

1991

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**BLATTA GÄBRÄ EGZI'ABEHER'S LETTER TO MENILEK
IN THE ITALIAN COLONIAL CONTEXT**

By Irma Taddia

AH Number 13 (1991)

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This paper was presented at a November 1989 Workshop on Translation, held at Boston University, as part of the project on "African Expressions of the Colonial Experience."

Publication of this paper was made possible by an interpretive research grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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By Irma Taddia

My discussion for the seminar on "Translation of Words and Images" deals with late nineteenth/ early twentieth-century Ethiopia. I believe that this is a particularly important period in the history and culture of the Amhara/Tegrean area, which is not as well-known as it should be. It is an interesting period basically because of two aspects: on the one hand the colonial influence and, on the other, the appearance in Ethiopia of a new literature no longer restricted to dealing with Court Chronicles. As regards the historical aspect, at the end of the nineteenth century, Ethiopia was divided into two parts, one part removed from the influence of the Solomonic monarchy (the Eritrean plateau) and the other, after Adowa, remaining formally independent. I believe that this phenomenon is also important from a literary point of view, in the widest sense of the term.

Various scholars have pointed out that with the rule of Menilek (1889-1913) Amharic literature began a new period for the type of sources which the historian has available today.¹ The first Ethiopian intellectuals who freely expressed their thinking appeared, while their works were no longer written in an official form, commissioned by the authorities (i.e. the political power).² Writings become more occasional; a literature of travel was created, of curiosities, observations on the world both inside and outside Ethiopia.

Literature of the "political" type also appeared, at least during the 1920s. However, there are few of these works: while still significant, they represent an exception, a trend marking the passage towards a new type of literary culture. As Berhanou Abebbe maintains in a recent work,³ what distinguished the colonial period was also silence, non-literature, turning inwards, thinking: maybe the beginning of a new form of political conscience.

¹S. Rubenson, *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence* (London, 1978), 27-28; P.P. Garretson, "Some Amharic Sources for Modern Ethiopian History, 1889-1935," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, XXXVIII, 2, 1978, 283-96.

² See: J. McCann, "The Ethiopian Chronicles: An African Documentary Tradition," *Northeast African Studies*, I, 2 (1979), 47-61.

³ Berhanou Abebbe, "Introduction" to *La foi des pères anciens* (Stuttgart, 1986), 3-4.

The silence of the colonized (or for Ethiopia, those most closely affected by the European influence) perhaps coincides with the passage from a "traditional" historical and narrative culture to a new form of expression, which emerges only in a very few literary cases. And I do not believe that the momentary silence is due to the clash with colonialism alone. It can also be seen under another form: the change from a religious or court literature to a cultural, secular, and thus also political expression. It is Berhanou Abebbe again who identifies this passage towards secularization and "modernization" (the latter intended as the acquisition of the European technological culture or the "modern knowledge," with respect to the "ignorance" of the past). This is not just a cultural phenomenon but also political: understanding European civilization is also a means of defending the independence of Ethiopia. Before these new forms of literary expression, typical of the 1920s, Ethiopia seems to have left us few written documents of a private nature. The great Court Chronicles, public and official documents, last up to Menilek. And the notebooks, "private papers intended for personal use . . . contain valuable, uncensored, historical information,"⁴ but in Ethiopia they are an exception. The elders "imparted their accumulated knowledge by word of mouth."⁵ Unfortunately, we still know little today about these occasional literary forms, nor do we know how widespread they were in each historical period.

The intellectual figure I am dealing with in this discussion has some significant elements that distinguish him in the cultural and literary milieu of modern Ethiopia. Despite Blatta Gäbrä Egzi'abeher's having led a very interesting intellectual life, and produced a considerable number of literary works, very little is known about him. My aim in this paper is to draw attention to his role in the Ethiopian political life and to his more famous works, as well as to the "Letter to Menilek," an important and valuable official document.

Gäbrä Egzi'abeher was born around 1860 (European calendar) at Sada Krestyan, in the Hamasiän, and received his education in the convent of Bizen. He had contacts with Italians right from his youth, as a civil servant in the Italian colonial government. He was, furthermore, both protagonist and victim of the Bahta Agos revolt in the Eritrean highlands, where he fiercely defended the Italians. Blatta Gäbrä Egzi'abeher was an intellectual, well-educated, able to write Ge'ez, Arabic, Amharic, and Italian as well as Tigrinyan, his native tongue.⁶

⁴Bairu Tafila, "The Historical Notes of Liqä Tabbäbt Abbäbä Yeräfu," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, L, 2 (1987), 267.

⁵*Ibid.* See also: Donald Crummey, Shumet Sishagne, and Daniel Ayana, "Oral Tradition in a Literate Culture: The Case of Christian Ethiopia," unpublished paper presented to the International Symposium on "Unwritten Testimonies of the African Past," University of Warsaw, 7-8 November 1989, which emphasizes that "Christian Ethiopia is a culture profoundly animated by the spoken word."

⁶Although all the letters and writings of Gäbrä Egzi'abeher are written in Amharic, many documents bear witness to his culture and knowledge and some friends address him to write letters and official documents. According to Italian sources, Gäbrä Egzi'abeher received an education in the convent of Bizen. See F. Martini, *Il diario eritreo*, Firenze 1942-1943, II, 59

Thanks to his many acquaintances, he became the official interpreter of the Eritrean government in 1897 and distinguished himself in numerous colonial battles, fighting alongside Italians, the last of these being the battle of Adowa. He participated significantly in the peace talks between Italy and Menilek and accompanied the Italian delegation on various missions outside the country. Owing to his position of primary importance, he had access to many government secrets, after being made official interpreter. He held this post for a mere two years, after which time he was accused by the Italians of political espionage, was hurriedly tried, and convicted. Blatta Gäbrä Egzi'abeher had many friends among the Italians living in Asmara, who respected him and considered him a perfect example of a Tегrean integrated into colonial society. He was accused in late 1899 of having passed highly classified information, gathered in the course of his work as a colonial interpreter, out of the Eritrean colony (i.e. to Menilek). The suspect correspondence, confiscated in July 1899 when he was arrested by Italians, appeared to be irrefutable proof of his guilt. The intellectual had corresponded with a number of friends, some of them interpreters for Italy, and also with more important figures, such as Mäkonnen and Mängäsa. The main accusation was that of having spread anti-Italian feeling and promoted a campaign of defamation against the colonial government. His trial was followed widely in Italy as well; pages and pages were dedicated to it in the Italian newspapers and he became the archetypal traitor.⁷

Blatta Gäbrä Egzi'abeher's arrest brought about a wave of fear in July 1899 in Ethiopia. Käntiba Gilankiel, head of Godaif, one of the principal addressees of the letters, fled from Asmara for fear of being arrested. The interpreter had corresponded frequently with Gilankiel and many letters, in a special code, had been exchanged.⁸ Everyday matters, exchange of greetings were interspersed in the letters with more important information, concrete ideas based on the certainty of a strong Ethiopia, both free and independent. These are also the major themes of the letter to Menilek, as we shall see.

Shortly after his imprisonment, the interpreter was sent to an Italian prison in Naples only for a few months, for security reasons. During this brief period he corresponded with Italian friends (the Sanguineti family in Turin) and a Tегrean living in Rome (Giyorgis Fessahaie), as we can see from the archival documents.⁹ The interpreter was transferred in November 1899 for reasons which are not clear to the colonial penitentiary of Nokra, where together with around one hundred other prisoners he was successful in staging a sensational escape, only a few days after his arrival. His escape and subsequent movements were carefully recorded in documents kept in Italian archives. After two weeks a small group of prisoners reached Tigray, having travelled by sea from a port to the north of the Eritrean colony and some of them thence proceeded to Addis Ababa.

⁷See the newspapers *Il Secolo XIX* and *La Tribuna*, cited in the Appendix.

⁸I have found three codes in all the documentation: see Archivio Eritrea: Interprete indigeno Garesghear Ghilemariam (attività sospette), Pacco 293, fasc. 4, Allegati 7 and 55.

⁹See Archivio Eritrea, Carceri e penitenziari, Pacco 313, fasc. 1.

Blatta Gäbrä Egzi'abeher created a diplomatic incident between Italy and Ethiopia at a time when the diplomatic relations between the two countries had been improving. Political relationships were not broken, however, in spite of the fact that the escaped prisoners had been welcomed in Tigray by Mäkonnen himself who was nonetheless careful to send conciliatory messages to the Eritrean government and to assure the latter that he was giving hospitality to the prisoners only until he received orders from Menilek.

Shortly afterwards Gäbrä Egzi'abeher moved to the Addis Ababa court, where he became a valuable political advisor to the emperor, so beginning the most significant phase of his life. In this period he became increasingly critical of the rulers and government and wrote numerous poems and declarations of protest of which about fifty copies were secretly circulated every Sunday in Addis Ababa, according to scholars such as M. Cohen and J. Eadie.¹⁰ Some of them are available now in a published work,¹¹ while others exist only in the memories of some people who bear oral witness.¹² Many of his writings were severely critical of the Ethiopian government for having surrendered Eritrea and for having negotiated with the Italians over the borders. Many passages are likewise very anti-Italian and against foreign oppression in general, and they gave rise to heated discussion with another intellectual of the period, Afäworq Gäbrä Yiesus. We shall look at the terms of this discussion between this intellectual totally supportive of the Italian cause, which he considered progressive, and Gäbrä Egzi'abeher, in the contrasting role of fierce opponent. In his role as advisor and influential figure at Menilek's court, Egzi'abeher attracted the envy of the people from Shewa who could not bear the fact that a Tegrean could have so much influence on the emperor. This rancor and hostility won the day and the intellectual was exiled away from the heart of the empire and sent to Harar where Ras Mäkonnen was ruler.

Doctor Merab, the famous doctor at Menilek's court and his friend, can tell us a great deal about the life of the interpreter. He speaks about the once more uncomfortable position of Gäbrä Egzi'abeher at Mäkonnen's court where he was despised by the most powerful figures and the clergy for declaring that the earth revolved around the sun.¹³ This "second Galileo," as he liked to call himself, was imprisoned for these "heretical" theories by Mäkonnen who was influenced in his decision by the Church. Having spent a lifetime spreading the ideals of a free and independent Ethiopia and continually removed from any position of influence, Gäbrä Egzi'abeher was at last called back to court. He spent the last years of his life in Addis Ababa where Menilek, by now very ill, no longer held power.

¹⁰M. Cohen, "La naissance d'une littérature imprimée en amharique," *Journal Asiatique*, CCVI, 2 (1925), 349; J.I. Eadie, *An Amharic Reader* (Cambridge, 1924), 193-202.

¹¹ See Eadie, *An Amharic Reader*.

¹²The main oral testimonies listed in the Appendix cite Gäbrä Egzi'abeher's poems, most of which seem lost forever.

¹³ P. Merab, *Impressions d'Ethiopie. L'Abyssinie sous Menelik II* (Parigi, 1929), III, 359.

According to some sources he managed to influence even Legg Iyasu,¹⁴ whom he again tried to convince to force discussion on the matter of the Eritrean borders. He died of heart trouble at the peak of his intellectual strength and is still remembered clearly by many, in Addis Ababa, as a Tegrean, an unusual figure, an intellectual and opposer, writer and interpreter, councillor and moralist.

After this brief summary of Egzi'abeher's life, some comments ought now to be made as to the importance of his intellectual figure in the cultural and literary setting of Menilek's "greater Ethiopia." Despite many recent studies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the intellectual and cultural life of this period is not particularly well known. Gäbrä Egzi'abeher was certainly not the only figure to harbor such nationalistic, anti-Italian sentiments, but he was one of the few to have written and left behind him such an important number of literary works. He is the subject of this paper not only for his importance as a political figure, but also as a thinker and an intellectual. His works are mostly ignored by scholars; such literary output, however, and among them the letter to Menilek, deserves to be rescued from oblivion.

Published Works

Most of Gäbrä Egzi'abeher's writings has still to be published. The published works are composed of short poems and a booklet printed anonymously outside Ethiopia in 1905. There is no doubt that the latter, attributed for the first time to the Tegrean intellectual by M. Cohen in 1925,¹⁵ was indeed written by him. This is also confirmed by oral testimonies.¹⁶

The booklet, 69 pages long, is entitled "Awag yätäälawn mängäd lämäna-fäqenna lämäyaz lähezbenä lä'agaru dehnennät endibbägg," or "Advice on looking for and following the best way to consolidate the security of the people and the country." This work was considered lost by some scholars,¹⁷ however at least two copies exist in the Amharic section of the library in the Institute of Ethiopian Studies in Addis Ababa. One is a personal gift from the last Ethiopian emperor, the other belongs to the collection of Gäbrä Mika'el Germu in Asmara and was brought to Addis Ababa by Professor S. Chojnacki in the late 1950s. There is an annotation on the title page of this second copy, "written by Gäbrä Egzi'abeher," followed by a question mark. It is not known exactly where the booklet was printed and I have not been able to find other copies either in Ethiopia or in

¹⁴Ä'aläme Esäte, "Blatta Gäbrä Egzi'abeher Gila dära fäwdal dära imperiyalist dahafi," Addis Ababa University, unpublished paper, 1969 (Ethiopian calendar).

¹⁵Cohen, "La naissance," 349.

¹⁶ See oral informants listed in the Appendix.

¹⁷Tekeste Negash, "Blatta Gebre Egzi'abeher Gila Mariam and his Works: A Sketch towards a Political Biography of a Nationalist," in his collection *No Medicine for the Bite of a White Snake. Notes on Nationalism and Resistance in Eritrea, 1890-1940* (Uppsala 1986), 13.

Italy. At Menilek's court the booklet's existence was acknowledged but its circulation was semi-clandestine. From the data I have gathered on this period by word-of-mouth it can be seen how much Gäbrä Egzi'abeher was resented by the Shewans and how his intellectual work was hindered.

Today in Ethiopia, as I have personally witnessed, many people still know of the volume, and some have been able to give me the exact title and have attributed it without any doubt to Egzi'abeher. Clearly only a careful reading and a comparative analysis with other works will enable all doubt to be removed as to this attribution. Although the language is, in some parts, unclear and allusive, even a superficial reading of the text brings particularly interesting information to light.¹⁸ The text discusses religious and theological issues, the persecution of foreign Catholic missionaries, and the role of the Ethiopian clergy in the society of the period. A theme dear to the author, which is also present in his most important unpublished work, is that of education, of the building of schools in the country, of the freedom of education. Harsh criticism is levelled at the Ethiopian Church, at the *debterà* and at the deacons, regarding the lack of interest in educational problems and the Church's refusal to institute more thorough education. Gäbrä Egzi'abeher's vision is clearly progressive and secular, aspiring not only to greater freedom, but also to greater scientific knowledge. The continuing polemic with the clergy and the ruling class, the nobles at Menilek's court, explains both why this volume was clandestine, and why the author was so unpopular. This book is a lively account of Ethiopian society and culture at the beginning of the twentieth century and reflects an intellectual conspicuous for the originality of his thinking and for his clarity of vision. This work deserves to be better known and should be translated and published with notes on language and content.

The remaining published works by Gäbrä Egzi'abeher are four poems printed in Cambridge by Eadie.¹⁹ These three short and one longer poem, untitled, have a similar content. They exhort the unity of Ethiopia against the invaders, they give moral advice as to how achieve this unity, they speak of the need to be sharp and watchful, and of being educated, so as to maintain independence. The last two poems published by Eadie have been translated into Italian by L. Fusella and recount the polemic between the intellectual and Afäworq Gäbrä Yiasus, in detail.²⁰ The poem that particularly incensed Afäworq is the last one published by Fusella, which speaks about the negative aspects of the Italian occupation of Asmara. Italy is likened to a vulture that plunders with violence, which has neither compassion for the old, nor kindness for the young, and which does not even leave

¹⁸I am indebted to Fuzum Asmelash for translating some pages of the manuscript and for helping me in analysing the material.

¹⁹Eadie, *An Amharic Reader*.

²⁰L. Fusella, "Una scaramuccia poetica fra Afaworq Gäbra Iyesus e il Blatta Gebra Egzi'abeher," in S. Segert and A.J. Bodrogligeti, eds., *Ethiopian Studies Dedicated to Wolf Leslau* (Wiesbaden, 1983), 155-56.

land free where the dead may be buried. Afäworoq's reply to this centers on Italy's positive influence, as the bringer of light and civilization.

Unpublished Works

Gäbrä Egzi'abeher's most interesting unpublished work is kept in the Italian colonial archives: *Blatta Garesghear, Sue memorie*, Archivio Eritrea, Rome.²¹ This manuscript constitutes a unique document because of its length (235 pages, handwritten in Amharic) and the time of its writing, 1897. Catalogued as an autobiographical work, as memoirs, it is in fact a more complex text, a collection of theological discussions, of Ethiopian history over a very long period of time and a testimony of personal experiences. Written immediately after Adowa, the memoirs show the influence of the particular climate after the Ethiopian victory and describe the emperor Menilek's decision not to occupy the territories of Italian Eritrea, and not to claim the honor of Ethiopia. The manuscript contains historical comment on the grandeur of the motherland over previous centuries, following the defeat of the Grañ, and beyond. The author aims to redeem political life and restore morality to it. He is deliberately provocative, with the ultimate goal of saving the nation, at least symbolically. His advice aims to move the conscience of an uncertain and fearful ruler, as well as the Ethiopian people. His message is moralistic rather than political, as is illustrated by the lofty style of the whole work.

The other unpublished manuscripts are letters to friends and acquaintances and to influential figures. Only eleven letters have been preserved, although there are numerous replies to these from which we can deduce that the correspondence was greater than the few letters that have survived. The signed correspondence, which may be consulted in the "Archivio Eritrea" in Rome, includes the following ²²:

- Lettera del Blatta Garesghear al Cantibai Ghilanchiel e ad Abebé Zeudé,
May 22 1899
- Due minute di lettere del Blatta Garesghear al Ras Maconnen, March 28, 1896
- Lettera del Blatta Garesghear al Deggiac Banu, April 29, 1899
- Lettera del Blatta Garesghear all'Alacà Haile, April 27, 1899
- Biglietto in lapis del Blatta Garesghear a Scialacà Bairu e Ato Haimanot,
April 17 1896
- Lettera del Blatta Garesghear al Deggiacc Sabhatù, April 13 1899
- Lettera del Blatta Garesghear alla signora Sahlù, (without date)

²¹Archivio Eritrea, *Blatta Garesghear. Sue memorie*, Pacco 78, fasc. 3, 1897.

²²Archivio Eritrea, *Interprete indigeno Garesghear Ghilemariam (attività sospette)*, Pacco 293, fasc. 4, 1899.

- Lettera del Blatta Garesghear al Blatta Tzegò Berhané, July 27 1898
- Lettera ad uno sconosciuto (undated)
- Lettera a Menelik, May 18 ,1899

Most of the letters by Gäbrä Egzi'abeher and his friends are written in special codes, which vary and are all different from each other, decoded by colonial civil servants. All the correspondence is very interesting for historians: 56 letters in the first file and 11 in the second one.²³ The letter to Menilek is certainly the most important document and evokes all the themes related to nationalism so dear to Gäbrä Egzi'abeher. Its authenticity makes this letter a particularly valuable document. I will be focussing on it.

I wanted to cite the entire literary work of Gäbrä Egzi'abeher known to us, both in order to fully illustrate the issues under discussion and to draw attention to a large amount of material about which scholars know very little. Some additional ideas ought now to be drawn from all this material to facilitate further research . It is, above all, to be hoped that part of the material to which I have referred may be brought to the attention of a wider circle of scholars and that ,in particular, Egzi'abeher's most important works be published, even if only in part. A critical edition of the texts, which incorporated new information ,at least as far as the nineteenth century is concerned, would be especially helpful in writing a history of Amharic literature. However, my aim in this paper is rather to draw attention to the themes of historical significance and the wide-ranging issues that can be found in the life and writings of the intellectual, himself a historic figure. Moreover, the fact of his being a Tegrean and identifying with the "greater Ethiopia" calls for reflection on the complex historical setting of Ethiopia at the end of nineteenth century. It is certainly odd how perhaps the most fierce defense of the Ethiopian state and its borders should come from a Tegrean. The letter to Menilek can be analyzed from a number of aspects.

The Letter to Menilek : "Lettera di condoglianza, di pianto, di rimprovero e di consiglio": "Letter of sorrow and lamentation, reproof and advice"

The letter to Menilek poses problems for the historian concerning the question of nationalism in the "greater Ethiopia." My understanding and evaluation of this document are based on the Italian colonial translation and comments that Italian bureaucrats made on the text, although the colonial translation has been compared with other versions.²⁴

The letter is composed of four handwritten pages containing a number of corrections, rewriting, and additions. It seems to have been rewritten and checked by other

²³ See *ibid.*, respectively : Series I and Series II.

²⁴Fuzum Asmelash and Teclehaimanot Gebreselassie have translated this document; these new versions confirm the colonial translation and reproduce only some minor variations. Given the nature of my paper, more specific reference to these versions seemed unnecessary.

people, a draft confiscated from the author before the final composition. This fact gave rise to various interpretations on the part of the colonial bureaucracy concerning the author. Nevertheless the document is well preserved, in good condition, although difficult to read, and in some passages almost impossible, as we can see in the Appendix.²⁵ The letter to Menilek, kept in the Italian Archives both in the original Amharic and in the colonial translation, enable a detailed examination of Gäbrä Egzi'abeher's political thought. Together with the author's religious writings which have come to light so far, this document is of great importance. Written in May 1899 (European calendar), it was addressed to Ras Mäkonnen, governor of Harar, so that he would pass it on to Menilek, the main interlocuter. (We do not know, today, if the message reached the addressee, but can only note that it was written more than a month before the author's imprisonment.) The entreaty to have the emperor read it is very strong, accompanied by a request to declaim it in front of the crowd and to place it in the monastery of Debra Libanos.

Gäbrä Egzi'abeher's message is forceful and self-assured, right from the start. Some passages are particularly significant, in my opinion, and I would like to stress them here.²⁶

I believe You [Menilek] deserve punishment, since You have submitted to the will of foreign Kings (Italian), have desecrated Your flag and its Kings. Your Majesty, Ethiopia has fallen into misery.²⁷

Unlike Your predecessor, Your Majesty, You have split mother Ethiopia in two. The blood of many Christians has been spilled; the whole country is uninhabited and deserted. The prophecy of Isiah has come true: "in those days they will say there are seven women for every man." Do something to remedy this before more men perish in war.²⁸

A clear awareness of present fault gives him a vision of a bleak future:

Your Majesty's major fault is having made the Wichale pacts and treaties, selling mother Ethiopia to the Europeans.²⁹

Gäbrä Egzi'abeher was most incensed over the question of treaties and borders and soon takes it up again :

²⁵ Only a few words are completely illegible, according to colonial translation and are indicated by brackets in the Appendix.

²⁶ Only a few words are completely illegible, according to colonial translation and are indicated by brackets in the Appendix.

²⁷ See p. 1 of the original Amharic manuscript: Archivio Eritrea, Pacco 293 (quoted above), Serie II, Allegato 11.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 2

²⁹ *Ibid.*

[You, Menilek] want to destroy and reduce Ethiopia's national territory. . . . [You] have given territories to the Europeans and have thus betrayed the Ethiopian people. And we thought You were the true King and we exalted You and thanked the Lord thinking that You would restore our kingdom . . . conserving intact the Motherland.³⁰

Another significant passage of the letter:

We have heard that You have sold Ethiopia for money, to such an extent that, as a result of Your ignorance and cowardice, Ethiopia has become a totally impotent State. Your name will be passed on to future generations. . . . Many of us [Ethiopians] will curse You . . . saying You are a second Judas, Emperor, lover of money. . . . Since the Wichale pacts were made with the Italians, we have lost all hope. . . .³¹

Again:

We Ethiopians know that in the future You do not intend to make Ethiopia flourish, but to destroy it. . . .³²

King Tewodros, predecessor of King Yohannes, born of a poor family. In his reign, he made Jerusalem tremble. King Yohannes died in combat, saying, "I will never concede an inch of my land. . ." Your Majesty . . . why do You cause damage to Your Motherland every day, and why do You forget the proverb, "Honour your father and mother, until your wisdom becomes great"? Your Majesty, rather than lose the Kingdom of Ethiopia, cede it to others who will know how to govern better. Otherwise . . . You will be called Menilek II, *King of Kings of the Galla people, and Half of Ethiopia* [underlined in the original text]. If You were to proclaim Yourself *King of Kings of Ethiopia* [underlined] this factor would be derisory for many, since You would govern a country of which You are not in reality King."³³

This passage — and I would like to stress it — concludes the letter:

Your Majesty, I have not written this letter in order to humiliate and offend You. . . . but seeing my Ethiopian compatriots dominated by a foreign people . . . , the wound has struck deep. Thus, I desired to refer and communicate to Your Majesty how my soul is suffering, so that You too might be struck by this sufferance, like a sword in the heart.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 4.

³³ *Ibid.*

In particular, witnessing how the Europeans have surrounded Ethiopia, [I said] : if we combat with more strength and courage and in greater numbers, for our Motherland Ethiopia, invoking God's help . . . the Creator will be on our side.

I am a servant of Your Majesty, a son of Ethiopia, and I am sad for our Mother because she is consoled by no one.³⁴

Written on the 11th of Genbot 1891 in a desert city (18th May 1899).

There is no doubt about the authenticity of the letter to Menilek: it is attributed to Blatta Gäbrä Egzi'abeher in numerous files on record. In the margin of the Italian colonial translation we can find the following notes:

This is evident:

- 1) The letter was written under the guidance of a Bizen monk
- 2) It intends to combat the diplomatic action whose intention is to maintain the current border limits in the colony (Eritrea).³⁵

Those notes in the margin lead us to consider a variety of possible interpretations. First of all, to what extent did the letter to Menilek's express widespread sentiment in Ethiopia? Or was it an isolated case of opposition to Menilek's diplomacy? The first thing to underline here is that the letter is not written in code, unlike other correspondence between the author and his friends, available in Italian archives. It was intended to be a public document, and it is still one today. The letter has a precise political significance: Egzi'abeher's objective was to convey his message to the Ethiopians and win them over to this cause. Italian colonialism (the occupation of Eritrea) had convinced Gäbrä Egzi'abeher to adopt a more decisive position regarding the defense of the state. Rather than nationalism or politics we could speak, perhaps, of ethics. The integrity of Ethiopia was seen as a moral question, concerning the defense of a culture, of a religion, rather than purely a question of borders and autonomy. The letter to Menilek bears clear witness to how the author perceived Ethiopian nationalism and the unity of the state, in which Tегrean and Amhara should be able to live alongside each other in a larger state and both be equally relevant in it. The loss of a part of the Ethiopian territories is considered a betrayal of historical tradition, of the faith which Menilek's subjects had placed in him. I will discuss that aspect later.

It is interesting to examine the concept of state unity in the colonial period and to outline to what extent this might be justified by the historical conditions in Ethiopia at the end of the nineteenth century. In the period in which Gäbrä Egzi'abeher was writing his letters and learned texts, the Italians had occupied Eritrea and attempted to conquer Ethiopia. This historical event brought about radical change in Egzi'abeher's beliefs,

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵ See the colonial translation : Archivio Eritrea, Pacco 293 (quoted above).

leading him to support Amhara/Tegrean unity against the foreign invaders. The phenomenon of nationalism at the end of the nineteenth century clearly has its roots in this factor and is a phenomenon to be considered carefully.

The letter to Menilek emphasizes the author's basic ideology and raises a more important issue: the role of the state and the concept of motherland and national territory. It reveals a new ideology with no ethnic context and refers to a national state, an Ethiopian state, non-Amhara, non-Tegrean. This seems to me a new, modern ideology. And the state entails independence and unity. The Ethiopia intelligentsia establishes a strong link between tradition and independence; they are in a colonial context, and colonialism means the breakdown of historical tradition. This new ideology can be considered a product of colonial domination rather than an autonomous achievement. This is the fundamental question we are trying to clarify. But in order to find an answer, more research is required into the Ethiopian milieu and the politics of the empire.

It is perhaps an anachronism to talk of Tegrean nationalism at this time; the reassertion of the moral force and integrity of the Ethiopian state certainly had a more important role and was the guiding force of a nation renewed materially and spiritually. There are few documents available to reconstruct Amhara intellectual life in the nineteenth century and those that exist are predominantly religious. The lay society apparently produced no literature worthy of note. For this reason the memoirs and correspondence are so important today (although containing in the first case some elements of theology and religion within a general social-nationalistic theme). But how should we insert this unpublished material in the culture of that period and how much importance should it be given? We could say that in nineteenth-century Ethiopia-Eritrea two political ideologies co-existed: one, certainly legitimate, of intellectuals advocating "the greater Ethiopia"; the other, of élite local leaders who, having been granted autonomy by central government, found inspiration in the centrifugal and regional forces at work.

It is important to emphasize that the feelings Blatta Gäbrä Egzi'abeher reveals in these pages have no connection with the politics of power and resistance of the Tegrean in the north who continued to be autonomous with respect to the Shewan monarchy, nor can it be considered on the same plane as the political games of the Amhara/Tegrean area. Rather these sentiments are, I believe, totally intellectual, motivated by political-moral issues. They belong to an aristocratic stance, which invoked unity against the Italians in the name of historical tradition. One of the great emperors in the nineteenth century, Tewodros, who strongly identified with the problems of the unity, the reconstruction, and the modernization of Ethiopia, had imposed a new policy of centralization. The notion of the renovation of the state after a period of anarchy and regional powers had continued to be a dominant theme in the monarchy at the time of Yohannes.

Two historical phenomena stand out in the political life of Mareb-Mellash, the future Eritrea, in the nineteenth century: the clear conquest of power by Alula, in Yohannes's name, of the territories beyond the Mareb, and the subsequent loss of these to the Italians, which resulted in the creation of the Eritrean colony. Both these phenomena,

paradoxically, helped strengthen Menilek's empire, by forcing intellectuals to aim towards political revenge.

The northern border, therefore — Eritrea — occupied by colonial rulers represented a cause of political change itself. Italian colonialism forced intellectuals to unite together in the "greater Ethiopia," and it kindled nationalistic feeling even in the Tегrean area, even though it represented a clear limit to the politics of the empire.

Amidst the games of politics and alliances taking place at the end of nineteenth century between Italy and Menilek, Gäbrä Egzi'abeher seems a rather idealistic figure, unaware of the important implications of diplomacy and compromise. Indeed, some historians have wondered about the reasons behind Menilek's defeat, on a diplomatic level, and have raised the question as to why, after the victory of Adowa, Menilek did not want to keep his northern border intact, choosing instead to come to an agreement with the Italians. Beyond any possible answer, any historical reply to these question, an important and unequivocal testimony remains today: that of a Tегrean, an intellectual and thinker, who has left us an unusual political inheritance of literary works, which highlights his fervent opposition to the decision made by the ruling power. It is a testimony which still has to find its place in Ethiopian history.

The clarity of the letter to Menilek and more generally speaking, Gäbrä Egzi'abeher's poems and works make the author a modern political thinker, in whom actions and ideals coexist and strengthen each other. We have to remember that the letter was written in May 1899: as far as I know, no similar documents exist in modern Ethiopian literature. The history of Galla by Asma Giyorgis, who also criticizes Menilek, can be considered as an official document, as can as the Amharic text of Gäbrä Heywat Baykadañ.
36.

We might advance three hypotheses:

First, the new phenomenon of secular literature alongside the religious literature typical of late nineteenth-century Ethiopia derives from new developments and changes in Ethiopian culture itself. Obviously, I am leaving aside Ethiopian court literature and chronicles, but I do include personal works of literature, notebooks by private individuals, and correspondence.

Second, the new literature is perhaps related in some way to Italo/Ethiopian relationships, to the development of colonial policy, which might have influenced the "traditional" culture (in the widest sense of the word) as well as creating a new kind of literature.

And finally, this literature is linked with a new perception of the world outside Ethiopia — a perception that became more evident and clear in the late nineteenth century.

³⁶Bairu Tafla, *Asma Giyorgis and his Work. History of the Galla and the Kingdom of Sawa* (Stuttgart, 1987); Luigi Fusella, "Menelik e l'Etiopia in un testo amarico del Baykadañ," *Annali dell'Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli*, new series, IV, 1952.

Ethiopia opened up to the outside world and such developments as the modernization of Japan in the first decade of this century might have been important influencing factors. It is a recurrent theme present in some writings of the period and might have contributed to bringing about a new way of viewing and reflecting on the history itself.

These three hypothesis should, I believe, be analyzed and investigated more deeply.

APPENDIX

Unpublished manuscripts on Blatta Gäbrä Egzi'abeher

1. Archivio Eritrea, Rome

Pacco 78, fasc. 3: Blatta Garesghear: Sue memorie, 1897 Manuscript, Amharic, pp. 235 by Blatta Gäbrä Egziabeher, with comments and notes by the Italian administration of Eritrea.

Pacco 293, fasc.4: Interprete indigeno Garesghear Ghilemariam (attività sospette), 1899 .

The main documentation on the intellectual in Italian Archives, divided into three sets, as follows:

Series I: 56 documents, letters and comments, with the Italian translation; 9 letters by Gäbrä Egzi'abeher, in Amharic. A Tigrinyan document (Allegato 18) reproduces the "Gazzetta di Asmara," a brief note, not signed, on a land tenure controversy during the time of Italian colonisation.

Series II: Il Documenti compromettenti, Asmara, August 4, 1899.

The famous "Letter to Menilek" is kept in this series: Allegato 11, Amharic, and Italian.

Series III: Fasc. d: Verbali d'indagine, 1899.

Many documents on the trial, with testimonies from friends and suspected Tegreans, such as M.Gäbrätsion, A.Zeudé, Zegò Berhané.

Fasc. e: Relazioni della Procura (per l'imputazione di reato art. 134 c.p.), Asmara, August 10, 1899.

Fasc. f: Note personali sul servizio prestato dall'interprete, Asmara 1899.

Pacco 293: Allegato A: Blatta Garesghear, Consiglio dato da un Etiope, March 28, 1896 (Ch. 2 of his memoirs, abstract) only Italian text.

Allegato B: Lettera del Residente dell'Acchele Guzai (on the special code used in all correspondence).

Pacco 313, fasc.1: Carceri e penitenziari.Evasioni, 1900.

Documentation about the escape from Nokra. The file contains some letters from Gäbrä Egzi'abeher's friends such as G. Fessahaie and the Sanguineti family.

Fasc. 12: Relazione al Governo del Capitano Cortese, preso prigioniero evasi, 1899.

Pacco 337, Relegati, 1900 (Documentation on the escape from Nokra).

Pacco 338, Diverse, 1900; Fasc. II: Evasi di Nocera, 1900.

Pacco 403, Registro capi. Relegati e ribelli, 1904-1905 ; fasc.3: Ribelli 1904-1905 (p. 16 contains a brief note on Gäbrä Egzi'abeher's life).

2. Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome

Fondo Martini: Scat. 14, Fasc. 48: Governo dell'Eritrea, Relazioni con l'Etiopia. II Tigrai sotto ras Maconnen, parte II.

The dossier contains a document by Dr. Mozzetti (the main accuser) on Gäbrä Egzi'abeher.

Scat.16, Fasc. 54: Lettere e notizie di capi indigeni.

A dossier on the intellectual's life with a poem dedicated to Ras Mäkonnen written in Ge'ez.

3. Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa

Amharic Division and Manuscripts

Aläqa Kenfä, Tarikä Nägäst (The History of Kings), manuscript, undated, Amharic. This document records the death of Gäbrä Egzi'abeher, August 1, 1906 (Ethiopian calendar) and the publication of the first Amharic newspaper, *a' mero*, the day after.

4. Private collections, Asmara

Gäbrämikael Germu, Blatta Gabrä Egzi'abeher Gilay, unpublished manuscript, written in Tigrinyan, kept in the private collection of the author's son, Amanuel Germu; pp. 7.

Gäbrämikael Germu, Blatta Gäbrä Egzi'abeher, unpublished manuscript, undated, written in Tigrinyan, kept in the private collection of Amanuel Germu, the author's son; pp. 5.

Kantiba Gilankiel, Manuscript without title and date, pp. 130, Amharic, some pages only in Tigrinyan, kept in the private collection of the author's son, Ato Tewoldemedhin Gilankiel, living in Asmara.

5. Rare works, copied by stencil, newspaper articles quoting Gäbrä Egzi'abeher

A'aläme Esäte, Blatta Gäbrä Egzi'abeher Gila dära fäwdal dära'imperialist dähf, bägenbot 1855-1906 (Blatta Gäbrä Egzi'abeher writer anti-feudal and anti-imperialist, May 1855-1906), Addis Ababa University, November 1969 (Ethiopian calendar).

Amsalu Aklilu, accer yä'ityopiya senäsehuf tarik (a brief history of Ethiopian literature), Addis Ababa University 1976 (Ethiopian calendar) , pp.126-29.

Anonymous (without title), a copy of a manuscript containing oral information on the Tegrean intellectual, kept in the Journalists' Association, Addis Ababa, pp. 7, Amharic.

Anonymous, Blatta Gäbrä Egzi'abeher Gilay Hamasyänay hasir tarik (A brief story of Blatta Gäbrä Egzi'abeher Gilay born in the Hamasyän), pp. 2, Tigrinyan, Asmara (broadcasting corporation).

Anonymous, Blatta Gäbrä Egzi'abeher Gilay a'mero yätäbaläwn gazeta bä'egaccäw yäsafu (Blatta Gäbrä Egzi'abeher Gilay the author of the handwritten newspaper *a'mero*), Addis Zaman, 26 Säne 1978 (Ethiopian calendar) pp. 2, Amharic.

J.R.H Conacher, General Survey Concerning Christian Literature, in Ethiopia, Addis Ababa University, 1970.

Gäbrämikael Germu, Blatta Gäbrä Egzi'abeher, Ethiopia, 1961, pp. 4, written in Tigrinyan.

Yohannes Redda Tsadik, Memoirs, unpublished manuscript, author's property, about his father Aläqa Redda Tsadik, Addis Ababa, 1987 (Gäbrä Egzi'abeher is quoted at pp.8-9).

Il Secolo XIX, a number of articles and notes on Blatta Gäbrä Egzi'abeher, published in the following issues: February 6-7 1900; February 7-8 1900; February 13-14 1900; February 25-26 1900.

La Tribuna, a number of articles and notes on the Tegrean intellectual, published in January and February 1900.

Published Works and Articles on Blatta Gäbrä Egzi'abeher

Berhanou Abbebé, "Introduction," *La fois des pères anciens* (Wiesbaden, 1986).

R. Caulk, "Black Snake, White Snake": Bahta Agos and his Revolt against Italian Overrule in Eritrea, 1894," in Donald Crummey, ed., *Banditry, Rebellion and Social Protest in Africa* (London, 1986), 301, 302, 304.

M. Cohen, "La naissance d'une littérature imprimée en amharique," *Journal Asiatique*, CCVI, 2 (1925), 349.

C. Conti Rossini, *Italia ed Etiopia dal trattato di Uccialli al-la battaglia di Adua* (Rome, 1935), 149.

J.I. Eadie, *An Amharic Reader* (Cambridge, 1924), 193-202.

L. Fusella, "Una scaramuccia poetica fra Afawarq Gabra Iyasus e il Blatta Gabra Egzi'abeher," in S. Segert and A.J.E. Bodrogligeti, eds., *Ethiopian Studies Dedicated to Wolf Leslau* (Wiesbaden, 1983), 143, 144, 146, 147, 152, 153, 154, 155, 156.

- _____ "Menelik e l'Etiopia in un testo amarico del Baykadan," *Annali dell'Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli*, Nuova Serie IV (1952), 134.
- _____ "Le biografie di Blatengeta Heruy Walda Sellase," *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, XXXI (1987), 59.
- G. Gamerra, *Fra gli ascari d'Italia* (Bologna, 1899), 54-61.
- A. Gerard, "Amharic Creative Literature: The Early Phase," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* VI, 2 (1968), 40-41.
- A. Gerard, *Four African Literatures* (Berkeley, 1971), 278-79; 410-411.
- V. Mantegazza, *La guerra d'Africa* (Firenze, 1896), 261-67, 256, 260.
- F. Martini, *Il diario eritreo* (Firenze, 1942-1943), II, 59, 67, 92, 93, 98, 106, 124, 143, 174, 175, 179, 197, 407, 446; IV, 258, 377.
- P. Merab, *Impressions d'Ethiopie. L'Abyssinie sous Menelik II* (Paris, 1929), III, 334, 359, 360.
- T. Negash, "Blatta Gebre Egzi'abeher Gila Mariam and his Work: A Sketch towards a Political Biography of a Nationalist," in his *No Medicine for the Bite of a White Snake: Notes on Nationalism and Resistance in Eritrea, 1890-1940* (Uppsala, 1986), 1-21.
- R. Pankhurst, "The Foundation of Education, Printing, Newspapers, Book Production, Libraries and Literacy in Ethiopia," *Ethiopian Observer*, VI, 6 (1962), 260, 261, 262.
- R. Pianavia Vivaldi, *Tre anni in Eritrea* (Milano, 1901), 242, 257, 258, 261-65, 266, 268.
- C. Prouty-E.Rosenfeld, *Historical Dictionary of Ethiopia* (London, 1981), 140.
- A.D. Roberts, "Documentation on Ethiopia and Eritrea," *The Journal of Documentation*, I, 4 (1946).
- E. Sengal, "Condizioni ed esigenze dell'Etiopia dopo il '96 secondo uno scrittore abissino," *Atti del 3° Congresso di Studi coloniali*, Florence, 1937, VI, 218.
- E. Sengal, "Note sulla letteratura moderna amarica," *Annali dell'Istituto Orientale di Napoli*, 1943, II, 292.
- I. Taddia, "Un intellettuale tigrino nell'Etiopia di Menelik: Blatta Gäbrä Egzi'abeher Gilay, 1860-1914," *Africa* (Rome), XLIII, 4, 1988, 574-602.

Oral Testimonies

I have collected some oral testimonies in Ethiopia in recent years. The memory of Blatta Gäbrä Egzi'abeher is still very strong among the intellectuals and many people remember very clearly certain periods of his life. I quote a list of those persons who were most helpful to me in collecting this information and data.

Information Gathered in Addis Ababa

Bitewoded Asfaha Wolde Mikael: his information concerned Gäbrä Egzi'abeher's life and works particularly during the years of Italian colonisation in Eritrea and on his education and employment with the Italians. He confirms the compilation of an anonymously published booklet.

Ato Joseph Jacob: he gave interesting information particularly on Menilek's court about the relations of the intellectual with the Shewan and his exile in Harar. He confirms the compilation of an anonymous work.

Abba Gäbrä Yesus is an important witness of the literary environment at the beginning of this century and of the first literary work in Tigrinyan. He quotes the 1905 work and claims to have seen the text of Gäbrä Egzi'abeher poems during his youth.

Ato Yohannes Redda Tsadik: this is the most complete testimony collected in Addis Ababa. Yohannes Redda was born in Sada Krestyan, Gäbrä Egzi'abeher's homeland, and he knew his sister and family personally and heard them grieve for his death. Yohannes Redda's father also knew the intellectual and this fact is remembered in Yohannes's Redda unpublished manuscript quoted in the list of the main sources. He confirms the compilation of the 1905 unpublished work and he is a witness of his poems.

Information Gathered in Asmara

Ato Mahari Mesgäna: a nephew of Kántiba Gilankiel, close friend of the intellectual and important witness for the reconstruction of his life during his period in Addis Ababa and in the Eritrean colony.

Ato Tewoldemedhin Gilankiel: the last son of Kántiba Gilankiel, Gäbrä Egzi'abeher's friend and correspondent. As well as providing me with useful information, he allowed me to have a copy of his father's unpublished manuscript diary (quoted in the list of the main sources).

Ato Amanuel Gäbrämika'el Germu: bibliophile and Tegréan intellectual, also an interpreter for the Italians and close friend of Gäbrä Egzi'abeher. He passed on his father's memoirs and provided me with some unpublished documents written by his father (see the list of sources).

Kegnazmach Tewoldebrahan Gäbrämedhin: he is an important witness to the reconstruction of the political environment in Asmara during the time of the Italian colonisation.

Information Gathered in Sada Krestyan

Kasi Tombosa Woldenkiel: he recounted many episodes of Gäbrä Egzi'abeher life and he showed me his supposed birth-place according to the oral tradition, inside the village.

Documentation

The Letter to Menilek

(translation by N.Idris, Institute of Language Studies,
Addis Ababa University)

A letter of sorrow and lamentation, with reproof and advice

May it reach the honourable Ras Mäkonnen, Governor of all Harar and half of Tegray: patriot and true son of Agaazé's country, Ethiopia, mother of all of us. May Our Lord Jesus Christ preserve you from seeing the destruction of Ethiopia, amen. I beseech you in the name of the living and crucified God, Our Lord, who set Adam free from the bond of death, and crashed the head of the snake with the stick of cross, and won the defence of the devil without argument, to forward this letter his Majesty the King of Kings of Ethiopia.

Your Majesty, this letter bears few lines of an indigent Ethiopian who entreats you in the name of the compassionate Virgin, the Mother of God, to read it thoroughly and get it read on Sunday either after the Miracles of Mary have been preached or before the Mass, and then let it be read in the market (i.e. in the big market day) and thereafter place it in Debre Libanos at the monastery of Abuna Teklehaimanot.

O, Emperor, as the Book has truly stated, "A ruler is not appointed but by God." However, God appoints some rulers who stand for the welfare of humanity, whereas others are for destruction; so the saying, "Fear God and honour his King" holds true. Therefore it is not unusual to honour the good and criticise the bad ones. Here, my position is that everybody is king in his home; thus, it is a known fact that the king can make people believe his testimony, can command, and can do whatever he wishes. So is with you Emperor; if God has desired to let you reign over your mother Ethiopia in order to kill her and to deal with her in whatever way you wish, then, to save yourself from being a king of destruction, we, your Ethiopian brethren who suspect the approach (nearness) of a destructive king towards you, warn you to take heed of the biblical word which says: "Do not bow down your head to aliens," for the progress of the alien kings has reached a point of destroying your flag and its kings. All this has occurred not because of the good example of their kings, but because of the weakness you have shown. I am writing to your mother Ethiopia in brief and condensed form to inform her that all this trouble has befallen her because of Your Majesty's sin. So, as my accusation is directed against all of you, let what you have heard fall into the ears of all your officers; and let your answer be announced to all of us Ethiopians through a proclamation .

First. I don't think the saying of Solomon: "A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother," has ever reached your officers, and the more your Majesty. However, may God prolong your life. The multiplied few from one for this holy

country: your mother Ethiopia, who has bestowed you with the crown of David, but to whom you have returned evil for good and mis-recompensated her by eliminating her existing boundaries, which is an act of imprudence because you ought to have protected her and litigated for her sake.

King Tewodros and King Yohannes, may God of Ethiopia bless their souls, did a great honour to their mother Ethiopia by protecting her; but you, Your Majesty, have followed the advice of evil people and have mutilated her by completely cutting half of its body. The Roman king Nero killed St. Peter and St. Paul. He also did the same with his own mother by dissecting her womb alive to examine and see the region where he lived before birth. You too, O, Majesty, did the same with your mother Ethiopia's womb, which has the capacity of giving birth or producing to many kings, Saints, and intellectuals. You have got the power but because of your incompetence or ignorance it has been cut into pieces and dispersed all over like human urine. It was you who developed the friendships with these white people and allowed them to get accustomed to the ways of entering our country and rule it. It is not today that you began this, you started it when King Yohannes was still alive. As I have heard from some reliable people, King Yohannes came to know this pact and was greatly disappointed, but was soon obstructed by his hasty death.

But now, Majesty, as the saying goes, "You will be convicted by the judge of your own choice [i.e. by the very judge you chose yourself]", and as Solomon said, "He who digs a hole falls into it himself." So, the trouble has come upon yourself. Because of Your Majesty's sins, the blood of many Christians is being shed in vain, and most of the country has become void. And because of this the number of men has been reduced and that of women has increased. This can be proved by observing the population of participants from both sexes in such occasion as market places and funeral ceremonies. Consequently, our country is facing what the prophet Isaiah said, "At that time seven women would plead with one man to shelter them in his name." Then, Majesty, if you slumber and do not take any precaution, inevitably war will break out every year, thus obliterating all the males. As a result, seven women will plead with one man to be their husband.

Your second sin is worse than the first one: in Wichale you made a pact with the "whites" and sold out your mother Ethiopia by giving this and that to so and so and, with the exception of the land owned by the monasteries and those inherited ones, you have put a demarcating borderline between them. The snake is a very mischievous animal, and surely it has the know-how to slip in even through the smallest opening it gets: just like grease. It is the same with these whites: after some years, they slowly — at a tortoise's pace — penetrated the country through the passage shown by Your Majesty, broke the agreement, and bought Ethiopia's basic land as well as the land of the monasteries, and kept them of their own accord. As a compensation or a return of good for your Majesty's favour towards them, they reached a point of saying, "You are completely our subject and dependent: you pagan king!" They have rightly called you pagan.

Second. Listen, as one officer said, "God would not forsake a country without a good hearted person," so, except yourself, all the people want to liberate their mother Ethiopia, and there are many who protect her through faith and prayers; therefore, in the time of calamity, God is helping her because of the prayers of these people. May God prolong their lives.

The Lord is near to all those who call upon His name. Likewise, the eyes of the Lord are towards the virtuous so, as I have said earlier, owing to the prayer of these people God has shown you a miracle in Alage, Mekele, and Alakwa on the 23rd of Yekatit 1888 (March 1, 1896). Anyway, Majesty, as I said earlier, you have been made to reign to be the cause of disaster for Ethiopia: by mowing her down and obliterating her; otherwise, you wouldn't have formed a boundary between the lands of these people and given it to the whites at Wichale.

You have mutilated the children of Ethiopia unjustly and in an unmannerly way by chopping off [their limbs], accusing them of having joined the whites' army and combatted their own king. But the foreign prisoners were well-treated because the whites have always been your friends. Your Majesty, we thought that you were a good king; the way these Ethiopians were dealt with was intended to warn away other Ethiopians from participating in such actions, so we said, "The most important thing is that he liberates his mother Ethiopia, but the case of those who have been mutilated unjustly could be passed by, because they have fought against their king". Therefore, we interceded to God on your behalf so that

- your eyes be on your head and your heart be better than that of all the people,
- the 2nd Zerubabel [i.e. Thou] may regain possession of the lost country and government,
- you may hold on (i.e. remain loyal to) the agreement you made, and
- you may have compassion for your mother Ethiopia.

In reply to our intercession and wish, we have been told that the emperor of Ethiopia, in consultation with his officers, wanted to liberate his mother Ethiopia and has reached a new agreement with the whites — a new borderline would be marked, and the white prisoners of war will be set free in return. We fools took the news as true and were very happy, saying: "Blessed be the name of the Lord." But now, after much inquiry and quest, we discovered the truth: the whole news was a mere dream, just as the saying goes, "They dreamt but got nothing," and our Majesty became like an ear of maize. How? Maize grows a beard like a grown-up man, but is carried on the back [i.e. of its mother-maize just like a baby. You too, Majesty, instead of sticking firmly to the (new) agreement you reached, You completely treated Ethiopia as if it were a toy-house of children. The saying "A prostitute's love for money diverted her from the holy faith that was her father's property" holds true. As you sold your mother for gold because of love for money, so did Judah Iscariot who sold God the Father, Saviour of the whole world, and God the Son for 30 pieces of silver; and because of this, his name has been recorded in books as evildoer,

and was passed from one generation to the other. We came to know that you also, Your Majesty, like Judah Iscariot, you have either sold out your mother Ethiopia for money, or maybe because of your weakness, you left her hanged [i.e. without knowing what to do]. Consequently, it will be said of you too, “[Look] what an indolent king Ethiopia has got this time: he is not able even to eat with his own hand the prepared food that has been served for him,” and your name will be recorded in every history book and passed from one generation to the next. Whereas some of us will leave behind our curses recorded as:

- the king who was a second Judah Iscariot,
- he who sold his mother Ethiopia for gold and lost her in vain,
- may his dynasty be not passed over to his next generation, and
- may his reign last a half-day only.

We said this because Satan envied our mother Eve’s domain and approached her disguising itself as a serpent. Because of her ignorance, Eve listened to his advice and ate the [forbidden] fruit. As a consequence, we are under the bondage of sin, death, tribulation, and fatigue until this day. Eve listened to the words of the serpent because she did not know that the subtle Satan approached her disguising itself in the form of snake with a wicked intention, so that she took him for an ordinary snake. Your Majesty became the second Eve.

Satan enters the human heart and talks so, as the saying goes, “The counsel of the wicked is malice,” but you forgot this and listened to the counsel of the wicked. Three months have elapsed in vain since you made the agreement, so we gave up the hope we had. Now we have realised that during your reign you are intending to destroy Ethiopia rather than developing her. Certainly, you will receive money and sell out Ethiopia. Thus, as the Bible says, “Blessed are those who do his will,” among these:

- Nepote died for his heritage,
- St. David also combatted the warrior Goliath for the sake of the children of Israel,
- Esther and Judith were but women, and yet by their intelligence they saved their country and their people, and
- Likewise, Joshua the son of Nun, fought against kings and defeated many of them, enabling the children of Israel inherit the Promised land.

In Ethiopia too, Your Highness and Majesty, there are many who toiled and died for their country, but I find it very difficult to tell who excelled the other in achievement. To mention but Tewodros among the many kings of Ethiopia. He was from a poor family and predecessor of Emperoro Yohannes. After he came to the throne, he campaigned as far as to Jerusalem. And Emperor Yohannes, declaring “I cannot give you even as much as a skin-bag-full of its soil, let alone my country,” fought the pagan king and died, thus becoming the second Gelawdeos. His Majesty, you belong to the old Davidic dynasty; then, how come you mistreat your mother Ethiopia daily? Majesty, don’t you give any

consideration to the Biblical saying, "Honour father and your mother so that you may have a long life in the land that the Lord your God has given to You?". Majesty, why don't you work for its welfare, instead of being 'with two tongues in one head and two kings in one throne,' as the saying indicates?

You did not liberate your brothers as you agreed to, nor did you pray for the rest of the country. Hence, it would be better if you hand over your regime to a competent person, instead of holding power without knowing what to do. Such a move would have saved Ethiopia from destruction.

Otherwise, if you sell out the country even this year as your usual habit, you will be addressed as "Menilek II, Emperor of Galla and a part of Ethiopia" and not as "Emperor of Ethiopia," it will be a great insolence. It will also be ridiculous for [i.e. many will laugh at] a person to bear a title of a country that he does not rule it.

You have not been considerate towards Ethiopia, therefore the saying of St. Paul, "He who does not think about his country and abandons his relatives is a traitor to his religion, and even worse than the unbeliever" points directly at Your Majesty and your officers, so I don't think you can escape a judgement. Hence, instead of shedding the blood of the Christians in vain again, it will relieve you in the time of the judgement if you agree and declare, "I have handed you over to the government of the beloved white so and so, therefore obey him and subdue yourself to him" or else, don't go on selling out the country and the monasteries whose owner thou art.

O, Majesty: my intention in writing this letter was neither to humiliate nor insult you, the annointed Prince of God, but when I saw my compatriots — the children of Ethiopia — being ruled by foreigners under a bondage of slavery worse than that of the children of Israel, I could not bear my grief and I decided to pass this information to Your Majesty so that it pierces and splits up your heart like a sword. Furthermore, it is said that Ethiopia is being surrounded by the whites, so if we remain in anticipation multiplying and strengthening ourselves as a united children of one mother-country Ethiopia; at the same time pleading for the help of God and the intercession of our lady to be with us, no doubt our Creator will abolish his judgement.

I am a subject of your Majesty, son of a liberating country who does not have anyone whose heart grieves for his mother.