

LIJ IYASSU AND THE AFARS (PART II)

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Impeachment of *Lij* Iyassu and support of the Afars

The young sovereign is overthrown on the 27th of September 1916, on the day of an important Christian feast, that of the finding of the true cross, by the Shoan aristocracy, after having obtained his excommunication by the patriarch of the Orthodox Church, *Abuna*¹ Matheos.

Upon this occasion, the authors of the coup d'état explained their motivations as being *Lij* Iyassu's apostasy and conversion to Islam, the religion of his paternal ancestors.² Hence, they had the Christians believe that by this fact, the cat had been released among the pigeons.³ The neighbouring colonial powers (France, Great Britain and Italy),⁴ had corroborated, or even abated these accusations. They held against the young sovereign his rapprochement with Turkey, in the context of the First World War in which the latter had aligned itself with Germany, his opposition to their policy of spheres of interest, and finally his anticolonial politics expressed on the ground by his support to Muhammad Abdulle Hassan (the "Mad-Mullah" of British colonial historiography) at war against the British in the north of Somalia and the shored up relations with the Afars chiefs. The latter were perceived by the French and the British as potential enemies as they had taken from them the trade with the Ethiopian highlands. At the time of his deposition, *Lij* Iyassu was in Harar. After having attempted in vain to deny the accusations levelled against him, especially the accusation of apostasy, he regrouped his partisans in the region, including the Afar of the escarpment of the Harar plateau and led them from Dire Dawa on the 11th of October with the intention of marching on the capital, Addis Abeba. The confrontation with the Shoan forces sent to capture him took place at Mieso, a railway station, in the east of the country. The forces of the fallen emperor were routed but he managed, with the help of the Afars, to escape his enemies and make it to Wayna Hara on the Shoan escarpment. There, he kept himself busy recruiting the Afars from

¹ Metropolitan bishop, patriarch of the Orthodox Church.

² Some modern historians still continue to explain the fall of *Lij* Iyassu by this motive of the conversion to Islam whose validity however had already been put in doubt in 1937, twenty years later, by one of the actors and the beneficiary of this coup d'état, the emperor Haile Sellasie, in the following passage of his memoirs, *My life and the progress of Ethiopia* : « *As Iyassu multiplied his sojourns in Dire Dawa, in Harar, in Djidjiga, to gather the Afar and Somali, to whom he gave without counting distinctions and weapons and spent the better part of his time showing himself to be their ally, the gossip was that the Muslims were ironically insinuating that he was neither Christian or Muslim* » (Quoted by Berhanou Abebe, 2001 :328.). After the coup d'état, *Ras* Tafari did not mention either the conversion to Islam of *Lij* Iyassu but negligence to the duties of the throne and to the Christian religion and the strengthening of Islam, in a letter addressed to *Ras* Seyum Mengesha of Tigray on the 13th of October 1916 in which he justified the overthrowing of the successor of Menelik II and demanded from him to acknowledge empress Zawditu and himself as the legitimate authorities, while intimating to him the necessity of his collaboration to preserve the Christian empire (quoted by Hagos G/Yohannes, 2003 :56).

³ A poem of Afä-Wärq dated from the 9th of December 1916 bears witness to the parallel established between *Lij* Iyassu and *imam* Ahmed "Gränn", the scourge of Ethiopia. Cf. Alain Rouaud, 1991: 265.

⁴ One can read the document "Manifest of the princes and people of Ethiopia" published as an annex of Berhanou Abebe's article (2001).

the region to recreate his escorting army, greatly reduced by the numerous defections under the menace of *Abuna* Matheos' excommunication. He had in mind to continue this activity in other parts of the region, especially amongst the Oromo. He thought they would support him for he had forged close relationships with their chiefs, who had been his "protégés" since his accession to the throne. On the road to Ankober, he learnt of his father's defeat in Sagalle on the 27th of October at the hands of the Shoan forces led by *Fitawrari* Habta Giyorgis Dinagde⁵ and *Dedjaz*⁶ Balcha Safo⁷, both Oromos.

This evolution pushed him to undertake attacks against the partisans of his Shoan rivals in the highlands, but apart from the Afar, he did not find the support he had counted upon in the region. The disappointment stemmed from the attitude of the Oromo chiefs, who not only turned their backs on him but reinforced with their men the ranks of the adversaries that were attempting to seize him.

The only places still loyal to Lij Iyassu and which continued to defend themselves to the end were the Afar inhabited districts around his town of Wäynä-Hara and it would be via Rassa and Wäynä-Hara that he finally succeeded to evade the hot pursuit of the enemies. Lij Iyassu's attempt to call the local Oromo to his support was not as successful as with the Afar. He tried to mobilize a large force from the Fursi, Arbawayyu, and Jille Oromo through their traditional chiefs like Abba Därra Wäne, Gunjo Alle, Omar Alisha Jarso, Fitawrare Dingo Omer and Ato Muhicho Arbiyyi, all of whom had been closely associated with him in the years 1912-1916. They now abandoned him in the days of his great need. (Ahmed Hassen Omer, 1997: 143-144)

This situation forced *Lij Iyassu* to leave this region with the help of the Afars for the fortress of Magdalla in north Wollo, by way of Dessie. Upon his arrival in this family fiefdom, a battle opposed his forces with those of *Ras Abate*. Beaten, *Lij Iyassu* managed to escape. On the 27th of August 1917, another battle took place in Wollo between the deposed sovereign and *Fitawrari* Habta Gyorgis, the minister of war. The latter prevailed.

Lij Iyassu again fled and took refuge with a small escorting group and servitors in the sultanate of Awsa at the side of the sultan Yayyo Mahammad aka *data* Yayyo⁸ (r.1910-1927⁹). The latter gave him a reception worthy of his rank and had him benefit from the right of

⁵ Born in Shoa, a common soldier in the troops of *Ras Gobana Dachi*, a famous Oromo auxiliary of Menelik II, noticed at the battle of Adwa against the Italians by the latter who elevated him to the rank of *Fitawrari*, then minister of war in 1908, a charge he held until his death in 1926.

⁶ A short version of the title *Dedjazmach*.

⁷ Raised to the rank of *Dedjazmach* after the battle of Adwa in 1896, he was named governor of Sidamo that he went on to lead for 30 years. After the death of Yilma Makonnen, the elder brother of Tafari Makonnen (the future Haile Sellasie), he replaced him at the head of Harar from 1907 to 1910 during which the young Tafari took his place in Sidamo. After 1916, he was reassigned to Sidamo and remained there until 1928, year in which he was arrested after a conflict with the government. Following this, he was allowed to go and live in his village of Agemja, in Gurageland. There, he remained until his death in 1936 in an attack on Addis Ababa, which had just been occupied by the Italians.

⁸ Yayyo, the Black.

⁹ Dates of reign.

hospitality which is sacred among the Afar. He set himself up in one of his camps, that of Gassissan, situated on a hill in the vicinity of Aysa'eyta and protected by seven walls of dry joined stone. The Ethiopians called it Iyassu Gora which translates literally from Amharic as 'Iyassu's hill.' *Lij* Iyassu's choice of refuge alongside sultan Yayyo in Awsa can be explained by the fact that he thought that he was the only one who could offer him protection at this difficult time. At the time of his escape, it had been less than a year that the sultan Yayyo had definitely imposed himself as the unique authority of the sultanate of Awsa at the end of a bloody succession war during which he had managed to put to flight his half-brother, Hanfare Mahammad Hanfare. The latter had ruled over a part of the country, after a power sharing agreement had been brokered in 1910 by *Ras* Mikael of whom he was the favourite. The few scraps of information that we have about *Lij* Iyassu's sojourn in Awsa confirm that he lived as a Christian. He drank the alcohol that his servitors prepared for him from sorghum.

The consequences for the Afar of their support to *Lij* Iyassu

The Afar paid an extremely high price for their incursion into the central power struggle in which they supported *Lij* Iyassu. The first reprisals were aimed at those of them who lived along the railway line, from Dire Dawa to Afdem. In October 1916, the Ethiopian forces victorious over *Lij* Iyassu seized their houses (Mers'  Hazen Wolde Kirkos, 2007: 114). The possessions of the family of the *Naggadras* Abubakar Mahammad Abubakar in Addis Ababa and in other parts of Ethiopia were also seized.

The *Naggadras* himself took refuge in Tadjourah, then a French protectorate. There, it seems he attempted to raise troops to come to his son in law's help. In April 1917, the Ethiopian government requested from the French the permission to seize him by any means available. Permission was first granted orally by the minister of France in Ethiopia, Maurice de Coppet, to the regent *Ras* Tafari Makonnen and to the minister for Foreign affairs, *dedjaz* Mulugetta, then confirmed by him in his letter of 14th of June expressed in these terms:

« To this letter [letter of the 10th of April from the Ethiopian minister of Foreign affairs], I answered two days later that I would telegraph Mister Fillon and the 20th of April at the Guebbi, I had made known to Your Excellency and to His Imperial Highness, the *Ras* Raffari [Tafari], that we had, the governor of Djibouti and myself, no objection to Ethiopian troops seeking to seize, even upon French soil, a man who is both an enemy of us and of yourself » (Henri Labrousse, 1992 : 239).

The empress Zawditu Menelik (1917-1930) and the *Ras* Tafari Makonnen, heir to the throne and plenipotentiary regent repeatedly asked sultan Yayyo Mahammad Hanfare to deliver *Lij* Iyassu to them and had him summoned to Addis Ababa. But the sultan denied the *Lij's* presence by his side and refused to answer to the summons, invoking his incapacity to ride a horse because of his age. Some of our informers have him reply to the Zawditu-Tafari tandem that he does not recognise their authority.¹⁰ Their declarations are given credence by his questioning of the tribute payment.

¹⁰ See also Kife-Regb Zeleke, 1982:14.

In order to punish the Afars of Awsa and their chief, the Ethiopian government sent, on March 30, 1919, important forces, estimated in oral sources as being several tens of thousands strong¹¹. Some came from Wollo and the others, from Shoa and from Harar. They were placed under the command of *Ras Kabbada Mangasha Atikam*¹², who had been recently named governor of Wollo. He replaced at this post *Ras Kassa Haylu*, relieved of his post for not having been able to capture *Lij Iyassu* and for not submitting the neighbouring Afar country to the *pax amharica*. The forces coming from Shoa were commanded by *Azzaz Mescrescia* from Ankober and were accompanied by Alo, the son of the previous sultan Mahammad Aydahis and the second by the deposed sultan Hanfare Mahammad Hanfare aka Rokkiyah Hanfare¹³. Forewarned of the movement of the Abyssinian troops, sultan Yayyo avoided confrontation and retreated with his host and all of his possessions to the region of Balho, a locality near the north border of the current Djibouti Republic where he was not pursued. The Ethiopian forces established their base at Dale, in the oasis of Awsa, from where they forayed out as far as the vicinity of Harissa, to the west of Lake Abhe. On their way, they seized cattle, killed men and set fire to huts. Some of our informers declare that on this occasion many precious manuscript books produced by the local *‘uléma* and dedicated to the praises of the prophet and his followers, to treatises on the *hadiths*, but certainly also fragments of the chronicles of the region were reduced to ashes¹⁴. Very quickly, the Ethiopian forces faced illnesses of which dysentery, which provoked many deaths within their ranks. Seeing this, *Ras Kabbada* took the decision to retreat on the 19th of May, leaving behind Rokkiyah Hanfare who once again proclaimed himself sultan. On their way home, the troops of *Ras Kabbada* continued their attacks against the Afar and their cattle rustling. Italian sources give the following summary of the expedition:

Gli Abissini arrivarono sull'Aussa come un essercito di formiche , predando tutto quello che trovavano uccidendo quanti piu nemici Dancali poterono e creando il terrore tra la popolazione complessivamente le truppe di Ras Chebbedè razziarono circa quattrocento cammelli, 10 000 bovini e poco mene di 3000 ovini. I Dancali uccisi furono circa 600 e quelli catturati 200. Gli Abissini morti in combattimento e nelle razzia furono solo 120 ma i morti per malattie furono 700, quasi tutti vittime di dissenteria e di colpi di calore. Se escludiamo il bottino catturato, dal punto di vista delle perdite umane questa razzia abissina in Dancalia penalizzo molto anche le genti dell'altipiano (Luca Luppi, 2009, vol. 2: 956-957)

Upon hearing of the Ethiopian troops' retreat, sultan Yayyo undertook without difficulty the reconquering of Awsa from where he once again chased his half-brother Hanfare and his followers. The latter found his death during his flight towards Shoa in an attack of the Afar of Ba^cadu. *Lij Iyassu* and his retinue were once again reinstated in their camp of Gassissan. For traditional Ethiopian historiography, which refuses to accept the existence at this time of a

¹¹ The Italian sources talk of 6 000 men. Cf. Luca Lupi, 2009 : 954.

¹² The son of *Ras Bitwodded Mangasha Atikam*, this faithful ally of Tafari Makonnen (the future Haile Sellasie Irst) had been relieved of his post as governor of Wollo in September 1928 in favour of the eldest son of the latter, Asfa Wossen. He died in 1940. Cf. James McCann, 1987:125.

¹³ Hanfare son of Rokkiya, the name of the mother.

¹⁴ Interview with *Shaykh* Mahammad Abdallah. ^cAd-Hamaddo (Afambo), May 11, 2006.

sovereign Afar power, capable of granting political asylum, since September 1917, *Lij* Iyassu had been wandering the Afar desert.

Departure of *Lij* Iyassu for Tigray and his arrest

In the course of the second semester of 1919, *Lij* Iyassu left Awsa, of his own volition, to meet up with *Ras* Seyum in Tigray.¹⁵

This decision, according to oral sources, followed preliminary contacts with the latter, who was married to one of his sisters. Kept secret, these contacts had been made possible by sultan Yayyo, who used the services of Afar chiefs from the foothills of the Tigray highlands, familiar with the court of *Ras* Seyum. It is also with their help that he managed to reach the part of this province administrated by his brother in law without being intercepted en route by the men of *Ras* Gugsa Araya, the grandson of Yohannes IV, whom himself administered the south and the south east of Tigray. He made this trip accompanied by a small number of servitors, leaving with sultan Yayyo the others of whom a certain Tassama. The intention behind the decision to travel to Tigray by the deposed sovereign and the attitude of the Tigryan *Ras* is interpreted in different ways in the existing literature. Some think that *Lij* Iyassu was expecting support to combat the central government from his brother in law and restore him to power. This hypothesis is difficult to imagine. *Ras* Seyum, a prudent man, hadn't shown solidarity for his family of in-laws when they were in better straits. *Lij* Iyassu, tired by his life as an exile in Afar country, rather wanted to give himself up to the central government. Towards the end of his sojourn in Awsa, he had shown signs of fatigue. For example, he had been told to mend his ways many times for having gone down to the ford and tried to accost women.

Lij Iyassu had obtained the promise of *Ras* Seyum to use his good standing with the central government to negotiate the best conditions for his rendition. This hypothesis is confirmed by the Italian sources quoted by major Dodds from the British legation in his correspondence of August 1920. In the course of a long and secrete conversation in Maqale with the Italian agent in Adwa, *signor* Polaire, *Lij* Iyassu would have informed him of his contacts with his aunt the empress Zawditu, who desired his surrender (quoted by Hagos G/Yohannes, 2003 : 61).

The emperor Haile Sellasie evokes in his memoirs the attempt of *Ras* Seyum to reconcile *Lij* Iyassu with empress Zawditu and himself (quoted by Hagos G/Yohannes, 2003: 66). He however omits to add that this process was probably derailed because of his opposition and of his demands of unconditional surrender.

Following this, *Lij* Iyassu left the territory of Tigray under the administration of *Ras* Seyum for the lands under the administration of *Ras* Gugsa Araya, the grandson of Yohannes IV. *Ras*

¹⁵ Following the administrative reorganisation of the empire at the end of the 1910s, Tigray was divided into two : the western part with Adwa as capital was placed under the administration of *Ras* Seyum and the eastern part with Maqale as capital under the administration of *Ras* Gugsa Araya Sellasie. Upon the death of the latter in 1933, his son, *Dedjazmach* Haile Sellasie inherited the domain from which three localities had been subtracted of which Axum, given to his cousin and rival, *Ras* Seyum, who was also named military commander of all of the province of Tigray. Haile Sellasie Gugsa was not authorised to inherit from his father the title of *Ras*. Because of this, he harboured a strong grievance towards the emperor and collaborated with the Italians between 1936 and 1941.

Gugsa easily apprehended him on the 28th of January 1921 and delivered him on the 21st of May in the town of Dessie to *Ras* Tafari Makonnen himself.

Menelik III perpetuates the memory of *Lij* Iyassu

The memory of *Lij* Iyassu remains alive and well among the Afar by way of his son Menelik. He was born in 1917 in the territory of the sultanate of Tadjourah, at that time a French protectorate, where his mother had sought refuge. The latter could have called him Abubakar, from the name of her father, or Mahammad from that of her paternal grandfather, but she chose for him the name Menelik. She brought him up in her family.

Menelik Iyassu surfaces in colonial sources in March 1935, when on the eve of the Italian invasion, the French administration took an interest in him after the king of kings Haile Sellasie had asked if the French government would like to entrust the adolescent to him so that he could bring him up as a son. Having refused this request, it allotted a stipend to the young Menelik whom lived in the town of Tadjourah with his cousin, the sultan Hoummad Mahammad Ibrahim (r.14 December 1928-21 April 1962), his elder by seven years. They put him under close surveillance, fearing that the Italians may organise his departure for Ethiopia¹⁶. With the advent of the Vichy state's administration at the head of the territory and the maritime blockade imposed by the allies, surveillance was relaxed and the young Menelik was deprived of the stipend he had been enjoying until then. In 1941, with the help of his maternal family, he managed to establish connections with one of his brothers, Yohannes, who was at the head of an anti-Italian resistance group in the Gondar area. Accompanied by a small group of companions of whom his cousins Daoud Abdallah, Mahammad Moussa Worko¹⁷ and Omar Ali,¹⁸ he left Tadjourah aboard a make-do vessel for Assab. Boarded at sea by a British warship, he gave a false identity (Mahammad Hassan), fearing that the British whom he knew to be allied with Haile Sellasie would turn him over to the latter¹⁹. They were brought to Aden where they remained for three days, before being released and making their way to Assab. And from there, they went to Bati. Once there, Menelik learnt of the return of Haile Sellasie and of the surrender of his brother. He turned tracks.

Towards the end of this same year, his maternal family negotiated his return to Ethiopia with Haile Sellasie, whom had just recovered his throne, through the intermediary of the heir Asfa Wossen. He was accompanied by his mother who died one year later in Dire Dawa. He was placed with his two cousins, Mahammad Moussa Worko et Omar Ali²⁰, under close surveillance at the palace where he lived for four years then in the Afíncho Ber neighbourhood where he was assigned a decent dwelling after the failed coup d'état of the Neway brothers in 1960. This event coincided, it has to be recalled, with the accession to power in the little French colony of Djibouti of his great uncle Ali Aref Bourhan. Haile Sellasie authorised him to move to Dire Dawa and to Assabot in West Hararge, where five *gashas* of land were allotted to him as well as Oromo Ittu to cultivate it for him as

¹⁶ Gontran de Juniac, 2001 :135.

¹⁷ He was the father of Amine Moussa, the administrator of the Afarforum website.

¹⁸ Ayla Ali Omar in the Afar manner. Faithful follower of the young prince, he lived by his side until his death.

¹⁹ And interview with Béchir Abdo Mohamed, Addis Ababa, 7 December 2009.

²⁰ Email of Amine Moussa, 11 April 2012.

sharecroppers. He received help from Hajji Moume Addus, a Harari, father-in-law of his cousin Mahammad Moussa to get the best land and settle. Menelik died without bearing descendants.

Conclusion

During his short reign, *Lij* Iyassu initiated a policy of integrating the Afars into the Ethiopian state, starting with those from the foothills of the highlands of Shoa. This decision, which was contrary to the policies of his predecessors, was a source of worry not only to the Amhara dignitaries but also to the European colonial powers presented on the coast. After his deposition, *Lij* Iyassu was able to measure the loyalty of the Afar and of the sultan of Awsa. He was certainly the first Ethiopian *Negus* to have understood, despite his young age and his attachment to the Christian faith, the necessity of not marginalising the populations of the lowlands because of historic or religious rivalries.

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