

Sven Rubenson

Ethiopia and Imerina (Madagascar) on Trial 1895–1896

The dimensions of the battle of Adwa place it among the most memorable battles in the history of Africa. The outcome made history by whatever standards one measures. When I was asked by Robert Rotberg and Ali Mazrui some thirty years ago to contribute a chapter for a book to be called *Power and Protest in Black Africa*, I had no problem finding a focus and formulating a title. In a section on “Resistance to conquest” there was no way around “Adwa 1896: The resounding protest”.¹ My research at that time had led me to the conclusion that the battle of Adwa was an extraordinary, possibly unique, event in the history of ‘the scramble for Africa’. My work with *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence* did not lead me to modify my overall impression that the Ethiopian struggle against European imperialism was very deliberate, consistent, and stubborn. In terms of 19th-century African history it can only be described as uniquely successful.

Some fifteen years ago, however, Professor Åke Holmberg suggested: “Comparisons with other African kingdoms—particularly fruitful with Madagascar and Basutoland, I believe—would have reduced [Rubenson’s] propensity to regard Ethiopian conditions and attitudes as unique. That Ethiopia had the good luck of getting Egypt and Italy as its opposite players, and not England or France, was hardly its own merit.”²

The one hundredth anniversary of the battle of Adwa is perhaps the right moment to pick up the challenge and attempt to relate the experience of Ethiopia to that of some other African nation. Madagascar is hardly a typically African nation, but neither is Ethiopia, so perhaps a comparison with Madagascar might be “particularly fruitful”, as suggested by Professor Holmberg. Imerina and Madagascar are often used almost as synonyms in the historical literature, but it was only gradually that the kingdom of Imerina in the central highlands emerged as the dominant polity of the island. In many ways Imerina and Ethiopia are the comparable 19th-century units, with the island of Madagascar and the Horn of Africa as geographical settings. Both were put on trial 100 years ago. Just as Ethiopia won its greatest victory, Imerina was defeated and turned into a French colony.

This paper will not reveal any new facts about the battle of Adwa or the events leading up to it. I have had my say about these matters in *Power and Protest in*

Black Africa and *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence*. Still less do I claim to have done any research on the fall of Imerina, about which I knew next to nothing until I began to write this paper. I am therefore relying mainly on standard works: Hubert Deschamps, *Histoire de Madagascar* (1972); *Histoire Générale de l'Afrique Noire, de Madagascar et des Archipels* (1971), edited by Deschamps, and the two chapters by the same author in *The Cambridge History of Africa*, vol. 5, pp. 393–417, and vol. 6, pp. 521–535; also M. Esoavelomandroso, “Madagascar, 1880s–1930s: African initiatives and reaction to colonial conquest and domination” in UNESCO’s *General History of Africa*, vol. VII, pp. 221–47; Robin Hallett, *Africa Since 1875* (1974), pp. 690–695; Philip Curtin, Steven Feierman, Leonard Thompson, and Jan Vansina, *African History* (1992), pp. 411–417. A more specialized work consulted is Finn Fuglestad and Jarle Simensen (eds), *Norwegian Missions in African History, Vol. 2: Madagascar* (1986).

My aim is to compare the European interventions in Ethiopia and Imerina and the responses of the two polities. Obviously there are similarities as well as dissimilarities between the two cases. The issue is whether these are to be found mainly on the European side: Ethiopia “having the good luck” of meeting *Italy* at Adwa while Imerina had to face *France*, or on the African side: France “having the good luck” of meeting *Imerina* while Italy had to face *Ethiopia*. In the first case Italy lost her war and France won hers, as could be expected—and Africans don’t matter. In the second case Ethiopia won her war and Imerina lost hers, and explanations must be sought in the dissimilarities between these two polities.

The most obvious factors—and the easiest to compare—are the military forces involved in the two campaigns, their numbers, armament and prior knowledge about their opponents and the actual battlefields. A second category which might help to explain the outcome of the campaigns in more general terms are the natural obstacles or hazards which can be expected to have hampered or weakened the invaders. Some authors, for instance, have explained what has been termed “Abyssinian survival-power” by referring to “the virtual impregnability of the highland-fastness.”³ Was there any similar natural obstacle to the penetration of Madagascar?

Finally we must ask how earlier experiences of Europeans may have predisposed Imerina and Ethiopia to resist or accept European domination. Had prior contacts with outsiders strengthened or weakened the determination of the two polities to defend their independence? These questions open a Pandora’s box of difficult issues of social and political structure and economic conditions which go beyond the scope of this paper. A tentative assessment of the interplay of European intervention and African response as causes of strength and weakness in the two polities involved is the most I can hope to give; at the very least I trust that certain misconceptions can be refuted.

Forces involved in the Adwa and Antananarivo campaigns

The Italians invaded Ethiopia from Eritrea in March–April 1895 and built up a force which eventually numbered approximately 20,000. They advanced some 200–250 kilometres into Ethiopia without meeting much resistance. At Amba Alagē on 7 December their advance guard met an Ethiopian army of 30,000. Outnumbered and outmanoeuvred they lost about 2,000 men and had to retreat. A beleaguered garrison at Meqelē had to surrender in January 1896 but was permitted to march off with their weapons. On the eve of the battle at Adwa the Italian commander, General Oreste Baratieri, had at his disposal an army of more than 20,000 men, armed with rifles, machine-guns and 52 cannon. 500 officers and half of the soldiers were Italians; the other half were Eritreans.

Minilik had mobilized around 100,000 men, some 70,000 to 80,000 with rifles, the remainder with swords and spears. His artillery numbered 42 pieces. The warriors had been recruited from all over the country and were commanded by local princes and governors. A large number of the Ethiopians were absent on foraging expeditions. Others were supposedly attending services at Aksum some 20 kilometres away; 1 March was a Sunday as well as *Qiddus Gǝyorgǝs*, the day of St. George. How many actually participated in the battle is impossible to know. The battlefield offered advantages to the attackers, no less than the defenders. There are many indications that both Baratieri and Minilik felt apprehensive as to the outcome of a battle. But it was Baratieri who chose the day and the field, so he must have believed that the odds were in his favour.

The French opened their attack on Imerina by occupying the the port of Majunga on the northwest coast of Madagascar in January 1895. The following month they landed an expeditionary force of 15,000 soldiers, with a service corps of no less than 7,000 in charge of the same number of mules. There is every reason to believe that the French were well armed. According to one historian the army “had ample resources”, and “the terrain had been thoroughly reconnoitred”.⁴ The commander General Duchesne had orders to advance into the interior and take the capital of Imerina about 400 kilometres from the coast. Apparently he met with very little opposition: “No military commander except Rainianjalahy bothered to attempt the slightest resistance. The troops . . . broke into a rout with the first shot.” In fact Duchesne lost only nineteen men in combat during the seven months the march to the capital took.⁵ It was with a light column of 4,000 men that he reached Antananarivo on 30 September 1895.

As things turned out, this was more than sufficient. There was no battle to hold the capital: “An artillery battery fired two high explosive shells on the queen’s palace, decimating the huge crowd that had gathered there. The queen raised a white flag, and the same evening French troops entered the town.”⁶

Duchesne had a protectorate treaty at hand. It was signed without reservations the following day. The queen’s prime minister and consort Rainilaiarivony, who

had ruled the country for more than thirty years, was exiled. This was, however, not the end of the story. Popular resistance and a guerilla war, the *Menalamba* uprising, followed. The French government reacted by an outright annexation in August the following year, and in February 1897 the monarchy was abolished and the queen exiled. The cost of putting down the rebellion was another 200 Europeans dead. The Merina fared much worse; their casualties are estimated at 3,000–5,000. How does this compare with the battle of Adwa?

The Italian army had arrived at its terminus about 40 kilometres from the *de facto* border, very far from the capital of Ethiopia. Baratieri decided on a surprise attack on the Ethiopian forces camping in and around the small town of Adwa. At 9 p.m. on 29 February 1896 three Italian brigades under Generals Albertone, Arimondi, and Dabormida marched out from their fortified positions at Sawria, followed one and a half hour later by the reserve brigade under General Ellena.

The first objective was to occupy positions on a group of hills about halfway to Adwa. With his superior artillery in position before the Ethiopians discovered what was going on, Baratieri hoped to battle successfully even against superior numbers. Besides, he expected that the rugged terrain would make it difficult for the Ethiopians to deploy their whole force, while he would keep the initiative, coordinating the actions of his smaller army. In fact, the opposite occurred. A faulty map, poor reconnaissance, vague and misunderstood orders left Baratieri with only half of his forces where he expected them to be. Minilik's advance posts discovered what was happening, and before daybreak his commanders were prepared to join battle.

It was a long day of heavy fighting. Casualties were high on both sides. The Italian losses amounted to 4,900 dead, 500 wounded and 1,900 Italian prisoners of war, in addition to approximately 4,000 Eritreans dead, wounded or captured. This was more than 50% of those who had entered the battle. The Ethiopian dead on the battlefield were first reported by Yosēf Nigusē to be 3,886, which obviously represents a minimum figure. Later estimates were 5,000–6,000 killed and about 8,000 seriously wounded. Though the Ethiopian losses were higher than the Italian in absolute numbers, they were relatively speaking less serious. Baratieri's army had been practically annihilated as a fighting force; Minilik's was still more or less intact. The Ethiopians picked up thousands of rifles and captured all their enemy's artillery. There were no Ethiopian prisoners of war, and the battlefield remained Ethiopian.

To the community of 'civilized nations' the shock of Adwa was formidable. In Rome, Crispi's government collapsed in an uproar of abuse and outbreaks of violence. The Prime Minister made no attempt even to defend his stewardship to his Parliament. The atmosphere there was so tense that no one was allowed to speak at the reading of his formal resignation on 5 March. In the streets and squares, shouts of "a basso Crispi", "via dall'Africa" and even "viva Minilik" were heard.

Baratieri was arrested and arraigned before a special court-martial. In London doubt as to the accuracy of the reports was expressed in the newspapers: “. . . the latest accounts place the Italian loss in the battle of Adowa at a figure so high that we cannot but hope there is a serious mistake somewhere.” The disaster “has clearly been one of quite exceptional magnitude.” Imperial policies in Africa were immediately affected. Lord Cromer in Cairo was told to prepare for the reconquest of the Sudan. The Marchand expedition finally got under way. The stage was set for the ‘race’ to Fashoda. For the Ethiopian nation the immediate consequences of Adwa were less dramatic but nonetheless extremely important. The Italians at once asked for peace negotiations. Earlier claims to a protectorate over Ethiopia were dropped, and a peace treaty was signed in October. Equally gratifying for Minilik was no doubt the eagerness with which French and British delegations arrived in his capital to compete for his friendship and negotiate boundaries for their possessions at Bab el-Mandeb and the Gulf of Aden.

To sum up, we find that the two European invaders were almost equal in terms of military strength when the campaigns began. No misleading information or tactical errors at Adwa can explain why the Italians were defeated at Amba Alagē or forced to surrender at Meqelē, nor can they be accepted as sufficient explanation for the magnitude of the disaster at Adwa and the fact that Italy called off the whole campaign. The contrast with the situation at Antananarivo on 30 September the year before could hardly have been greater. The French casualties there were negligible. Including those suffered against the *Menalamba* rebels or freedom fighters in the aftermath of the fall of Imerina, the French losses amounted to 2 % of the Italian losses at Adwa alone. Unless we are prepared to assume that the competence and courage of Italian officers and soldiers a century ago were by definition grossly inferior to those of the French, the contrast in outcome must be sought elsewhere than in the conduct of their respective campaigns. Or are we supposed to believe that Duchesne and his army would have succeeded in defeating the Ethiopians, while the Italians would never have reached Antananarivo? A counterfactual argument with little or no weight or a rhetorical question with an obvious answer?

Natural obstacles or hazards

What about the “the virtual impregnability” of the Ethiopian highlands as the determining factor in explaining the failure of the Italian invasion as opposed to the the success of the French? The facts do not support this thesis; on the contrary. Not only was the battle fought at Adwa, some 120 kilometres inland from the escarpment; sizable Italian forces had been as far south as Meqelē and Amba Alagē, as we have already noted. Military operations, not terrain or climate, had forced them to retreat.

Earlier expeditions into Ethiopia tell the same story. When the British manag-

ed to persuade the Ethiopians in 1867–68 that they had no designs on Ethiopian territory or sovereignty, the British expedition marched to Meqdela and back to the coast virtually without losses. In 1875 and 1876 Egyptian armies commanded by European and American officers made their way into the highlands without problems until they met the Ethiopian armies at Gundet and Gura respectively. Then it became an entirely different story, as it did for the Italians twenty years later.

In the case of Madagascar, on the other hand, the French experienced something which was more like “virtual impregnability”. Antananarivo, itself 1400 m. above sealevel, was situated 400 kilometres from the port of Majunga. In between lay forests and swamps with an unhealthy climate, particularly during the rainy season. In fact it is here that we find the explanation for the fact that the capital fell to an army of only 4,000 French. No less than 6,000 had died of fever on the way, and others were presumably too weak to be used for an attack. In the words of Deschamps the “ill-planned expedition . . . opened with the victory of General Tazo”.⁷ Esaoavelomandroso’s verdict is that Rainilaiarivony trusted, and trusted only, “General *Tazo* (fever) and General *Ala* (the forest)” as allies in his final struggle against the French.⁸

As “Tazo” did a so much better job for Madagascar than the “impregnability of the highland fastnesses” did for Ethiopia, the predictable outcome should have been French defeat and Italian victory! Instead the outcome was just the opposite. The thesis that Ethiopia was protected against European conquest by natural phenomena is as untenable, it seems, as the allegation that Italian political and military incompetence and French competence made the difference between the outcome for Ethiopia and Imerina respectively. The explanations why Ethiopia demonstrated strength and Imerina weakness must be sought beyond the campaigns themselves, in the developments that had taken place during the preceding decades.

Responses to penetration, pressures and protectorates

European pressures on the peoples of Madagascar and the Horn of Africa were initiated or renewed as a consequence of the French–British rivalry of the Napoleonic era. In both cases it was British emissaries who took the initiative. In both cases the African scene presented them with a conglomeration of more or less autonomous, often interdependent polities with undefined or contested territorial boundaries. In both cases there was one more or less dominant actor centred in the interior: Ethiopia and Imerina.

For Madagascar the British victory over Napoleon led to the Anglo–Merina Treaty of 1817. By conferring the title of ‘king of Madagascar’ on the Merina ruler Radama I, the British recognized and lent support to the aspirations of the kings of Imerina to expand their inland state to include all Madagascar. A number of

successful campaigns organized by European officers “led to the formation of an empire as large as any to be found in contemporary Africa.” A British political agent was soon in residence and Christian missionaries of the London Missionary Society began to arrive and engage in evangelization and education. Young Merina aristocrats were sent to school in England. Administrative reforms and technical innovations in production followed. After the death, in 1828, of Radama I, however, a violent reaction against Europeanization set in with rebellions and persecutions of Christians—and with partly successful French attempts to regain influence.

In 1861 Radama II once more threw the doors wide open to Europeans. The following year he signed treaties with both England and France guaranteeing freedom of movement and enterprise to foreigners. Though he was soon assassinated as too liberal-minded, his open door policies were not reversed. A prime minister (and consort of three successive queens), the earlier mentioned Rainilaiarivony, took over the reins of government and held them until 1895.

Rainilaiarivony was an astute and prudent politician, who realized the limits of authority and the risks involved in challenging traditional values without proper preparation. Nevertheless he was also strongly committed to modernization. In 1868 further treaties were signed with Britain and France. More important, at the coronation of a new queen in 1868 “the ‘idols’ were replaced by the Bible”, and early the following year both queen and prime minister were converted to Christianity.¹⁰ “Without too many worries” Rainilaiarivony reorganized his army in 1878–79 and established a set of ministries on European lines with hundreds of civil servants and clerks.¹¹ The influence of the Protestant missions spread and deepened. In a single year 16,000 new Christians were baptized. By 1875 30,000 pupils attended Protestant schools. The work of the LMS grew until this society alone counted more than one thousand churches and an equal number of schools. The work was concentrated to the Merina highlands, where out of a population of less than one million in 1894 “137,000 were registered in Protestant schools, and at least 50,000 attended”. Including the Catholic missions, the number of pupils in mission schools had reached 164,000. In 1895 the Protestants in Imerina numbered 455,000 and the Catholics 136,000.¹²

The Catholics tried to compete with the overwhelming British/Protestant influence, asking with growing insistence for French official support. French claims to ‘historic rights’ generally were revived, as were specific ‘protectorate’ rights to Sakalava in the northwest, dating from the 1840s. As the European partition of all Africa drew closer, France decided to make a new bid for Madagascar. Colonial propaganda stressed the “vast consumer market” of the island, “a land of untold riches”. The British-created “‘Kingdom of Madagascar’ was—with little justification—portrayed as a ‘barbarous state’, headed by a ‘foreign tribe’ which had exalted ‘tyranny as a system of government’ and still engaged in the slave trade.”¹³

The French pressured Imerina for concessions, and when no agreement was reached, a naval force was sent. In May and June 1883 Majunga on the coast northwest of Antananarivo and Tamatave on the east coast were occupied. A French demand for the cession of the whole northern part of the island was rejected by Rainilaiarivony. What the French quite clearly wanted was control in some form of the whole island. On 17 December 1885 a treaty was negotiated and signed by representatives of France and Imerina, with the British Colonel Willoughby adding his signature as well. It stipulated that the French government, through a 'resident' at Antananarivo, should represent Madagascar in all its external relations but refrain from involving itself in the internal affairs of the kingdom. Madagascar was also to pay an indemnity of 10 million francs. The term 'protectorate' was not used, though that was what the French intended to impose. In August 1890, the British recognised "the Protectorate of France over the Island of Madagascar, with all that this entails . . ."14 This was a *quid pro quo* for French recognition of England's protectorate over Zanzibar, and it remained, sometimes referred to as the 'phantom protectorate', until the fall of Antananarivo.

In the Horn of Africa renewed European interest was heralded by the arrival of Sir George Annesley/Viscount Valentia and Henry Salt in 1805. The aim was basically the same as in Madagascar, in the words of Valentia to "for ever shut out the French."¹⁵ On a second trip 1810 Salt was instructed to deliver a letter and gifts—including cannon, other arms and ammunition—from King George III to the emperor at Gonder in person. Salt did not manage to reach the capital, and handed over the gifts to the *nas* of Tigray, whom he later referred to as "the Prime Minister of Ethiopia". On his return he suggested that the best way of gaining influence in Ethiopia would be to set up a separate state in Tigray with a rival emperor at Aksum. Two Englishmen, Nathaniel Pearce and William Coffin, were left behind, Pearce as the first representative in Ethiopia of the British and Foreign Bible Society. Neither of the two reached influential positions, least of all as representatives of British interests, and when Coffin surfaced at Cairo almost twenty years later, it was in connection with the securing of a new Orthodox bishop for the country.

In 1830 the first missionaries of the Church Missionary Society arrived in Ethiopia, followed in 1838 by the first Catholics. The 1840s saw a flood of British and French commercial and diplomatic missions. To begin with they were received as friends. The British succeeded in concluding treaties of 'friendship and commerce' with the rulers in Shewa 1841 and in Gonder 1849. French envoys and missionaries were less successful in their attempts to gain what they wanted and resorted to presenting their superiors in Europe with sometimes mistranslated and forged agreements.¹⁶ Ultimately it made little difference. The Protestant missionary J.L. Krapf was a very outspoken imperialist who wrote to Aden suggesting that the new treaty with Shewa would soon provide a pretext for taking action:

“. . . the slightest transgression should be attended by a military demonstration”. British control of Abyssinia should be established “whatever measures must be applied”. Sahle Sillasē sensed the new attitude and barred all British from re-entering Shewa; *Ras* Alī, acting for the emperor, declared the 1849 treaty “exceedingly useless, inasmuch as he did not suppose . . . that one English merchant would or could enter [Abyssinia] in ten years”. Wibē of Tigray reportedly told one of the d’Abbadie brothers: “Take care that you never again tread the soil of my country. The English and you are confined to cursed land and you covet our healthy climate: one collects our plants, another our stones; I do not know what you are looking for, but I do not want it to be in my country that you find it.”¹⁷

The rise of Tēwodros to supreme power in Ethiopia in 1855 raised new hopes for European penetration, both British/Protestant and French/Catholic. Tēwodros was no less interested in technical innovations and military and administrative reforms than Rainilaiarivony. Moreover, he was aware of the potential danger a modernized Egypt posed on his western borderlands.

Europeans were welcome. Nevertheless there were reservations. The king refused to ratify the treaty signed by *Ras* Alī: “I have never heard of a Consulate under the former Kings of Abyssinia.” After further consideration of the matter: “I cannot agree to a Consulate, as I find in the history of our institutions no such thing . . .”¹⁸ No proselytizing aimed at establishing a Catholic or Protestant church would be permitted under any circumstances. To the French consul at Massawa the message was: “We, too, are Christians from the beginning of time. We do not need anybody to teach us Christianity. From now on, your priests should not come to our country.” To the Anglican bishop Samuel Gobat the message was no different: “. . . let not priests who disrupt the faith come to me, in order that our friendship may not diminish.”¹⁹

Nevertheless the Protestants infiltrated. The Catholics attempted to build up a rebel in Tigray—Agew Nigusē—by offering him arms and an alliance with France. In the end Tēwodros’ attempt to modernize and centralize his state failed, his subjects rebelled, and his relations with the Europeans ended with the catastrophe at Meqdela 1868. The British army, approximately the same size as the Italian almost thirty years later and extremely well equipped, freed some captive British diplomats and missionaries with almost no casualties at all. In spite of this the British showed no inclination to establish any presence in Ethiopia. On the contrary, they hurried back to the coast and wanted to have nothing to do directly with the Ethiopians for many years. The expedition had cost British tax-payers no less than nine million pounds! Emperor Yohannis’ attitude was much the same. In matters of missionary activities he was even more strict than his predecessor.

So Khedive Ismail’s Egypt was given ‘a free hand’ in Ethiopia, encouraged by prominent missionaries like J.M. Flad. When Yohannis had defeated the invaders, the British government acted as a mediator to save Egyptian garrisons caught

between the Mahdists and the Ethiopians. The outcome was the so-called Hewett treaty 1884, which stipulated that Massawa was to be a free port and that all the territories which had been occupied for a few years by the Egyptians were to be restored to Ethiopia. Instead of honouring their words the British invited Italy to occupy—to make sure that the French did not do so. The result was an increasing mistrust of Europeans, expressed in a message from Yohannis to Minilik: “[The Italians] are not a serious people; they are intriguers; and all this must be something which the English are doing to me . . . But with the help of God, they shall leave again humiliated and disappointed and with their honour lost before all the world.” To Queen Victoria the message was: “By making me appear to be the offender when I am not, are you not implying that I should give them the land which Jesus Christ gave to me? Reconciliation is possible when they are in their country and I in mine . . .”²⁰

Territorial conquest in the north, combined with diplomatic pressure in the south, led ultimately in the first year of Minilik’s reign to the Wichalē treaty of 1889. By deliberately mistranslating the crucial paragraph the Italians thought they could make Ethiopia an Italian protectorate. Termed “the quasi-Protectorate” or “the so-called Protectorate” by the British representative in Rome, Italy’s claim was nevertheless accepted and fully supported by the British government. French and Russian protests were overruled. Minilik did not accept being deceived and annulled the treaty: “For it is with much dishonesty that he [Umberto], pretending friendship, has desired to seize my country. Because God gave me the crown and the power that I should protect the land of my forefathers, I terminate and nullify this treaty.”²¹ This was not the kind of language Europeans accepted from Africans in the 19th century. The Italians refused to back down. The road led to Adwa.

Conclusions

The above summaries of the relations between Europeans and the peoples of Imerina and Ethiopia leave no doubt in my mind that a comparison between the fates of Ethiopia and Imerina, and therefore Madagascar, is meaningful only if the emphasis is placed on the African actors. It is difficult to see any important differences between the European actors and their interventions in the two areas under study. The latter shared the experience of European penetration and occasional attacks, leading ultimately to the ‘quasi-’ and ‘phantom’ protectorates.

The moving force was the conviction of the Europeans that they were entitled to deal with African peoples and polities to suit their own interests. British–French rivalry dominated both cases from the outset. Strategic considerations accompanied by commercial exploitation and the desire to win adherents to one’s own faith and church flourished in both cases and led ultimately to the race for territorial acquisitions. The initiatives and the agents were the same in Ethiopia as

in Imerina: missionaries and businessmen, consuls and advisers, schools and other forms of institutionalized influence.

As far as the battles are concerned, accidental circumstances such as a faulty map, poor reconnaissance, or even poor Italian generalship, provide subsidiary causes for the Italian defeat at Adwa, but no more. Things go wrong in the most well-planned of battles without whole campaigns being called off or foreign policies changed overnight. Natural obstacles or hazards do exist, but in the case of Ethiopia and Imerina, it was Imerina that lost in spite of her ally 'General Tazo'. The 'impregnability' of the Ethiopian highlands is nothing but a myth created by Europeans incapable of comprehending that an African nation could defend itself. If the Ethiopians had been known to resort to guerilla warfare, the explanation might have carried some weight, but this was a practice that was looked upon with considerable contempt in traditional Ethiopia.

What dissimilarities between the African actors led to the fall of one and the victory of the other? What was it that made such a tremendous difference in the two cases? The albeit sketchy presentation above of the relations throughout the 19th century between the two African actors and their European opposite numbers suggests that the explanation lies in the overall attitudes of the Ethiopians and the Merina to the European interference in their national lives.

Though the people of Imerina revolted after the first attempt to destroy their cultural and spiritual heritage by introducing British Protestantism, a nucleus of a European-oriented social and political elite had been created. In Ethiopia on the other hand, Pearce and Coffin had no impact, nor did Gobat and his colleagues from the CMS in the late 20s and 30s. The Catholics were a little more successful but only on the periphery of the state. In Imerina the new forces had made themselves felt in the capital itself. The political leadership was converted to, or at least allied itself with, the most expansive and economically strong form of European Christianity, backed by European commercial interests. In Ethiopia the Europeans were obliged to try to break up the central polity: a French Tigray, a British Shewa, a German Oromo (Krapf identified the Oromo as Africa's Germans) were all on the agenda at different times.

While the political elite and the queen of Madagascar accepted the foreign faith and with it a European life style, Tēwodros made it abundantly clear that he and his advisers would permit no proselytizing. He was not opposed to all education. He would listen. Foreigners could work for him if they had the proper skills. He would pay them. But there was to be no question of establishing rival churches, supported by political agents or money from abroad. Foreign flags and consular jurisdiction were out of the question, until such a time as there would be full reciprocity. Tēwodros's "ignorance" about consuls most probably included a healthy awareness of their role in the Ottoman Empire.

To ignore the existence of an Ethiopian national identity, closely allied with

and supported by the position of the Orthodox Church in the society, seems to me to be an untenable position. The traditional Merina identity on the other hand rested on a structure of 'ancestor worship', which was the very target of the activity of the European missionaries. As they offered more and more education and more and more worldly benefits to the educated young, the traditional society was undermined. The Ethiopian society was able to resist major intrusions into its spiritual life up to the end of the century. Nowhere does the difference emerge more strikingly than in the number of pupils in European-type schools. The figure of up to 164,000 pupils in mission schools in Imerina by 1894 has been mentioned above. The best Ethiopian figures we have are 810 pupils in twelve Swedish Mission schools and 350 in seven Catholic mission schools in Eritrea by 1910.²² In the Ethiopian capital the first modern schools, government and mission, only started after 1905. That tens of thousands throughout the country probably attended Orthodox church schools is a different matter. They were not alienated from the faith and culture of their parents. In view of the challenges of the twentieth century this may be regarded as a drawback. In terms of coping with European imperialism and colonialism in the nineteenth it was quite clearly an asset—particularly when contrasted with the situation in and the fate of Imerina.

The missionary/educational aspect of this history is revealed also by the attitude of missionaries to the final life and death struggle of the two nations. By coincidence Norwegian and Swedish missionaries arrived in Madagascar and the Horn of Africa respectively the same year, 1866. Since they were not representatives of colonial powers, their attitudes could possibly be expected to be a bit more impartial than French or Italian observers of the scene in 1895–96.

A year before the fall of Imerina the Norwegians noted a warlike spirit among the people and expressed their sympathy with the "poor Malagasy". A later report, however, speaks of almost unbelievable calm prevailing. The queen had spoken in the church of the royal court and encouraged the people to trust in God: "The fortunes of war did not depend on the numbers of soldiers, for strength comes from above." A Malagasy priest expressed the same conviction, aware that "we Malagasy matter little in comparison with the French, whether in strength, skills, wealth or numbers" but trusting in God "we can probably still defeat them, as David defeated Goliath." In letters dated as late as a week before the fall of Antananarivo the Norwegians reported that the French had an easy task meeting almost no resistance. At mission headquarters there was some concern about the future but also confidence that the victory of the French would probably also provide opportunities for increased activities."²³

The Swedes were rather more positive to the expected Italian attack on Ethiopia in 1895. A missionary in Harer had found a good friend in an Italian there: "If all Italians were like him, you might congratulate Abyssinia; you could do that anyhow, the way its princes 'rule'". Almost three months after the battle the same

missionary reported *Ras* Mekonnin's return and the victory celebrations, during which the priests chanted the song of the children of Israel at the Red Sea: "I will sing unto the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously: the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea." The missionary, however, thought that the Italians might still win in the end, even if the Ethiopians now seemed to be prepared to take on all Europe. The field director of the mission wrote from Şe'azega: "The defeat at Adwa on 1 March, which was unexpected by all of us, has caused distress and grief all around . . . I visited the dear General Baratieri, who has now been so severely humiliated."²⁴ As far as anticipations are concerned, it is obvious that both Norwegian and Swedish missionaries expected African defeats. They were right in the case of Imerina, wrong in that of Ethiopia. They seem to have differed with regard to sympathies, the Norwegians being more sympathetic to the Merina, the Swedes much less to the Ethiopians.

Ultimately, confidence that the God of their fathers would give them the victory fortified the Ethiopians, who were totally convinced that justice was on their side. The Merina, on the other hand, were faced with the paradox that the Europeans, whose God they had been taught to worship and whose culture they had so widely accepted, had become their enemies. The determining factor was the relative strength and weakness of the spiritual and national identities of the two African societies on trial. At a time when Africans were not expected to have a fatherland, even Baratieri sensed that he was up against something unforeseen, for which he could find no better description than "a semblance of the idea of nationhood in the guise of hatred against the whites."²⁵ It was more, much more than a semblance, as the outcome of the struggle and the battle showed.

Noter

- 1 Robert I. Rotberg and Ali A. Mazrui (eds), *Power and Protest in Black Africa* (1970), pp. 113–142.
- 2 Åke Holmberg to the Faculty of Humanities, Umeå University, 23 Nov. 1979. Åke Holmberg is the author of the pioneering study *African Tribes and European Agencies* (1966).
- 3 Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History* (1934–61), II, p. 365. J. Spencer Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia* (1952), p. 145, uses the same expression: "It was this impregnability of the highlands which enabled Abyssinian Christianity to survive . . . the menace of Western imperialism which was imposing itself over the whole of Africa."
- 4 Esoavelomandroso, UNESCO, *General History of Africa*, VII, pp. 231–232.
- 5 Deschamps (ed.), *Histoire Générale*, II, p. 354; Stephen Ellis and Øystein Rennemo, "The Rising of the *Menalamba*: An Overview", in *Norwegian Missions in African History, vol 2: Madagascar*, p. 117: "The French expeditionary army that marched on the Merina capital, Antananarivo, met with almost no resistance." Hallett, *African History Since 1875*, p. 393, mentions 25 French killed in action, including the capture of Antananarivo.

- 6 *The Cambridge History of Africa (CAH)*, 6, p. 530.
- 7 *CAH*, 6, p. 529.
- 8 UNESCO, VII, p. 232.
- 9 Hallett, p. 691.
- 10 *CAH*, 5, p. 413.
- 11 *CAH*, 6, pp. 521–23.
- 12 Curtin *et al.*, *African History*, p. 414; Deschamps, *Histoire de Madagascar*, pp. 217–219; *CAH*, 6, pp. 523, 526.
- 13 UNESCO, VII, pp. 224–225.
- 14 *Ibid.*, pp. 226–230; *CAH*, 6, pp. 524–526. There are considerable differences in approach and emphasis in the two presentations but they need not concern us in this context.
- 15 Sven Rubenson, *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence* (1976), p. 43. Unless otherwise stated, this section is based on my earlier research as presented in this book.
- 16 See reproductions of original documents in *Correspondence and Treaties 1800–1854, ACTA AETHIOPICA*, I, specially nos 44, 66, 88, 135.
- 17 Rubenson, *Survival*, p. 54.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 182
- 19 *Tēwodros and His Contemporaries 1855–1868, ACTA AETHIOPICA*, II, nos 4 and 5.
- 20 Rubenson, *Survival*, pp. 380 and 382.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 394.
- 22 Tekeste Negash, *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea, 1882–1941* (1987), p. 82.
- 23 *Norsk Missionstidende*, 1894, pp. 460–462; 1895, pp. 119–120, 447–448.
- 24 *Missions-Tidning*, 1895, p. 147; 1896, pp. 115–116, 124–126.
- 25 Oreste Baratieri, *Memorie d’Africa* (1898), p. 48.