

Ras Alula Abba Nega: An Ethiopian and African Hero

By Ghelawdewos Araia

There are many heroes and heroines that have captured our imagination and became the centerpiece of historical anecdotes. But there are very few born leaders that have been fascinations of societies for centuries and will remain so for generations to come. Alula Abba Nega is one such a leader, and a charismatic magnanimous persona at that.

Ras Alula was born in the village of Menawee, district of Tembien, Tigray northern state of Ethiopia. The exact date of his birth is unknown, but since he was on his late 60s when he died on February 1897, we can safely assume that he was born between 1839 and 1841.

Alula was the son of a peasant Engda Eqube and obviously of a humble origin. During his time, no one thought that he would become a dignitary in a highly differentiated or stratified feudal and aristocratic Ethiopia where power was inherited and ascribed. However, early on, Alula exhibited a role model of a fine leadership quality [in group dynamics] among his peers. He was sociable, courageous, friendly, affectionate, and with a lot of sense of humor. Above all, Alula had a magnanimous personality that virtually attracted the upper strata of the Ethiopian nobility including the king of kings, Yohannes the IV.

In his early 20s, Alula had already enjoyed the blessings of Dejazmach Kassa Mercha, future Emperor Yohannes of Ethiopia. By the time the latter assumed the title of emperor, Alula was a strong charismatic leader in his early 30s and already at the top of the feudal echelon. He became a Ras, just below Negus (king), in spite of the jealousy and hatred encountered by the aristocratic elements that surround the king.

In order to get a good flavor of Alula's biography and the role he played in Ethiopian and international politics of the 19th century, one needs to simply make an analysis of world politics, particularly that of Horn of Africa, of that period. In the Ethiopian context, Alula's time coincided with a staggering but relatively consolidating nascent Ethiopian state that had begun during Tewodros and witnessed a more expansive stature during Yohannes.

As to world politics, Alula had to encounter a seemingly unavoidable European interest in Africa and threat of colonization. The English, French, and Italians had begun penetrating North Eastern Africa. The politics of the Horn of Africa was not healthy either; Egypt and the Mahdist Eastern Sudan State also wanted to expand their frontiers and encroach on Ethiopian territory and Emperor Yohannes was, apparently, destined to confront European colonizers and African expansionist forces, but he was fortunate enough to have Alula, one of the finest African generals (perhaps the grandest of all after Hannibal) whose lexicon does not include 'defeat' and/or 'failure.'

As mentioned above, the nobility never accepted Alula's status among themselves and most of them did not endorse, at least indirectly, the Emperor's favorable attitude toward Alula, but they could hardly disparage his deeds for they themselves witnessed the enormous guts, commitment, resilience, resolve, and indefatigable personality of Alula 'Weddi Quibi' as he was locally known by his friends and foes alike. In fact, despite their resentment, they truly believed that the 'the holy ghost was incorporated unto Alula.'

Alula proved his bravado and his leadership ability at the battles of Gundet and Gura in November 1875 and March 1876 respectively, where he routed and vanquished the Egyptians. It is after these major battles that he was promoted to the rank of Ras and he was only about 35 years old. It was also during this time that the Emperor gave Alula an additional title of Turki Basha, for he must also guard against another menacing force of the Turks.

When Alula became so prominent in Ethiopian politics in his mid-30s, he had three children from his first wife Weizero B'tweta whom he later divorced. His second wife, the daughter of Ras Araya Dimtsu, was Weizero Amlesu. This was purely a political marriage in an effort to enhance Alula's legitimacy of his status among the feudal aristocracy. However, Alula would have been better off had he honored his *Kal Kidan* (the holy communion of his first marriage), for Weizero B'tweta enjoyed longevity and Weizero Amlesu died soon after he married her.

Also soon after Gura, Yohannes appointed Alula as governor of Mereb Milash or Midri Bahri (present-day Eritrea). So, beginning late 1876, Alula settled in Asmara with his entourage and his army. He constructed his palace on a hilly top in the heart of Asmara between what was formerly known as Commissariat Hammasien and Club Hammasien (Asmara Sporting Club), and thus began the foundation of a city that would later become the capital of Eritrea.

Now, Alula's main preoccupation was to safeguard the frontier of his Empire against the encroachments of the Italian, Anglo-Egyptian and Mahdist forces. The so-called Adwa or Hewett Treaty of 1884 concluded between Ethiopia and Britain recognized Bogos (the Keren area) and Massawa as parts of Ethiopian Empire, but the English wanted Alula to lead an expeditionary force against the Mahdists of Osman Digna.

Alula executed all necessary strategies, preparations, and logistics to move against the Mahdists, although local chiefs that would not recognize his governorship troubled him. Despite this problem, however, Alula continued with his plan and marched on to the land of the Bogos and beyond. While Alula was preparing his expedition, Osman Digna wrote him a pompous letter of warning. Alula was used to such empty propaganda and the mirage of "emperor" Teklegiorigs' was still fresh in his mind. The latter was captured by Alula when he attempted to destroy Yohannes long before he became emperor. Thus, in spite of Digna's seemingly Goliath caricature, Alula entered Keren on September 1885. After staying in Keren for about ten days, and meantime doing some intelligence work on the Mahdists, he then marched to Kufit. Although Alula was the prime organizer and

commander of this march, his abler lieutenant, Blatta Gebru was the Fitewrari (vanguard) of the army.

At Kufit, the Mahdist forces of Osman Digna were virtually annihilated with very few survivors, but there were also heavy casualties on the Ethiopian side. Blatta Gebru and Aselafi Hagos, two fine commanders, died and Alula himself was wounded. The news of Ethiopian victory, however, reached the headquarters of the Italians, the English, and Emperor Yohannes.

The people of Keren and the Tigre of lowland Eritrea praised the victory of Ethiopian forces over the Mahdists. The late Michael Gabir, who was educated at Haile Selassie University, provides us important information on what the people of Bogos had to say about Alula and his victory:

**አሉላ አመል ዋዚንተት ሓድርያ
ሰንሒት ተሻቂር ዓለት አንሳ ኢግል ተርእያ
ቤት አስገደ ሚን ፍውቂታ ከረያ
መሓዝ ዓድ ፍሃእ ኦሮ ፊተውራሪ ከሳያ
ሰገደት ኢሎስ ኤብ ብሩድ ፈግርያ
ድርቡሽ ሚሲል ጥሪምባታ ርእሳ ሓር በልስያ**

Alula Am'el Wa'zin'tet ha'dri'ya
Senhit Te'sha'kir alet Ansa Egil Tir'eya
Biet Asghede Min Few'kita Kereya
Mehaz Ad Feza'e Oro Fitewrari Kes'aya
S'gadet Elos Eb Brud Fegre'ya
Derbush Mi'sil Trimbata Ra'esa Har belse'ya

The direct translation, according to the author, is as follows: “when Alula arrived at Wanzintat, the people of Senhit boasted and wanted to be admired by their ladies. He made the Biet Asghede come down from their plateaux and punished the Fazza only by one Fitewrari of his. He scaled the cliff of Elos without difficulty and forced back the Dervish with their trumpets.”

Alula, however, could not relax following the defeat of the Dervish. This, after all, was the era of European imperialism that was about to partition the entire continent of Africa, and the Italians, in violation of the Hewett treaty, had begun settling down on the Red Sea coast and vicinity of Massawa and Sa'ati. Alula's prime agenda was to guarantee Ethiopian sovereignty, and although he collaborated with the English against the Dervish, he had great resentment to the coming of the Italians and suspected that the latter's advancement had an English blessing. Alula had no doubt in his mind that English politics in the Horn of Africa essentially featured double standard. In fact, Alula's complaint on the English deceit and maneuver is clearly revealed in his conversation with Augustus Wylde, once a vice consul to Her Majesty the Queen at Jedda and later

correspondent to the Manchester Guardian. Haggai Elrich, the Israeli historian, in his book Ethiopia and the Challenge of Independence, cites this fact:

“What does England mean by destroying the Hewett treaty allowing the Italians to take my country from me? ...Did I not relieve the Egyptian garrison in the Bogos country? Did I not fight at Cassala when it was too late? Have I not done everything I could? You English used us to do what you wanted and then left us.”

Following the battle of Kassala, Alula returned back to Asmara, mobilized his well-armed 5000 troops and descended beyond Ghinda'e to Sa'ati (Sehati). Before he engaged the Italians, he reported the coming of the Italians to Emperor Yohannes based on the information provided by Shalaka Araya, district governor of Ailet and Balambaras Tessema, the administrator of Ghinda'e. He also communicated his concern to Harrison Smith who accompanied admiral Hewett during the signing of the treaty in 1884. He told Harrison that the English did not honor their words by allowing the Italians to get hold of Arafale, and he knew very well that Harrison was lying when he told him that the Europeans, with the exception of Turkey, had supported the Italians with their advances in the Massawa area.

Alula also arrested some Italians whom he suspected as spies but were pretending as engineers and who wanted to go to Gojjam and help Negus Tekelehaimanot to build a bridge over the Nile. In the meantime, he wrote a letter to Marcopolo Bay, Italian aide in Massawa, and Consul Sumagn of France and underscored that he will destroy the Italians unless and until they leave Ethiopian territory on their own volition. But the Italians were determined to stay and came up with a sinister idea that “it was God's will for the Italians to come to the Massawa area.” Thus, beginning October 1886, Alula's forces were taking positions all over the Sehati and Massawa area and they were encouraged by the determined patriotism of the local people who actually, as per their tradition, sung the following song in Tigrigna:

**አሌላ ውረድ ናብ ምጽዋዕ
ስግር ባሕሪ ዘሎ ኣይንቐድዎ
ክርዳድ በቐላ ኣሎ ኣብ ምጽዋዕ
ከይበዝሐ ከሎ ቀርድዶ ምሓዎ**

Alula We'red Nab M'tswa'e
Si'gir Bahri Ze'lo Ay'n'Qe'd'wo
Kir'dad Be'Qu'lu A'lo Ab M'tswa'e
Key'Bez'he Kelo Qe'r'did'do M'ha'wo

Roughly translated, it means: “Alula, we don't like strangers who come beyond the sea; you should descend to Massawa and eradicate the bad weed before it is too late.” Indeed, by December 1886 the confrontation with the Italians was inevitable. The first clash took place at Sehati where a lot of Ethiopians were killed and wounded, but Alula immediately reorganized his troops and took Dogali where the Ethiopians had clearly exhibited military superiority over the Italians. On January 1887, the famous battle of Dogali took

place; Ethiopians encircled the Italian army led by major Baroti and during the height of the battle, the chief coordinator, Colonel Thomaso De Christophoro was killed along with other 22 elite officers and 400 troops.

As per the Tigrigna poem, the bad weed was annihilated at least temporarily, and meanwhile while the Ethiopian troops were gathering momentum and the Italians were trying to recuperate, another poem of praise to Alula (in Amharic) was already in place as part of the folklore:

**ጣልያን ሰሐቲ ላይ እግሩን ቢዘረጋ
በብረት ምጣዱ በሰሐቲ አደጋ
አንገርግቦ ቆላው አሉላ አባ ነጋ
ተው ተመከር ጣልያን ይሻልሃል ምክር
ሰሐቲ ላይ ሆነህ መሬት ብትቆፍር
ኋላ ይሆንልሃል ላንተው መቃብር
ይች አገር ኢትዮጵያ የበዝብዝ አገር
ምንም አትቃጣ እንደ ራስ ነብር**

Ta'lian Sehati Lay E'grun Bi'ze're'ga
Be'b'ret M'Ta'du Be'Sehati Ade'ga
An'ger'gi'bo Ko'law Alula Abba Nega
Tew Te'me'ker Ta'lian Yi'sha'lal Mi'kir
Sehati Lay Ho'neh Me'riet B't'ko'fir
Hua'la Yi'hon'li'hal lan'tew Me'ka'bir
Yi'chi Ager Ethiopia Ye'bez'biz Ager
Mi'nim At'Ka'ta En'de'Aras Ne'bir

The Amharic poem of praise is cited by Tekle Tsadik Mekuria in his book *Emperor Yohannes and the Unity of Ethiopia* and it simply admonishes the Italians: “Although the Italian sat foot at Sehati, Alula roasted him by his metal oven (metaphoric); Italians, You better listen to our advise! You may dig trenches but that may very well be your graveyard. This country Ethiopia, the land of Bezbiz [Emperor Yohannes], is just like a tiger defending its children without compromise whatsoever.”

Yes, the Italians were defeated at Dogali, but Alula will never rest; these were times not only for vigilance and heightened alertness, but also for incessant skirmish and wars. In fact, by 1888, both the Italians and Dervish seemed to have recovered and had indeed planned to retaliate. On March 1889, the Battle of Metema took place on the western frontier of Ethiopia and this will dramatically alter the politics of the Horn forever. Emperor Yohannes was wounded and beheaded by the Dervish although the Ethiopians had the upper hand when the battle began. Yohannes' death, however, is a mystery to this day, for some observers witnessed that he was hit from behind and not from the enemy side.

A couple of months after Metema, Menelik would become emperor, the Italians occupied Asmara and they concluded the Treaty of Wuchale with Menelik; few months later, they

formally declared Eritrea as their first African colony. All of a sudden, the great Alula became a lonesome political figure.

Alula was extremely sad and demoralized after he lost his beloved emperor and after witnessing his erstwhile enemies, the Italians, consolidating over Eritrea. In the early 1890s, the Italians have further expanded their colonial territory and took over the western frontier around Tesseney and Akordat and also occupied parts of the Adwa area in Tigray in order to countercheck Ethiopian reprisals and as prelude to their ambition in occupying Ethiopia and perhaps colonize it. Another historical inevitability, thus, was impregnated as a result of this Italian aggression and the battle of Adwa will soon ensue.

The Battle of Adwa took place on March 1, 1896 and in this Ethio-Italian war too Alula, like his Ethiopian counterparts who came from all over the country, contributed immensely. Never in the history of modern Ethiopia were Ethiopians so united at Adwa to defeat a common enemy, and Alula, who initially did not recognize Menelik as a sovereign king, now fully endorsed him as guarantor of Ethiopian unity.

At Adwa, before the real clash with the Italians began, in the extreme left of the Ethiopian position were Alula's forces that occupied the height of Adi Abune and they were supported by the troops of Emperor Menelik, Ras Mekonnen, and Ras Michael. Ras Sebhat and Dejjach Hagos Teferi's forces had also joined Ras Alula and Ras Mengesha's camps.

Some observers, like Augustus Wylde, who furnished us an eye witness account, were of the opinion that the Italians would have had an upper hand at Adwa had they used the surprise element, but Alula maintained that it won't have made a difference; the Italians, in any event, would be outnumbered and the Ethiopian resolve was immeasurable. According to Wylde, "the Abyssinians never expected to be attacked, and the Italian advance would have been a complete surprise had it not been for Ras Aloula, who never believed the Italian officials, and would never trust them. Two of his spies watched the Italians leave Entiscio, arrived by a circuitous route, and informed Ras Aloula who was about a mile to the north of Adi Abune, that the enemy was on the march to Adwa. The Ras immediately informed King Menelik and other leaders, and the Abyssinians prepared the battle..."

Although Wylde's account on the role of Alula is right, his contention that the Ethiopians "never expected to be attacked" is fallacious. Ethiopians, in particular Alula, by then knew the Italian psychology very well and they had entered into combat with them several times at Sehati, Dogali, Amba Alagie, Mekelle, and finally at Adwa.

In the middle of the battle, Ras Michael's troops went to reinforce Ras Alula, who had already begun fighting General Dabormida who was outnumbered [5 to 1] by the gallant Ethiopian fighters. Moreover, the Oromo cavalry also reinforced Ras Alula, and to his credit Abba Nega effectively blocked the expected Italian reinforcement from Adi Quala.

The Battle of Adwa began at 6 a.m. in the morning and by about 10 o'clock the Ethiopian victory was almost certain; the battle continued till high noon, but the remaining Italian troops had already begun to retreat. In view of the Italian retreat enmasse, Alula conveyed a message to Emperor Menelik for more Oromo cavalry in order to cut off the retreat and make them POWs rather. "Had Ras Aloula been allowed to use the King's cavalry for the purpose of closing the passes on the line of retreat, which might easily have been accomplished," says Wylde, "the whole Italian army might have been compelled to capitulate." Moreover, as Wylde testifies – and this is a strong reminder for the present generation of Ethiopians who witnessed the recent Ethio-Eritrean conflict – "had Aloula been allowed to advance his army, strengthened by part of Ras Mengesha's force, there is no doubt that the whole of the Hamassien plateau and the Bogos province, with the exception of the fortified positions of Adi-Ugri, Asmara and Keren would have again fallen into the hands of the Abyssinians..."

Ras Alula and the other Ethiopian leaders have proven to the entire world the resolve and invincibility of Ethiopians, and Alula was overjoyed by the significant victory scored at Adwa by himself and by his fellow countrymen. His only great regret was that he did not capture General Baratieri alive, who was not only the enemy of Ethiopia but also the personal foe of the Ras.

Ras Alula finally would have opted a retired and relatively tranquil life, but unfortunately this did not happen. Instead, he fought Ras Hagos of Tembien and both of them were seriously wounded; Ras Hagos lost the war and died, but Alula also died of his inflicted wound on February 1897, exactly eleven months after the victory of Adwa.

Note: This article first appeared on Deki Alula's website on September 2001 and we are now republishing it in response to incessant popular request! Minor editing was done to the original article and the poems in Ethiopic were added in order to authenticate the story on Alula Ababa Nega.

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