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Article

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Introduction

The recurrent conflicts in the history of Ethiopia have various causes: political power, religion, regionalism and ethnicity, among others. Their consequences were devastating and were largely responsible for the country's poverty.¹ In the early twentieth century, a critical historian and political economist, Gäbrä Həywät Baykədəñ conceptualized this intersection and outlined the far-reaching impacts of these conflicts on the development of the country in his classic work, መንግሥትና ፣ የሕዝብ ፣ አስተዳደር # (*Mängəstənnā yəhəzb astädadär*).² He mentions two major causes of conflict: 'greed' (being in possession of financial or natural resources to set up rebel organizations) and 'grievance' (such as pronounced inequality, lack of political rights, ethnic or religious repression). For Gäbrä Həywät nothing hinders economic progress more than armed conflict and wars; even natural disasters and negative trade balances do not usually have such dramatic consequences. In his view, the major obstacles to agricultural development in Ethiopia were the wars which were led by individuals who did not want to work themselves but aspired to feed on the toil of others. The process also diverted human labour from farming to banditry.³ There are several ways in which civil war damages economies. It gradually reduces the accumulation of local potential (resources, skills, and knowledge), negatively impacting on the development of a nation. Moreover, the longer the duration of a war, the greater the likelihood that it seriously affects a nation and its people and reduces them to an impoverished status.⁴

Conflict and war are closely connected with monarchy throughout Ethiopian history. It might be assumed that the presence of a monarch in a certain province would assure peace and security. However, the opposite appears to be true for much of the history of Ethiopia. North Šäwa was

¹ Bairu Tafla 1987, 275.

² Gäbrä Həywät Baykədəñ 1960/1961.

³ Addis Ababa University 2009/2010, 54–55; Salvadore 2009, 127–134.

⁴ Alemayehu Geda 2004, 4.

exposed to these challenges throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. It suffered from a number of wars, starting with the battle of Bärākāt (1855) and continuing until that of Sägäle (1916). Major events included the following: the two campaigns of Emperor Tewodros II to Šäwa in 1855 and 1857; the confrontations between his viceroy in Šäwa, Bāzzabbəh, and the sons of Šahlä Šəllase from 1855 to 1865; the battle between Bāzzabbəh and Mənilək; Mənilək's confrontations with his rivals (uncles and cousins) in the late 1870s; the invasion of Šäwa by Yoħannəs IV; the submission of Mənilək in 1878 following the Ləčče Agreement;⁵ and the war between the nobilities of Šäwa and Wällo at the Battle of Sägäle in 1916. All these events resulted in political, religious or ethnic instabilities that seriously affected the unprotected peasants.

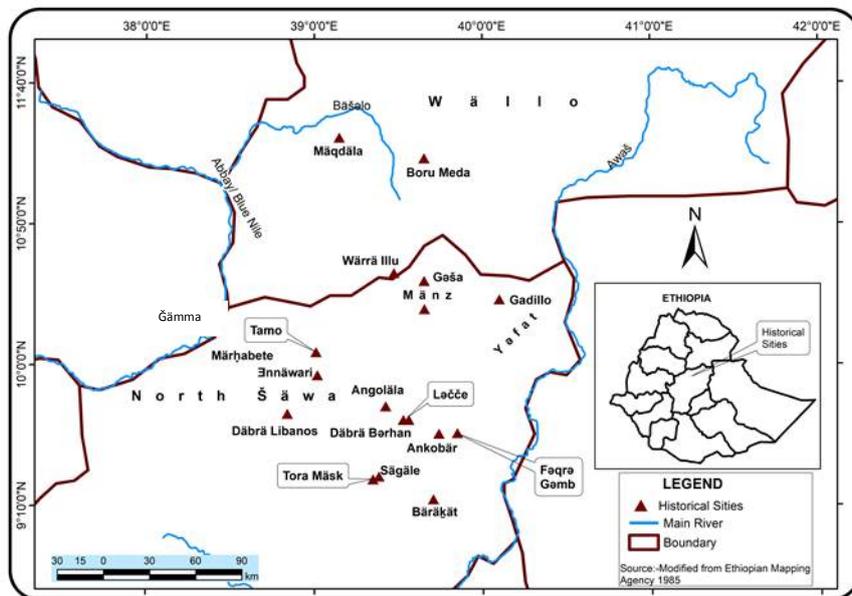


Fig. 1 Map of the area under study. Source: modified from the Ethiopian Mapping Agency, Addis Abāba, 1985.

This article analyses the impact of these recurrent wars on the life of north Šäwan peasants from 1855 to 1916. It also attempts to add to our limited knowledge of the fate of north Šäwan peasants in the various conflicts that arose in the second half of the nineteenth century. Unfortunately, archival sources for this period are almost non-existent:

⁵ Darkwah 1975, 40–45.

most of the few documents that existed were destroyed during the resistance to the Italian occupation (1935–1941).⁶ Efforts were made to fill these gaps by interviewing informants during field research.

The Time prior to Mənilək (1855–1865)

North Šäwa became a battlefield for bitter and violent conflicts among rival chiefs to attain political power. The death of King Həylä Mäləkot in 1855 resulted in endless battles which lasted until 1889. Local authors emphasize particularly the initial phase of these conflicts as, ‘ያገኘሰ ምን አገኘ ፣ ያጣሰ ምን አጣ’ (‘he who gained, gained nothing [and] he who lost, lost nothing’). This situation in Šäwa can be attributed to the absence of a strong government.⁷ The many battles led to a dramatic rise in the number of soldiers for at least two reasons: becoming a soldier represented an employment opportunity for many peasants and was the only means of escaping from their oppressive daily life.

One of the authors who elucidated these conflicts was Ašmä Giyorgis, who accused the Ethiopian Orthodox Church of failing to actively intervene in such situations. He assumed that the Church was reluctant to solve the problem since it was headed by an Egyptian patriarch who did not wish to see a peaceful and economically prospering Ethiopia. Subsequently, he boldly concluded that the patriarchs worked for the benefit of their own country to the detriment of Ethiopia so that it would not develop the capacity to dam the Nile, ‘the life of Egypt’.⁸ Although it is difficult to agree with this argument, the present author believes that the Church did not exercise any moral authority and try to stop the conflicts.

The death of each Šäwan ruler was usually followed by conflicts between rivals for the ruling position.⁹ Each successor occupied the position by force: the most powerful of the numerous sons competing for power, the one with the largest number of supporters, would be successful. In fact, each Šäwan ruler had several wives and concubines, who gave birth to many sons who would, in turn, become rivals after the death of their father. For example, the second half of the nineteenth century was characterized by conflicts in the region because *Nəgus* Šahlä Šəllase of Šäwa, who died in 1847, had fathered approximately thirty children with his wives and concubines.¹⁰ The existing literature from the Šäwan side claims that the

⁶ Garretson and Pankhurst 1978.

⁷ Bairu Tafla 1987, 533; Hobbes 1651; Crummey 1986.

⁸ Bairu Tafla 1987, 533.

⁹ Gäbrä Šəllase Wäldä Arägay 1966/1967, 48–60.

¹⁰ Təlahun Bərhan Šəllase 2003/2004, 136.

relative peace and Šäwan autonomy ended at the death of *Nəgus* Ḥaylä Mäläkot (successor of *Nəgus* Šahlä Šəllase) in 1855, followed by the subjugation of the region by Emperor Tewodros II (1855–1868).¹¹ Thus, a series of destructive battles were fought on the soil of north Šäwa, from the battle of Bäräkät (1855) to that of Sägäle (1916).¹²

To begin with, Emperor Tewodros fought two bloody battles in Šäwa in 1855 and 1857, both of which resulted in heavy casualties, mainly for the peasants of Šäwa Meda. Furthermore, a number of battles were fought in Šäwa for ten years (1855–1865), involving the sons of Šahlä Šəllase after the death of their elder brother Ḥaylä Mäläkot and the exiling of his son Mənilək in Mäqdäla. The main actors were Ḥaylä Mika’el and Säyfu. The former was the son of a concubine of Šahlä Šəllase and a viceroy of Emperor Tewodros, even though he was not recognized by his rivals. The latter was the legitimate son of Šahlä Šəllase from his wife. The extent of the destruction during the time of Ḥaylä Mika’el was mentioned in diplomatic letters sent by King Mənilək to European rulers. His letter to Queen Victoria in 1867 is one example, explaining the case as: ‘if my grandfather had done no wrong and had not displeased your people at that time, all this oppression and destruction like this would not have happened in our country [...] Do not let the country where you planted your flag be destroyed again.’¹³

Mənilək’s Rule (1865–1913)

Even after he escaped from Mäqdäla and became the king of Šäwa, Mənilək was unable to stop the conflicts.¹⁴ First, he had to settle his rivalry with Bəzzabbəh, the second viceroy of Emperor Tewodros, at the battle of Gadillo in 1865. The other strong opponents who had transformed Šäwa into a land of turmoil were Mənilək’s two uncles, Ḥaylä Mika’el and Säyfu, his own wife *Wäyzäro* Bafäna and his cousin Mäšäša Säyfu. The lowlands inhabited by the Amhara were not only the parishes of peasants but also areas of self-exile for most of these opponents who had been defeated by force.¹⁵

¹¹ Gäbrä Šəllase *Wäldä Arägay* 1966/1967, 48–60; Marcus 1975, 7–15.

¹² Bairu Tafla 1987; Ḥərüy *Wäldä Šəllase* 2006/2007; Märsə’ə Ḥazän *Wäldä Qirqos* 2006/2007, 165.

¹³ Rubenson et al. 2000, 327.

¹⁴ Mənilək became the king of Šäwa in 1865 and emperor of Ethiopia in 1889 after the death of Emperor Yoḥannəs IV.

¹⁵ Ḥərüy *Wäldä Šəllase* 2006/2007, 100–109; Marcus 1975, 28–56.

Emperor Yoḥannəs IV undertook one important campaign to Šäwa, which was concluded by the Ləčče Agreement in 1878. Based on the available sources, the months before the agreement were very hard for the peasants of north Šäwa: the chronicler of Mənilək, for instance, reported that '[t]he armies of Emperor Yoḥannəs were destroying the country, invading left and right, plundering cattle. While spending the night at Wadera, they burnt the town of *Wäyzäro* Atmoč, Sälla Dəngay.'¹⁶ During the same period, the cavalry of the emperor tried to overrun Šäwa Meda, causing many casualties. Even after the emperor prohibited his army from plundering the possessions of the peasants, yet the 'starved northern armies' were not willing to stop.¹⁷

The army of Emperor Yoḥannəs spent weeks in Šäwa Meda while marching to Däbrä Libanos: the emperor and his army passed through Mänz, Wadera, Dənbäro Meda, Doddota, Abičuu, Ğiğiga, and Sälale, plundering Šäwan peasants on their way to Däbrä Libanos.¹⁸

Before he moved to Ənətoṭto in 1881, Mənilək spent almost two decades wandering throughout Šäwa from one garrison settlement to the other even though his nominal capital was at Ləčče. As a result, the king and his army repeatedly crossed the Šäwan territory through the villages of peasants feeding on their properties.¹⁹ There was no time of the year in which the peasants were exempted from feeding the mobile court's residents. Moreover, the army requested food items that were not abundant, such as butter, meat, and honey. The same travel pattern was frequently followed in Šäwa by Mənilək after the Ləčče Agreement in 1878. The year 1878 was characterized by the repeated crossing and re-crossing of Šäwa by the armies of both Emperor Yoḥannəs and Mənilək.²⁰

The death of Emperor Yoḥannəs IV in 1889 at the battle of Mätämma also resulted in turmoil in Šäwa for a brief period of time.²¹ The critical Battle of ʿAdwa fought with the Italians in 1896 also affected Šäwa: even though the battle was fought in the northern province of Təgray and not on

¹⁶ Hərui Wäldä Šəllase 2006/2007, 115–116. The translation is by the article's author.

¹⁷ Ibid., 117.

¹⁸ Gäbrä Šəllase Wäldä Arəgay 1966/1967, 83–85.

¹⁹ Rubenson et al. 2000. The capital town, Ləčče, was founded in September 1865, but Mənilək was based at Ankobär in July 1867 and at Ləčče and sometimes in Wällo in 1868 and 1869. He spent most of 1871 in another garrison town, Ənnäwari, occasionally in Wärrä Illu, and stayed frequently in Wällo throughout 1872. He arrived at Ləčče in June 1873, returned to Wällo in 1874 and 1875 but returned to Ləčče in December 1875.

²⁰ Afäwäraq Gäbrä Iyäsus 1908/1909, 45.

²¹ Täklä Həwaryat Täklä Maryam 2005/2006, 1.

Šäwan soil, the soldiers from Šäwa and other newly incorporated southern provinces spent about two weeks in the Šäwan territory, consuming the property of peasants on their way to °Adwa. The army was in Šäwa during the month of October, the eve of the harvesting season: ‘ዘመቻዬም በጥቅምት ነውና የሸዋ ሰወ. እስከ ጥቅምት እኩሌታ ድረስ ወረይሉ ከተህ ላግኝህ’ (‘My campaign is in Ṭəqəmt, all the people of Šäwa, make yourself available at Wärräyällu till the middle of Ṭəqəmt’) was the command of the emperor.²² After the victory, the region once more experienced the burden of supplying the army on its way back to the capital and the southern region.²³

The Time of *Ləǧ* Iyasu (1913–1916)

The short reign of *Ləǧ* Iyasu (1913–1916) was also characterized by mobility of the army, which accompanied the young crown prince from region to region, even before the death of the emperor.²⁴ The unpredictable movements of the crown prince created an additional burden on those peasants who lived on his route. *Aläqa* Gäbrä Ḫgziʿabəḫer commented the situation as follows:

Abeto Iyasu never ordered his army to prepare their provisions when he planned to make a campaign. He informed only a few of them who were his special officials and then mounted his horse, Tena. At that moment his selected armies carried their guns and mounted their horses to follow him. Nevertheless, in the regions he travelled to, the local governors and peasants provided hay for their horses, and *anǧära* and cows for the army.²⁵

This royal mobility from region to region increased the pressure on the lives of the peasants and even local or village governors extracted what they gave to the prince from the same peasants who were also supplying the prince directly. As we can read in his chronicles, Iyasu and his followers were living in Wällo most of the time: north Šäwa was a geographical bridge between central Šäwa (Addis Abäba) and Wällo and, therefore, its peasants were responsible for providing all the requisitioned supplies and services while the prince crossed the region repeatedly.

The overthrow of *Ləǧ* Iyasu by the Šäwan nobility resulted in a conflict between Šäwa and Wällo, which led to a series of battles in 1916. Three of these battles, namely Tora Mäsk, Ankobär and Sägäle, were fought in north

²² Gäbrä Šällase Wäldä Arägay 1966/1967, 225. The translation is by the article’s author.

²³ Gäbrä Šällase Wäldä Arägay 1966/1967, 225; Ḫärury Wäldä Šällase 2006/2007, 236.

²⁴ Gebre-Igziabiher Elyas 1994, 34.

²⁵ i.e. bread and meat. *Ibid.*, 41. The translation is by the article’s author.

Šäwa, which therefore had to host about 250,000 soldiers with their servants and pack animals. The entire army, their servants and animals left nothing behind for the peasants in those districts. In particular, *Nəguś* Mika'el of Wällo legitimated his army's looting: 'do not worry about preparing provisions [...] I am your provisions, eat and drink by looting what you come across on your route!'²⁶ This led to a massive destruction of the property of Šäwan peasants, which took place as soon as these forces entered their territory from Wällo. According to an eyewitness' account reported by Märso'e, 'the army of Wällo overran the district of Mänz and began to plunder anything they found on their way. They slaughtered the oxen and sheep of the peasants, burnt their houses'.²⁷

A further cause of severe loss for the peasants was the fact that these battles were fought in the middle of October 1916, the season when crops were ripening and easily depleted or destroyed as the armies fed on them, set them on fire as the enemy's property or let their animals graze on them. The month of October was also the time when cattle and sheep were fatter, because of the availability of grazing grass, to the benefit of the soldiers and to the great loss of the peasant families.

These wars caused such damage to the property of Šäwan peasants that the new government of *Ras* Täfäri Mäkwännən, the future Emperor Həylä Šəllase, promised the peasants that he would pay compensation, declaring that

all the peasants, whose properties [were] looted, whose farms [were] destroyed by the army because of today's war, should inform *Ligaba* Bäyyänä in order to obtain compensation. You [peasants] should not mourn for your looted property, spoiled farms and slaughtered oxen.²⁸

Taffara Deguefé, who was originally from the region and later became the head of the National Bank of Ethiopia, authored a voluminous autobiography. Narrating the story of his family, he remembers these battles as the most miserable time of his family's life in Ankobär.

The battle of Sägäle, at which thousands perished in a fratricidal conflict that shook Wällo and Šäwa to the core, affected countless families. Aunt Gete remembers Sägäle as a sad occasion when many

²⁶ Märso'e Həzän Wäldä Qirqos 2006/2007, 162, 165–167; translation by the article's author. See also Taddia 2013.

²⁷ Märso'e Həzän Wäldä Qirqos 2006/2007, 162, 165–167; translation by the article's author. Marcus 1975, 278–281.

²⁸ Gebre-Igziabiher Elyas 1994, 78. See also Marcus 1995, 13–21.

lads from peasant families of our village were conscripted to follow their chiefs to a conflict between feuding lords that they did not comprehend.²⁹

A Quantitative Estimate of Military in Action (1855–1916)

The prolonged political conflicts that took place between 1855 and 1916 resulted in a demand for a larger number of soldiers as well as better weapons: these two factors aggravated the instability in north Šäwa. Firstly, the army of Šäwa dramatically increased in size from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards. Even before this, the army of Šahlä Šällase comprised 40,000 to 100,000 soldiers according to several European travellers, such as Harris and Krapf, who were in Šäwa during his reign: they reported that about 100,000 soldiers could be mobilized or called up, if conflicts or wars erupted.³⁰ In the view of the present author, it is likely that the size of the army increased after the death of the king: while during his reign many soldiers were commanded by the king, after his death and especially after the death of his immediate successor, Ḥaylä Mäläkot, **ከሸዋ ፣ ባለ ፣ አልጋ ፣ ጠፋ** ('there was no Bāla algā in Šawā')³¹ as Ašmä Giyorgis puts it, meaning that each claimant led a large number of soldiers causing an increase in their overall number and aggravating the misery of the peasants. A decade after Šahlä Šällase's death in 1847, Šäwa might have billeted nearly 200,000 soldiers and this caused a vicious cycle of conscription and looting: the need to enlist more soldiers as well as to feed the growing armies were most probably the reason why numerous expeditions were dispatched to different corners of Šäwa or to regions north of this area. It should also be remembered that equal numbers of armies, or even more, were left behind in Šäwa for security purposes.

Secondly, to worsen the matter, the immense size of the army coincided with the introduction of large numbers of firearms. The period of Emperor Mənilək's rule in Šäwa, beginning from 1865, was characterized by the importation of these from different European countries.³² Thus, numerous soldiers armed with these weapons repeatedly passed by or through the villages of Šäwan peasants looting their possessions and frequently raping their wives and daughters.

It was most likely this gradual expansion of the army that led Gäbrä Ḥəywät to comment on the situation as follows: 'The multiplicity of

²⁹ Taffara Deguefé 2006, 26. See also Gebre-Igziabiher Elyas 1994, 78.

³⁰ Pankhurst 1963, 123; Harris 1844, 367.

³¹ Bairu Tafla 1987, 570 (ed.), 571 (tr.). *Balä alga* stands for 'legitimate ruler'.

³² Pankhurst 1962, 149.

soldiers does not strengthen but impoverishes the state'.³³ Moreover and in addition to the looting by the army under the supervision of the king and his officials, the availability of firearms frequently promoted banditry and robbery.³⁴ Both the army and petty criminals represented non-productive consumers relying on the livelihood of the peasantry of the region.

A Predatory System resulting from Political Instability

The violent and detrimental relationship between the large armies and the peasantry had several causes, according to the author of this article. Firstly, the armies seemed to consider the peasants to be simply at their disposal:³⁵ they only had their own material needs in mind and viewed the peasants as a means of satisfying them, regardless of the consequences. Secondly, the introduction of firearms and their distribution among the soldiers gave them greater power to harass the peasants. One of the early Ethiopian authors, Afäwäraq Gäbrä Iyäsus, expresses their acts in this way: **‘ኅፎጥ ኑግ ጥቁር ወተት ወለዱ’** meaning ‘Bring white nug (black oily seed) and black milk’, two impossible provisions.³⁶ Thirdly, the present author believes that the traditional education provided by the Ethiopian Church did not deal with issues associated with the military code of conduct:³⁷ although the Church influenced many aspects of Ethiopian life, it had no effective means by which it could influence the army or its leaders and stop or avert war. Instead, the Ethiopian Church tended to regard the victorious groups or individuals as the ‘elected of God’.³⁸ Thus, most armies lacked moral codes or rules which would give a positive orientation to their relationship with the peasants, and rather sought to gain credit in the eyes of their masters, as mentioned below:

**ፈረሱንም ጋልበዉ ላቡ እስኪንቆረቆር ፤
ነፍጡንም ተኩስዉ ቃታዉ እስኪሰበር ፤
ጦሩንም ወርወረዉ ሰማዩ ይሰንጠር ፤
አዳራሽ ሲገቡ አንገት ከማቀርቀር ።**

(Ride the horse to sweat
Pull the trigger too deftly

³³ Addis Ababa University 2009/2010, 20.

³⁴ Maḥtämä Šällase Wäldä Mäsqäl 1969/1970, 424–428.

³⁵ Afäwäraq Gäbrä Iyäsus 1908/1909, 4.

³⁶ Ibid., 2–3.

³⁷ Pankhurst 1968, 550.

³⁸ Messay Kebede 1999.

Shoot the arrow, tear the Zenith
Rather than sticking your head in your breast).³⁹

Fourthly, another possible factor was that the soldiers were not paid but were allowed to loot whatever they required from the regions through which they passed, irrespective of whether the inhabitants were loyalists or rebels. Therefore, the dramatic effects of frequent fighting were exacerbated by the acts of pillage of these myriads of soldiers that damaged the property of the peasants. This system was fully to the advantage of the chiefs or kings and to the detriment of the local peasantry: since supplying the army with provisions was not the responsibility of the king or the chief, they were not concerned about producing more crops from limited farmlands.⁴⁰ Probably this is the reason why Gäbrä Həywät strongly associates the poverty of the country with the acts of these armies, writing that

many of the peoples of our country call themselves soldiers, but they spend their time loitering in the streets, living like parasites on the produce of the peasantry. Among the civilized societies, a soldier is someone who protects the peasant and the *gäbbar*. In our country however, we are nearer to the truth if we define the soldier as an ardent enemy of the peasant.⁴¹

Due to the absence of modern transportation, the soldiers travelled on foot and left the peasants unprotected:⁴² the villages on their route (and their surroundings) were automatically raided and left in a miserable condition. The troops' inclination to loot was referred to by an Ethiopian chief (whose name is not mentioned in the original source) who, talking to a British officer in 1900, declared, as quoted in Pankhurst, 'our soldiers are bad men and when we come to a large village, they just fire a few shots, on which the natives run away, and all their grain is then brought into my camp'.⁴³

When the resources of a locality or region were depleted, the rulers abandoned it or extended their domain to include better-resourced areas, measures which often culminated in the capture of much booty.⁴⁴

³⁹ Maḥtämä Šəllase Wäldä Mäsqäl 1969/1970, 247; the translation is by the article's author.

⁴⁰ Pankhurst 1962, 149.

⁴¹ Addis Ababa University 2009/2010, 20. Translation by the article's author.

⁴² Caulk 1978, 457.

⁴³ Pankhurst 1968, 577.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 118–142.

The destructive nature of undisciplined soldiers was particularly an issue during Mənilək's rule of Šäwa and after his coronation as emperor of Ethiopia, when the bands of unpaid but supposedly professional soldiers, who had left their lands during the previous period of fighting, had grown out of all proportion. Moreover, these armies were usually predators living relatively independently from their lords by raiding their enemies for booty, while their masters could retain large numbers of soldiers since they did not need to provide for them. To worsen the matter, the region of Šäwa was already impoverished and the peasants could scarcely feed themselves, let alone the soldiers: thus, Mənilək's conquest of the region south of Šäwa had the aim, among others, of feeding this growing army.⁴⁵

Based on this, the present author believes that efforts were made to trigger war for the purpose of raiding: even if the king did not wish to engage in battle, his armies might want to do so. The idea 'bring us war, if there is no war there is no booty' seems to express the mentality of the army.⁴⁶ The continuous wars and conflicts also had wider social consequences for the peasantry: villages and farms were deserted; the inheritance of properties, wealth and villages was hindered; for many generations, individuals were forced to resettle several times within their lifespan.⁴⁷ The widespread turmoil prevented the secure possession of lands which could be transmitted from father to son: one's land, including *rəst*, could be easily confiscated by powerful individuals and given to their supporters.⁴⁸ Moreover, households isolated from clustered villages were victims not only of soldiers but also of bandits or robbers who saw the turmoil as an opportunity for themselves.⁴⁹

Therefore, the history of north Šäwa in the second half of the nineteenth and the first two decades of the twentieth century is characterized not only by the victories and defeats reported by the royal chronicles, but also by the economic and social consequences of these wars and conflicts on the peasants, the bloodshed, the ravaging of fertile lands, the butchering of herds of cattle, the destruction of towns and villages, and by the interruption of internal and external trade. The frequent destruction of livelihoods resulted in famine which led, in turn, to outbreaks of epidemics

⁴⁵ Pausewang 1979, 703.

⁴⁶ Täklä Šadəq Mäkwəriya 1973/1974, 161–166.

⁴⁷ Author's fieldwork informants: Abbäbä Dämise, Həylu Dämise, Nädhi Zärga (interviews carried out at Wayu on 7 September 2010).

⁴⁸ Sirak Fəqadä Šəllase 1938/1939, 12; Crummey 2000, 221–225.

⁴⁹ Author's fieldwork informants: Mägərətü Dämise, Fälläqäčč Dämise, Ğəfare Dadhi (interviews carried out at Gamo/Mändida on 15 February 2009 and on 2 July 2010).

and to a significant reduction of the population.⁵⁰ Virtually each war was followed by famine because there was no time or opportunity to cultivate land. The most severe famine which brought much hardship and claimed the lives of many peasants is that known in Ethiopian history as the ‘Great Famine’, which lasted from 1888 to 1892. Although other factors, such as the failure of the rains and the hot weather that scorched many hectares of crops, contributed to it, the fundamental reason was the constant conflict and the concentration of considerable numbers of soldiers in the north which contributed to the depletion of the food supply.⁵¹ As mentioned above, a large number of soldiers repeatedly crossed the Šäwan region and the overburdened peasants were forced to feed them from the already limited supplies they had left after the failed crop season. The loss of cattle, and especially oxen that were used for ploughing, brought agricultural activity to a halt, paralysing and devastating the economy by depleting the agricultural capital (cattle and seeds). The large number of cattle carcasses led to unhygienic conditions and infectious diseases: smallpox, typhus, cholera, and influenza epidemics decimated the population.⁵²

In addition to politically-related conflicts, violent confrontation between bandits and their immediate masters also impacted on the lives of the peasants. The attempt to secure the highest position or rank among the bandits had a particularly negative effect in the area since, thanks to the number of inaccessible localities, banditry flourished in north Šäwa. Under such circumstances, the locals were threefold victims: bandits robbed them; the government punished them for supporting bandits and also collected tribute from them; finally, the armies looted their possessions and turned their villages or farms into battlegrounds.⁵³ The peasants, who represented the majority of the population, played a crucially productive role in the society: while the nobles fought with each other and the priests engaged in over-refined theological disputes, the social order was sustained by the peasantry, practically the only productive class in the entire society. Through the combination of a long-established plough agriculture and animal husbandry, the peasants supported the whole social edifice. However, at the same time, they lived in difficult conditions, not better than that of employed household servants: they were at the mercy of the will and

⁵⁰ Pankhurst 1963, 118–142.

⁵¹ Government of Ethiopia 1928.

⁵² Pankhurst 1968, 623.

⁵³ Pankhurst 1963, 119.

whims of the warring nobility and their soldiers who went on raids to fill their coffers.⁵⁴

Religious Conflicts

The legacy of the seventeenth-century religious controversies between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the Portuguese Jesuit missionaries continued throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Ethiopia. In Šäwa, these reached a climax, affecting many people after the Council of Boru Meda in 1878,⁵⁵ a council that attempted to solve the religious controversy on Christology. Beginning in May 1878, the attempts of Emperor Yoḥannəs to homogenize the religion of the country by banning all religions except Christianity, but also various sects of Christianity (except for the ‘two births [for Christ]’ sect to which he belonged)⁵⁶ affected the peace and security of the region that was already in a state of turmoil. Yoḥannəs acted forcefully, justifying his measures with the purpose of extirpating all wrong practices.⁵⁷

This campaign particularly affected north Šäwa for three reasons. Firstly the centre of the dominant rival sect, ‘three births [for Christ]’, was the monastery of Däbrä Libanos in north Šäwa.⁵⁸ The religious measures taken against the followers of the various Christian sects created a certain degree of hostility between Emperor Yoḥannəs IV and *Nəgus* Mənilək and the clergy, as well as among the population that was banned from practicing the religion of their ancestors. In October 1878, the coronation ceremony of Mənilək as the *nəgus* of Šäwa (after he displayed his loyalty to Yoḥannəs IV), held at Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase, and the feast at Ləčče one day later offered some examples of how locals were forced to adapt to the ‘two births’ sect of the Orthodox *Təwəḥədo* Christianity. In fact, Mənilək himself was forced to convert to the ‘two births’ sect in order to be recognized by the emperor and, in turn, he forced his subjects to convert. Most of the unrest was caused by the simple fact that the peasants could not clearly understand the differences between each religious faction.⁵⁹ Secondly, the majority of the inhabitants of Šäwa Meda consisted of Oromo Tuulama, who were banned from practicing their *gadaa* system and were subjected to forced circumcision and baptism before the actual *buttaa* age.⁶⁰ In fact, not only were the Tuulama forcibly baptized, but the unrest was

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ ‘Boru Meda’, *EAE*, I (2003), 609a–b (É. Ficquet).

⁵⁶ ‘Karra’, *EAE*, III (2007), 348a–349a (Getatchew Haile).

⁵⁷ Bairu Tafla 1987.

⁵⁸ Ibid.; Darkwah 1975, 45–46.

⁵⁹ Hərüy Wäldä Šəllase 2006/2007, 121.

⁶⁰ Bairu Tafla 1987.

aggravated when the clergy refused to baptize them before checking whether the males had been circumcised or not. If not, they were forced into circumcision before the *buttaa* ceremony.⁶¹ Lastly, a significant number of Muslims living in the eastern part of north Šäwa, near the Awaš river, faced difficulties because they were not willing to convert. Yoḥannəs' efforts resulted in social unrest which, in turn, affected the peasants' life. Migration and displacement from one locality to the other, coupled with attacks or looting by soldiers who used the situation as a pretext, aggravated the unrest. Many Muslims migrated to areas such as Qabeena in Gurage, Ğimma Abbaa Ğifaar, and Haräрге.⁶²

Ašmä Giyorgis concluded his discussion about the religious and political feuds that frequently affected the north Šäwan region with a strong personal statement:

The rivers of Ethiopia overflowed with blood, because of many religions and peoples. It was the blood of Ethiopia that nourished the cotton of Egypt. Moreover the apostles that came to Ethiopia did nothing to save her from shedding her blood in order that the cotton might not wither, for they themselves were wearers of Egyptian cotton.⁶³

Inter- and Intra-Ethnic Conflicts in the Twentieth Century

Ethnic differences among the people of the north Šäwan region were used as a cover for conflicts over control of resources. The region was inhabited by Oromo, Amhara, Argobba and ʿAfar who had often been in conflict. The eastern zone of the region had been a battleground for different ethnic groups over a long period of time. The Oromo settlements were mostly established on rich farmland and forest land and this resulted in the large scale displacement of the Amhara and the Argobba.⁶⁴ However, these two groups started to resettle the area by the beginning of the eighteenth century as a result of the revival of powerful local Amhara chiefs and their strong alliance with the Argobba leader (*wälasma*) against the Oromo. The Amhara began to establish their agricultural settlements in the lowland areas, which had earlier been used entirely by the Oromo for pasture. The ʿAfar were the last group to move into these areas, probably from the late eighteenth century onward. According to some historical accounts, by the late 1890s various ʿAfar clans had extended

⁶¹ Ibid., 48–50.

⁶² Bahru Zewde 1991.

⁶³ Bairu Tafla 1987, 221.

⁶⁴ Ahmed Hassen Omer 1997, 76–77.

their settlements further west to the Oromo areas.⁶⁵ This expansion was associated with the Great Famine of 1888–1892 and with ecological factors, which forced them to move to the neighbouring Oromo area of Ifat. The environmental pressure and the conflicts between the four ethnic groups had their most obvious manifestation during the famine when competition for the scarce resources was so high that people might kill each other for wild trees and fruits.⁶⁶

Two decades later, in 1916, power struggles between Šäwa and Wällo and the leaders' attempts to divide the people and gain their support resulted in ethnically based divisions and conflicts. Iyasu attempted to strengthen his power by seeking the support of the Oromo and °Afar, who were followers of Islam. On the other hand, *Ras Täfäri Mäk^wännən* relied on the local Christian Amhara population. As a result, the area became a centre of turmoil and recurrent conflict. The power struggle ended with the victory of *Ras Täfäri Mäk^wännən*'s faction; however, the misery of the local population did not cease: his supporters adopted harsh measures such as confiscation of the land and the heavy taxation of the °Afar and the Oromo. These measures led to a new wave of conflict between the Amhara, the °Afar and the Oromo: according to Ahmed Hassen, these were due to the fact that local Oromo and °Afar took revenge on their Amhara neighbours for their grievances against the state.⁶⁷

In addition to these inter-ethnic clashes, the geography of the region, the prevalence of a weak government and legal system along with the complex nature of the *rəst* land tenure system encouraged intra-ethnic conflict. The irregular landscape contributed to the emergence of isolated identities and behaviours embodied by individuals who considered themselves as alien, for example, to the adjacent *amba*. In most highland Ethiopian regions, each hamlet, each hill and each small valley had a name of its own: even if they could seem too small and too close to each other to deserve distinct names, they were separate 'microcosms' and sometimes the expression 'my country' simply denoted 'my village' with its specific psycho-social characteristics. These peoples shared common boundaries, mainly rivers or minor streams, which could become lines of conflict between communities on either side.⁶⁸ Different war songs were composed by the people of the Amhara ethnic group to initiate or accompany members of their community into combat in the

⁶⁵ Pawlos Nōñño 2010/2011, 94.

⁶⁶ Author's fieldwork informants: Abbäbä Zärga, Həyly Dämise (interviewed at Sakela/Wayu on 8 September 2010).

⁶⁷ Ahmed Hassan Omer 1997, 76–77.

⁶⁸ Zäwde Gäbrä Həyiwät 2002/2003, 8.

Adäbay river valley. The practice was continued into the twentieth century, as some of the eyewitness accounts in Ğirruu and Märḥabete attest.

**ወይ እነሱ አይመጡ ወይ እኛ አንሻገር ፤
ወንዙ ጦም አደረ የሁለት ፈሪ አገር ።**

(Neither we cross to them beyond, nor do they
The river unmuddied passed the night idle, oh, we two cowards!)⁶⁹

Among the Amhara, disputes over land boundaries or inheritance of *rəst* lands were common, and resulted in killings and in the disruption of the peace of a locality. Often male members of the families that clashed turned to banditry and left their farms to female members of their household. This could cause significant loss of agricultural productivity, since most of the area was dominated by plough agriculture which needed male labour to be productive. According to the tradition of the Amhara, the harvested crops, or the crops ripened and ready for harvesting, were set on fire by their enemies. The houses and all other properties of the peasants might be set on fire at night, resulting in the destruction of all their possessions, including their cattle and flocks. After modern guns were made available to peasants, an enemy might even shoot those who were attempting to save the property from the fire. Able-bodied men who had been victims of such incidents could turn to banditry and might express their emotions as follows:

**በሬዬን አረዱት ደግ ተገባደደ ፤
መሬቴንም ቀሙኝ ደግ ተገባደደ ፤
ሚስቴንም ወሰዷት ደግ ተገባደደ ፤
እኛ ደም አይለምድም ሰወ. ከልተናደደ ።**

(They killed my ox; I said I am no more
They took my land; I said I am no more
They took my wife; I said I am no more
No man stains his hand [with blood] unless one sees it is enough!)⁷⁰

The family history of Taffara Deguefé begins with an account of how they had travelled from the Mänz area to Ankobär and describes what they had faced there. As narrated in his autobiography, '[his grandfather] was escaping from a complicated land dispute that had resulted in his killing of his adversary in Mänz. And so he had run away to avoid revenge killing and blood feud'.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Dechasa Abebe 2003, 6.

⁷⁰ Author's fieldwork informants: Abbäbä Zärga, Ḥaylu Dämise (interviewed at Sakela/Wayu on 8 September 2010); translation by the article's author.

⁷¹ Taffara Deguefé 2006, 22.

Moreover, he describes what his family faced after their settlement in Ankobär, as follows:

The dreadful conflagration that destroyed the house and cattle reducing them to ashes is well remembered by the descendants. The cattle were barricaded for the night near the house and my mother and aunts witnessed helplessly their dying in the flames. They have never forgotten the turmoil and noise as the cattle exploded trapped in the fire.⁷²

Most of the acts of revenge were committed by the Amhara against each other, although the practice also gradually spread among the Oromo of Šäwa Meda. For this reason, the following song, similar to the Amharic one reported above, was composed:

Maasaan Darroo lafa hinbaatu,
talbaa facaafata taati;
Tokko horee tokko hin nyaatu,
walgagalaafata taati.

(Darroo's farm won't remain a fallow, never!
Flax (oil-seed) will be sown at least.
One breeds and toils in vain, for someone to eat and live on?
Never ever! That will mark our end, finally!)⁷³

In most cases, the ethnic groups had no confidence in the government's capacity to maintain peace and security: they rather relied on the power of their relatives and on the weapons at their disposal. This is why they expressed their feelings as follows:

**ሰራህን ከፍ አርገዉ ጎራዴህን ቀና ፤
ከሊህም ቤት ከሊያም ቤት ባለደም ነህና ።**

(Pull up your shorts, be alert, brandish your sword
on your left, on your right, is your hand stained with blood).⁷⁴

The death of a father or a family leader was a particularly delicate moment in which the inheritance process could easily trigger endless conflicts within the community or the families. This was due to the fact that the land tenure system, particularly the *räst* system, was open to endless interpretations of

⁷² Ibid., 23.

⁷³ Author's fieldwork informants: Abbäbä Dämise, Tulluu Tufa (interviewed at Sakela on 7 September 2010).

⁷⁴ Maḥtämä Šällase Wäldä Mäsqäl 1969/1970, 344.

rights, which led to much litigation. The legal system would affect peasants' lives for several reasons, the first being the length of time that opponents spent on litigation, which diverted manpower from agricultural activities and weakened confidence in the ownership of the land (in particular, the planting of perennial crops required such confidence). According to the author, the second reason might be the venues and locations of the courts themselves in relation to the residences and occupations of the contestants: peasants would lack skills in litigation and would be obliged to pay for both the lawyer and most probably for the judge, even for cases that ended in failure. The third reason would stem from the amount of resources that the various sides in the case were ready to commit to win it: many of the peasants sold whatever they had, thus losing both their land and their property to the lawyer; to the point of giving their sons and daughters as servants to those who would lend them money or offer legal services.⁷⁵ Therefore, the weak legal system often worsened the peasants' situation and led opponents to further violence.

Conclusion

Although wars and conflicts could sometimes result in scientific innovations, such as the invention of different types of weapons and the increase in the productivity of farms or industries to finance the war and to feed large numbers of soldiers, the real situation on the ground, in Ethiopia in general and in north Šäwa in particular, was different.

In the period between 1855 and 1916 north Šäwa was heavily affected by wars that did not solve short term problems or conflicts but rather seemed to become a way of life: individuals were born in wars, grew up in them, and died during them. Commonly, such conflicts diverted a large amount of the labour force from production to the battlefields. Although there were different options for feeding the large number of soldiers, including increasing the productivity by introducing innovations and using different farming methods, in Ethiopia the peasantry carried the burden of providing the army's livelihood to the extent of losing everything.

Moreover, although the traditional Ethiopian Church's education was ecclesiastical in character and might have helped individuals to develop moral values and a more humanitarian behaviour, the Orthodox Church did not challenge the armed forces by using its authority. If it had done so, it would have contributed to the stability of the area and played a role in improving the peasants' life. However, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was inclined to regard those who were victorious on the battlefield as the 'elected of God'.

⁷⁵ Pawlos Ñoñño 2010/2011, 220, 251.

Therefore, the Church was not in a position to impose a code of conduct on the army.

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Summary

Conflicts and wars are associated with Ethiopian monarchs throughout history. It might be assumed that the presence of a monarch in a certain province within the country would assure peace and security. However, the opposite appears to be true for much of the history of Ethiopia. North Šäwa experienced a number of wars, conflicts, and predatory raids when its autonomy and relative peace was disrupted by its subjugation to Emperor Tewodros II in 1855. This was followed by Šäwan resistance, a time labelled as a ‘period of anarchy’ by Šäwan authors. The return of Mənilək from Mäqdäla to Šäwa in 1865 also caused confrontations among power contenders of Šäwa. The transitional period between the reigns of Emperor Mənilək and Emperor Həylä Šällase was also characterized by similar uncertainties which reached their climax in 1916. In a time of relative peace, the autumn of 1895, Šäwan peasants were forced to feed thousands of soldiers from the southern regions of the country on their way to °Adwa. The Battle of Sägäle in October 1916 fought on Šäwan soil had a catastrophic impact on the life of local peasantry that forced the government to promise compensation and rehabilitation, a rare practice at that time. Moreover the region was affected by different forms of intermittent conflicts on religious and ethnic pretexts. Inter- and intra-ethnic conflicts arose for both economic and cultural reasons. The article attempts to analyse the impacts of the recurrent wars on the life of north Šäwan peasants from 1855 to 1916.