.

p69 Most young men of Segeneiti, Bahta and his brothers Kasu and Sengal fled to tangled country below the escarpment while the soldiery ravaged the whole district surrounding Segeneiti immediately after Embaye was killed.

Araya the Elder was in Adwa with the emperor. When they heard of these killings, Yohannes summoned one of the Catholic missionaries to give reassurance that Embaye was known to have been at fault. Nevertheless, Araya marched to Segeneiti. It was empty. (Annales 1876 p 126,459,494, Touvier, Barthez).

The villagers had deputed someone to appeal to the Egyptians for aid against reprisals. Until Yohannes' victory in mid November 1875, a detachment of 200 Egyptian irregulars were sent to the district.. (Touvier to Emenence Keren 12 June 1876, AVA 3:1 no35).

Most of the young men returned to their homes. Bahta and his brothers remained among the Asawerta. (Perini, Di qua dal Mereb p 248)

After the Battle of Gundet, Araya the Elder came with his son Debeb and burned the house of Bahta Hagos and the other responsible for Embaye's death and confiscated their crops. Following the rains of 1876, after Gura battle, Alula marched through Akele Guzai in pursuit of Welde Mikael. Bahta's relatives did not have enough time to hide the family herds. All their livestock was taken.

Thereafter, Bahta and his brothers adopted the brigande life among the caravan route to Massawa. They had taken some of Embaye's firearms. They acquired more ammunition, by holding up the escorts of Alula and Araya sent with caravan passing near their permanent camp at Agametta, half way down the sea. Until this time, the Ethiopian catholic who was Bahta's confessor recounted during his detention after the revolt of 1894. The sons of Hagos of Segeneiti had simply been peasants like their fathers.

p70 People of Tsena Degle – Segeneiti being the principle place, grazed their herds yearly during the lowland rainy season from december to march in the Agametta plain below Mount Assali, which was the Asawerta camping ground.

All the able bodied including women might abandon the highland and erect a temporary village to sow a second crop at Agametta. It was natural that Bahta and his brothers use it as a camp. Nothing is known of the life, unable to return to Segeneiti.

A punitive expedition led by a lieutenant of Alula's in 1880 forced Bahta and Sengal to leave Asawerta country and take refuge near Keren where the Habab welcomed the by now expert riflemen.

Sengal Hagos married a woman related to the Kentiba of another of the branches of Bet Asgede, she having converted from Islam to make possible the alliance with their hosts. The ages of Bahta's children in 1893 show that he and his wife Negsa, Segeneiti native, and mother of all his children, had not always been separated between his flight and his return as Italy's governor in 1889.

On the bandits conjugal life traditions gave us no further detail. The only story told of the brother's life between 1875 and 1889 relates of Bahta murdering Kasu. While still with the Asawerta, a dispute arose over the disposition over spoils and over Bahta's authority as the eldest. Of a more violent temperament, it is said, Kasu had gone off and formed a band of his own.

One day along one of the tracks leading down to Massawa, he killed a soldier of Araya the Elder. To recover the mule load of goods taken, the Ras ordered all the brothers' relatives held. Enraged by Kasu's insistence that he could not be a servant even to an older brother, Bahta killed him with Sengal's approval as that restitution could be made and their kindred in Segeneiti freed.

p 71 The story of Kasu's murder was told when Bahta had become rich and powerful as a favored Italian client, to show that he had become hard hearted living as a shifta. A recent version of the deadly quarrel, romantically supposes Kasu to have been killed because Bahta and Sengal rejected a living made out of the sufferings of others.(Iyob Teklu, Akrur 1971, interviewed by Habtom G Mikael). No other way was open to those who lost the means of peasant agriculture and who could not join the hosts of professional beggars and camp followers.

Yet already in 1891, the fiction circulated that Bahta and Sengal had wanted to give up bandit life and that Kasu was killed because he stood in their way refusing to stop robbing. Today in Tsena Degle his saying that the fratricide was one of his mistakes in life is popularly quoted.

Colonial partition opened careers in Italian service to nobodies of talent and to the collaborating gentry. Thus Bahta Hagos emerged from obscurity in the last years of his life.

Ordinary men turned shifta were strapped geographically not far from their villages unless they become dependents of a frontier group. Offsprings of provincial nobility had many territorial connections. They could attract a wide following – likely they could achieve office and be able to provide lordly rewards.

p. 73. Gordon inspected Keren in 1878

Peasants eluded Alula's exacting by fleeing their farms at the approach of armed men. This made it difficult for him to maintain a large garrison in his province year round. During much of the dry season, therefore, bodies of men not sent to work on their own land went into the borderlands where unrestricted violence could be employed. This eased immediate needs although the northern borderlands were areas of competing loyalty. Alula returned to Hamasien early in the dry season of 1880-1 with 10,000 cattle taken during the tour for taxes down the Anseba valley. The Egyptian garrison at Keren hid inside their forts during the visits unable to protect those claimed as subjects of the Khedive in the Ethiopian highlands.

Once the Ras had left, the commander at Keren went out to burn village known to have paid the taxes imposed on the emperor's name. Settlements which hesitated to meet Alula's demands were burnt down by him on his return in the next dry season. In two days of pillaging north of Keren early in 1882, Alula took a reported 7-8,000 sheep and goats and thousands of cattle. 15,000 silver dollars were also extorted. The lowlands from the latitude of Keren to south of Massawa meanwhile were looted by his deputy in Hamasien and by Araya the Elder from Akele Guzai. (Erlich, Eritrea and Ethiopia p34-5)

p. 74 The Emberemi at the end of 1881 near Massawa was destroyed by Ethiopian soldiers, may have been the port for slaves and pilgrimage, some 15 kms north of the island.

In the very parts of Sahel, which Araya and Alula's deputy ravaged before the rains of 1882 and from which Bahta and his brother had been flushed out in 1880, a band of robbers led by Debeb Araya began to operate. At onset rains of 1882 he refused the emperor's calls to return from among the Asawerta to whom he had fled from Akele Guzai and appear at court.

Alula's wife who was Debeb's sister and many traders on the way to the coast for 2 months in September 1883 lost all their goods and a priest was killed. This was the third richest caravan robbed by Debeb since becoming shifta only 12 months earlier. (Wylde I p60)

p75 Debeb became an outlaw on killing someone but he explains to the Egyptian commander

at Massawa "I was deprived by Yohannes (of)my cousin and have come to you."

Debeb Araya married into the family of the governor of Arkiko and made his headquarter there.(Wylde I, p53, the Naib – a Turkish title)

p. 77 He was caught by the British but jumped from ship to Asawerta country. Enraged that his cousin had slipped into Asawerta country, Yohannes sent commanders into the lowlands to hunt down the rebel after the rains of 1884. Too dangerous, he moved to the Habab, north of Massawa. He recruited a new band and recommended raiding at the expense of the Mensa, Christian sedentaries who accepted Alula's government as the Egyptians prepared to leave Keren. (Erlich p. 53). The outlaw troubled no more, perhaps a great deal less than did their now governor.

Of Adwa treaty, of June 1884.

The Egyptians were to leave Anseba forts for rescuing the garrisons against the Mahdists. Early in august, marauders who had detached themselves from Alula's army arrived unexpectedly at Keren. Without orders they began to plunder. The Egyptian soldiers made a sortie from the fort and the intruders retired. In the four hours of fighting, a few dozen died on both sides and among the townsmen. Before the first of the forts in the Anseba were surrendered formally to a representative of the emperor, on 10 September 1884, Keren had been deserted by its population meanwhile emissaries from the Sudan arrived.

To curb their agitation, Yohannes himself marched an army reportedly of 20-30,000 before the end of 1884 to within a day of the Anseba. Having given promises of security to those who submitted he marched on again to Adoa without molesting those whom the Mahdi's leutenants had aroused. (Bohe to "N" Keren 10 august 1884, Carboulier to Bettemburgh Keren 13 September 1884 Annales 1885 p 73-4, 78,250-1, 423-5)

The Anseba did not cease to be marching ground for campaigners and for their droves of voracious hangers on with its formal restoration to Ethiopia.

p78 by the time that the fort at Keren was handed over in mid April 1885, Muslim pastoralists between the sea and the besieged Egyptian garrison at Kessela were busy pillaging each other. Out of rivalry with those who adhered to the Mahdiya, some petitioned Alula, others did so because the harshness of the Mahdi's deputy in eastern Sudan alienated them.

In November 1884 Yohannes left Alula with 5,000 men to police the newly annexed territories. Instead, he pillaged. When the Muslim clans refused his demands for cash, he took 9,000 cattle, sheep and goat from them. His victims increased the number of opponents to the Ethiopian rule. The Habab split. One part declared for the Mahdi. Under the leadership of an Ethiopian rebel, whom the missionaries say was celebrated without naming, the disaffected Habab cut the route between Keren and Massawa.

The Beni Amer and other rivals of the Mahdi's Hadendoa allies, however, assured Alula numerical superiority against the Sudanese before the end of 1884.

In mid September 1885, unaware of the surrender of Kessela, he assembled a great army at Keren and marched to the town's relief. 23 September 1885, was the Battle of Kufit and Alula won.

While Alula wept on returning to Keren for the loss of his favourite lieutenant at Kufit, the emperor's authority was being flaunted in Akele Guzai. Catholics there had fled into the lowlands when Alula's escorts arrived at start of rains to reinstate the orthodox clergy. Mostly the young men left, more than half the inhabitants of Segeneiti, however, abandoned their homes during that highland rainy season rather than acquiesce in Yohannes' policy of one religion for the empire. Even the young men suffered greatly it being the lowland dry season. They could not hold out long, living in deserts, where everything was in want and in the midst of bandits "more ferocious than wild beasts" a missionary commented when he had shared for a night in July 1885 the hiding place of men of Halay while Alula's soldiers camped in their village. (Coulbeaux to Lequette Akrur 24 July 1885 annales 1886 p 261,263)

p79 during the rains, the monastery of Debre Sina was pillaged and eight monks killed, by a daring band of outlaws. The eastern escarpment teemed with robber bands in 1885-6. They grew more audacious with the flight from the catholic settlements of the male population.

Wherever religious precaution reduced village defences, herds were driven off by the attackers. Where there were sufficient men still, and if altered in time, thieves could be frightened off even a pitched battle fought. (Annales 1886, p265-6, 1887 p247). The villagers' own staunchness alone protected their property.

The perpetrators of the unauthorised raid on Keren in august 1884 were punished with amputation of limbs as common criminals, the missionaries heard. (Laquette to Du Fougerais, Massawa 27 February 1885 Annales 1885 p425). This is not the only mention they make on restrains and disapproval from above. (Duflos to Chinchon, Hebo 12 august 1872, p79,87 Annales 1881 p 681, 684-5).

But commanders favoured the soldiery because an unpopular leader would be abandoned by his men. It seems no sufficient organization to discipline armies, not without forced levies. Exhausted by levies and other exactions, farmers in the borderlands did little into land work in fear of next raid. Instead, as Yohannes' reign was coming to its unexpected end, they were concentrating their efforts in herding. (Annales 1886, p 571)

Repeatedly after the recovery of Keren, Alula arrived each time taking thousands of cattle, goats and camel by pillaging. Hundreds who could not pay tribute to the emperor were killed or enslaved. This alienated some, and many submitted. On the defeat of the Mahdists in September 1885, the two rival Kentibas of the Habab went to Massawa and signed a treaty of protection with the Italian command. (Erlich, Ethiopia and Eritrea, p 90-1)

For a time in the start of the dry season of 1886-7, all others within the reach of Keren volunteered annual tribute. Alula arrived 13 November 1886 with an army of 10,000, intended it was said to extend to Kessela. In fact, he raided the Habab, NE of Keren. This campaign as others into the Anseba afforded an occasion for farmers from elsewhere in the Mereb Melash to take part as irregulars in the plundering of imperial armies. These returned to Akele Guzai and Hamassien in end of 1886 after joining in the forays of Alula's Tigrean regulars brought back a mule or a cow each.

p 80. Some had a captive to ransom or clandestine sale to a Muslim trader. Most even retained their good health although disease was usually the greatest danger in campaigning alongside the rifleman of the emperor against the poorly armed people of the boulderlands. Alula's expedition of 1886 had been prompted by rumours of success of Mahdist propaganda

and of the Habab's alliance to Italy. In the course of it, Alula despoiled the Habab of " 2/3 of their cattle and camels." (Erich, p100)

Alula's severities contributed to the loss the northern-most highlands after Yohannes' death at Metemma, March 1889. Other causes of alienation goes back to Wibe and earlier. (Rubenson, Survival p 144). Outlaws from prominent Trans Mereb families, who had been sheltered in the arc of the borderlands between Massawa and Kessela, became stipendiaries of the Italians as willingly as they had been clients of Egyptians, whose occupation of Massawa ended in December 1885. The most prominent ally of Italian imperialism was Yohannes' cousin, Debeb Araya of Enderta.

p. 81. Alula blamed the Italians at Massawa for Debeb's reviving his activities in Asawerta country after Kufit. It was Alula himself who assured Debeb of local allies. Because of the punitive expeditions into the lowlands, the Asawerta continued to look upon Debeb as a protector. Debeb and Italian journalist (?) Harkiko – January 1886 – Debeb had several hundred regular bands and able to raise occasional few hundred when needed. And reported that raids by Alula were persuading Debeb of the advantage of Italian protection. At the first of Italo-Ethiopian war in the end of January 1887 when Alula surprised a relief column at Tadali (Dogali) between Genda to the sea, Debeb threw his lot with the Italians.

At the end of highland rains in late September 1887, the moderating of the coastal summer, Debeb commanded 1,900 irregulars. The Italians supplied him with rifles, ammunition and cash to raise this force. He harassed the Asawerta and Ethiopian frontier customs post at Ghinda in Aylet valley, half way between Massawa and Alula's residence in Asmera which overlooked the Hamasien encampment. In mid February 1888, Yohannes mobilised a vast army along the Mereb to meet the expeditionary force the Italians were gathering at the coast. Debeb slipped away. With some hundreds of the rifles the Italians had intended for his recruits, he went to Alula's camp – had a change of hearts. Araya the Elder recalled him to his filial and patriotic duties.

Debeb wrote to the British in Aden, justifying himself "I treated with the Italians", when once more in rebellion against his cousin at the end of 1888 "and I submitted to them thinking that all other Abyssinians depended on them would be under my orders. I wished to be the chief without having other chiefs on my side. They made other chiefs that made me angry, and I decided to desert them": (Debeb to Hogg, Adwa 23 December 1888, Public records office London. FO 403/123 N50 enclosure 2)

p. 82 Before deserting the Italians, Debeb took precautions to assure his welcome to Yohannes. He sent to the emperor supposedly and though an unwilling servant, he was a willing son and humbly begged for forgiveness in the name of the Arc of the Covenant – it was believed that the purloined relic was preserved at St Mary of Zion in Axum. Yohannes gave him guarantee of safety to the overdue appearance at court. So, according to the chronicle, Debeb tricked the Italians into entrusting him with more ammunition pretending he would attack Alula. Not at all of those he ordered on the night march followed once he revealed he was defecting. He arrived at the Ras' camp with only 300. (Erich p 118) Debeb presented himself before his cousin, as a condemned man as was customary for rebellious nobles anticipating restitution: "he entered with a rope around his neck and the chopping block (for amputation) on his shoulder". (Lemlem "Tarik" fol 35, and Erilch p 118) Yohannes was so pleased and gave him his own robes to mark the reconciliation plus Dejazmach title which the Italians had given. The emperor's campaign of 1888 down into the coastal plain

resulted in a stalemate in the last days of March. When the imperial army withdrew for lack of supplies from the Mereb Mellash, Yohannes satisfied Debeb's earlier ambition for governorship by appointing him over Akele Guzai. (Erlich p 121-122)

By 1919 Debeb was judged a hero in Eritrea for risking his blood for the motherland, Ethiopia. In August 1888 he repulsed the first Italian attack on the highlands. (Azmach Gebre Mikael Gurmu "Itiopia na Italia", Amhric. Institution of Ethiopian studies, Addis Abeba University N 324 fol. 166. The late Gebre Mikael worked for the Eritrean colonial administration, and his history dated May 1919 is based upon Italian works and interviews with elders. fol. 137)

All five of the Italian officers and more than 300 of the 800 Asawerta whom they were leading to capture Debeb at his residence in Segeneiti died in the attempt. The survivors streamed back down the slopes. Debeb had been badly outnumbered. Yohannes had stripped the north of soldiers. In the midst of the rain that year, Alula marched with the emperor and many commanders to the central province to keep watch on the Mahdists.

Afterwards the Italians heard Debeb was promising to obtain pardon from Yohannes for any outlaw who joined the few hundred regulars left in Akele Guzai.

p 83. Eritrean elders early in this century credited his skill at ambush for the victory. In fact, he was saved, according to contemporary report by the populace. Once the alarm had been given, men and women rose to defend their homes. In this way, the surprise attack planned by advocates of a forward policy at Massawa turned into a debacle reminiscent of Dogali and the Egyptian defeats of 1875-6.

The defeat of the Italian-led irregulars at Segeneiti discouraged all direct intervention from Massawa until the very end of May 1889 where the Italians moved up to Keren. In the meantime, pushing officers at Massawa used local allies to circumvent Rome's timidity, and its parsimony. The speed with which the Italians partitioned the northern Ethiopia owed little to audacity. It depended more upon the willingness of skilled commanders and veteran soldiers in the north to serve the colonial masters rather than the southern prince Menelik II or the illegitimate son Yohannes appointed heir on his deathbed.

In mid 1888 after Yohannes had withdrawn from the north, there was a stampede by the scions of office holding families between the middle Mereb and the escarpment above Massawa to enter the Italian service. (Kolmodin p278)

Among the first to rush to the Italians was Hadge Ambesa Gelwet, son of a minor official in Hamassien. He had fled the province in 1883 rather than answer to Alula for disregarding sumptuary laws. (Hadge had served hydromel at his wedding in defiance of the Ras' restrictions on this drink's use). He took refuge to his wife's Habab kin and may have been one of those notables reported to enjoy Egyptian protection until the Keren evacuation in 1885. (Kolmodin para 273,278.)

He became a favourite of the Massawa command after the failure of Segeneiti attack and raised for them one of the earliest units of irregulars. (Banda, Italian-singular).

p. 84 With 200 of these riflemen, he escorted the Catholic missionaries to Akele Guzai in the weeks following Yohannes' death. He was then a Dejasmach.

p. 84 At the beginning of 1889, Bahta came to the coast looking for patronage. With part of the Banda formed at the end of 1888 out of fugitives from Akele Guzai, he was sent to Agametta to bolster Italy's allies among the Asawerta and to shut out Debeb's influence from those lowlands.

Access upon the highlands up to the Mereb was thrown open by Welde Mikael's son-in-law and former lieutenant Kefel Yesus and by Debeb Araya. When the Egyptians' departure deprived him of their protection at Keren, Kafel went to the Habab.

Along with them he turned to the Italians at Massawa after Kufit. Thus, on the eve of the battle of Tadali, the Italians armed him and he fought in the campaigns of 1887 and 1888 against the Emperor. On the Italians' behalf he returned to Bogos where at the end of July 1888, he chased the small garrison Alula had left out of Keren. He recovered the town where 1,500 loyalists came to repossess on 31 August- 2 September. During the fighting, the inhabitants fled to the forests. They were left destitute by the pillaging and burning of every building but the catholic mission. (Letter to "N" Keren 30 September 1888. Annales 1889, 222, 224).

Before Yohannes' death, Kafel had been made Dejazmach by the Italians.

Debeb went to Adoa without Yohannes' permission at the end of 1888, the emperor to invade Shoa from Gojjam. On returning to the Mereb Mellash, he killed Alula's deputy on 9 February 1889 and occupied Asmera. Yohannes and Araya the elder died.

He had invited the Italians to advance into the highlands to fill the vacuum his leaving to fight in Tigray created in the Mereb Mellash. Early in the rainy (season) Alula tricked Debeb into being arrested. (Erlich 131, 133-4, 141-3, 145-6, 168-9) on Debeb's part in the civil wars which weakened the north until his death in 1891 by which time the Mereb Mellash was lost and quoting from a Tigrean informant, a song bitterly recalling the capture by guile of Araya's son (146). But the Bilen must have heard of his departure with relief. They continue to remember him as a brute while regarding Welde Mikael as heroic terms. (Addis Abeba Dec 1982, personally told Adhana Mengestab, based on his interviews at Keren, march 1982)

p 85 Already on June 2 however, Banda led by a few Italian officers had arrested Kafel and hoisted the Italian flag over Keren. 2 months later on 2-3 august 1889, as Alula was at last busying himself with the frontier, Asmera was occupied. Bahta and other Italian allies from Akele Guzai were sent homewards during the Italian march into Hamasien to rally their kinsmen against the threat of Alula's arriving to restore his authority. Thus, before the end of august, he left the Trans-Mereb and did not return.

In January 1890 Hadgembes led the vanguard of the Italian colonial troops which occupied Adoa temporarily on the anniversary of Tedali. By then, Bahta was Dejazmach installed at Segeneiti, as client governor of all Akele Guzai.

Loss of the Mereb Mellash and the endangering of Tigray was not renegades work but office holding families of the Christian highlands and parvenu leaders who trained themselves as shifta alone. Colonial partitions commanders who collaborated had no difficulty in recruiting followers to shoulder the arms lent by the Italians.

The Italians to avenge the Tadali and the massive armies Yohannes led to the escarpment down the coastal plain in futile search to a decisive battle in 1888 precipitated worse famine

than that of '60s and '70s. Hunger throughout the highlands assured colonial armies of easy recruiting.

Livestock imported from India by the Italians who spent campaigns of 1887-8 couped up the coast until the expeditionary force was repatriated in may 1888 introduced a virulent cattle infection. Yohannes' army carried the disease into the interior as they withdrew taking the captured stock or animals infected by their enemies' herds.(Pankhrust, Economic history 217-20) Even goats died. (Crouzet Annales 1889, 241).

The death of plow oxen before the rains of 1888 reduced drastically what could be planted. So harvest of 1888 end was poor. Without milk to drink during the hungry months between planting and harvesting, people fell ill in large numbers than normally. Locusts had swarmed annually in the Anseba again from 1887.

p. 86 Towards the ends of rains of 1888, a descent of winged ants ate the younger grain crop. Farmers replanted in the Anseba but the rains stopped early and the sun burnt what the insects left. Civil war between Kafel and Debeb, and the loyalists completed the ruin of Mereb Mellash. There was little booty to take in Anseba by late 1888, the population was starving. (Letter to "N" Keren 30 September 1888, Annales 1889, 222-4).

The first weeks of 1889, when the highland harvest should have relieved the suffering, people were eating roots and wild herbs. They ground hides of animals killed by the pestilence and made cakes from the powder for their dread of uncleanness. Stories circulated of women strangling their babies, so they would not suckle them. The strong among the Habab, Blein and groups further west of the Anseba migrated to the settlements opposite Massawa. For cash, imported grain could be bought. In the last month of the highland's dry season of 1888-9, migrants on the coast continued to starve. But they remained there because the Italians shielded them from further ill-treatment by armies fighting civil war which reupted in the highlands even before Yohannes' death. (Sister "N" letter Massawa 24 may 1889, Annales 1890, 336).

With the Italians formal occupation of Keren the first days of June 1889, many who had migrated to be near Massawa returned to take construction and other jobs at the Italian camp. Wages from this new form of employment enabled the fortunate to buy the high priced grain bought inland in quantities by the Italians for themselves and the Banda. (Picard, letter, Keren 24 July 1889, Annales 1890, 336.

Those without cash ate the grass which sprung up in late July after the beginning of the rains. Many who managed to stay alive until the next rainy season were stuck down by cholera epidemic which broke out in the Anseba. (Picard letter 23 July 1889, Annales 1890, 336)

Akele Guzai and Hamasien were as badly hit by drought, locusts and famine and by an outbreak of small-pox at the Anseba in 1889-90. Along the roads towards the sea through Asmera and Ginda, only dogs and other wild scavengers were well fed by mid 1890. A missionary en route returning to Akurur from Massawa "only moribund skeletons, and...horrible corpses... half eaten by hyenas. (Coulbeaux to Fiat, Akurur 30 march 1890, Annales 1891, 449)

p 87 On Akele Guzai and Keren missionaries distributed grain handful at a time from what

they could purchase at the coast drew beggars and converts. In Hamasien too was shift from Orthodoxy (Picard Annales 1890, 339-41).

As in the Anseba, fighting added to the troubles inflicted by nature. Before mid January 1889, Catholics of Halai appealed to the Italian general at Massawa to help recover several children kidnapped by raiders who had taken their stock. On the children's being released, they said their captors intended selling them for rifles. (Crouzet Annales 1889, 229-30). Lowlanders were blamed for some of the raiding. Wherever ravished bands along the eastern escarpment came from, before the rains of 1889, they had stepped up the sequence of raids and counter-raids and added to the hunger which pushed them to attack their neighbours. (Sister Raygasse to Fiat, Massawa 28 march 1889, Crouzet to Fiat, Massawa 7 April 1889, Annales 1889, 410,419,553).

A new wave of starving migrants had arrived at Keren and along the Eritrean escarpment by the rains of 1890 – some Tigray and Amhric speakers. Civil war below the Mereb and onset of famine throughout the empire impelled these migrants. They arrived completely despoiled by strong men. (Picard to "N" 31 July 1890, Annales 1890, 453)

The destitute died in Italy's new colony yet even reports of food and security attracted more. Nearly expiring they arrived from the south of the Mereb by the hundreds daily at Asmera and Keren into mid 1891. With no more than a bit of flour, people walked into the colony from every part of north Ethiopia.

A small group which settled as outriders at Akrur were naked. Being little more than skin and bones, they had neither the energy nor the means providing themselves with shelter, missionaries reported. Other groups of these vagabonds spread out into the villages. By foraging a little wood or straw or by drawing water for their hosts, they earned cash to buy grain. (Picard to mission Catholic, Keren 13 April 1891, Annales 1891, 454, 1892, 272)

Before the great famine abated in 1893, many able-bodied men and youths had enrolled as bandas or Italian regulars "Askari". Wages and rations and the honour attached to soldiering on both sides of the Mereb and in the Amhara lands made this very desirable.

p 88 Alula and other Tigray commanders with Ras Mengesha to pay homage to Menelik June 1894 complained that there would soon be no one in the north to serve them unless the exodus of Italy's colonial army was halted. Their own quarrels since 1889 had contributed to driving out the empire's subjects. END.

"Until his colonial masters sent him to die in detention in Assab, Hadge Ambessa terrorized Hamasien as their client Dejzmach. Elders in 1910 devoted a whole passage of their recitation to his tyranny. On a visit to Hazzega, they recall "he burnt villages, stole cattle and had some people whipped." (Kolmodin para 281-2). In his home village, he used the whip on all his former enemies, they said.

Missionaries in Eritrea (personal notes form references)

Keren

Picard 1867-69, 1870-1, 1873,1885-6, 1889-91 Touvier 1875-6-7

Carboulier 1884

Marie Post 1884

Baudraz 1885

Bohe 1885

Clememt 1882

Lequette 1882

Massawa
Bel 1866
Crouzet 1889-90
Etienne 1867
Laquette 1885
Salvayre 1869
Sister Reygesse 1889

Coulbeaux 1882
Delmonte 1866
Genin 1871
Paillard 1885
Touvier 1871,september

Halay
De Jacobis 1858

Hebo
Mgr Louis

Segeneiti
Barthez 1871-2

Tsena Dagle
Duflos

Akrur
Crouzet 1889
Coulbeaux 1885, 1890

Alitena
Barthez 1876
Colbeaux 1877

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