

Yohannes IV and Keren

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Keren, known also by its older names of Bogos and Senhit, is situated at a crossroads linking the Nile Valley and the Red Sea ancient caravan routes leading to Metsewa in the north and Matamma in its south-west. Traders from Kassala, Metsewa and Matamma camped at 'Ona on the outskirts of the town.

The nineteenth century has brought to Africa the tragic consequences of colonialism. To make up for his military defeats in Syria and to replace a failed Middle Eastern empire in Africa, Mohammed Ali Pasha of Egypt transferred his troops from Arabia to Africa. The conquest of the Sudan, which was initiated in the 1820s, was consolidated in 1840 at the fall and occupation of Kassala. In 1844 the Egyptians began to threaten Ethiopia's northern frontier-lands. From the beginning the Egyptians' firm intention was to occupy Keren so that they could link the Nile Valley and the Red Sea coast for trade purposes. In fact, at one time, they conducted feasibility studies to construct a railway line to connect Metsewa with Kassala. Their real intentions were delayed and camouflaged under Said Pasha only vividly to appear under Ismail Pasha. Despite Theodore II's attempts to resurrect a strong united Ethiopia, Yohannes IV inherited a weak and divided country, each warlord vying against his neighbour for military and political power. It was an excellent time for external intruders, such as Egypt.

Abba Bezbiz Kassa (Kahsay) consolidated his power in the territories of Tigray and Marab-mellash even before he was crowned Emperor of Ethiopia after defeating *Wagshum* Gobeze (Emperor Teklegiorgis) at the battle of Assam (Adwa). He replaced *Dej.* Hailu Teweldemedhin, the governor of Marab-mellash by *Dej.* Weldemichael Solomon from the rival house of Tsa'azzega. The former was imprisoned for intrigues with the Egyptians, due to old rivalry between the ruling houses of Tsa'azzega and Hazzega for the control of Hamassen, and entrusted it to a certain René, his French gunsmith, a mechanic from Marseilles, in 1868. This man reached Keren at the command of one hundred riflemen and stayed there with his Ethiopian wife for a short time while, may be long enough to levy the annual tribute; he was later raised to the rank of *Fitawrari* by Kahsay. This contingent of armed men was intended to be trained in the European fashion by a French traveller, Captain Alexandre Girard. It seems that the lord of Tigray wished to involve the French in the military protection and political influence against Egyptian intrusion into the northern border-lands. He sent an untranslated Amharic letter addressed to Emperor Napoleon III, by-passing the arch intriguer Werner Munzinger, French vice-consul at Metsewa. In the letter Kahsay recalls to the addressee that Napoleon Bonaparte had written to his fore-father Michael

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Sehul via Egypt and that copies of his letter were kept in Axum and the Holy Saviour Church in Adua. He desired a Franco-Ethiopian Christian alliance against Muslim Egypt. Woldemichael's pride and anger fueled by Munzinger's sinister and deceitful advice almost exploded into open anger. Offended that Bogos (Keren) was cut out from his governorate, of which he considered it an integral part, and being given to a foreigner, he instead wanted to invade it and collect the tribute himself. Even worse, at Munzinger's instigation he corresponded with the French authorities and flirted with the idea of French involvement, to the extent of giving the Bogos governorship to Munzinger himself. All this led to his downfall. On 12 September 1869 Woldemichael was denounced as a Gobeze partisan and was imprisoned while attending Mesqel celebrations. Kahsay was angry at his independent ways and above all his independent correspondence with Napoleon III. Marab-mellash was given over to *Wagshum* Gabru. Woldemichael bribed his jailers and escaped from prison on 10 July, 1871, only to submit after learning that Gobeze was defeated and his sons were prisoners of Kahsay. He was later given the Mekhi'aw Qolo (a portion of Marab-mellash), at which decision he was not happy at all. During the campaign against the Egyptians Yohannes needed the help of the local chiefs in Marab-mellash, for which reason he was lenient with Woldemichael. The latter fought valiantly at the battle of Guedaguidi only to defect to the enemy side at the battle of Gura.

Before actually occupying Keren and the adjacent districts the Egyptians weakened them by incursions, raids and invasions. Pillage, plunder and wanton destruction of life and property became the order of the day. Munzinger, much aware of the shape of things in the area, wanted to lend his services to Egypt. A soldier of fortune, while still a French consular agent he wanted to possess the territory somehow. The people desperate for assistance several times asked for French help against the Egyptian intrusions, knowing very well their highland brothers could not do anything to help them against this menace, which fact they mentioned in one of their letters written on 1 January 1865, and sent by their chiefs to the French vice-consul at Metsewa. In it they solicited foreign assistance and protection, saying:

"...እኛ ብዙ ዘመን ሰላበሻ ንጉሥ ተገዝነ ነገር ግን ከ፲፫ ዘመን ወዲህ ከሚከቡን እስላሞች እንደያድኑን ኃይል አጥተው በመሐከል ቀረኑ። በሠናር መንግሥት ጊዜ የሚያስጨንቀን አልነበረም። ቱርክ ግን ሰምሃርና ባርካ ከገዛ ወዲህ ብዙ ጊዜ ዘረፈን በኃይል እንድናሰልም ምሽቶቻችን ልጆቻችን ወሰዱብን። ጥረቦቶቻችን ማርያ ሐልሐል ሐባብ ይህን ፈርተው አሰሰው። እኛ እንደነዚያ መሆን ጠላን በሃይማኖታችን በነጣ መኖር ወደድን። በመጨረሻ ቱርክ ሲዘርፈን የፈረንሲስ ንጉሥ ነገራችን ይዞ እንደረደን አወቅነ።"

"...we were ruled by the Abyssinian king for many centuries. Since two hundred years as they could not save us from the Muslims who surround us due to lack of power we have been abandoned. During the Sennar kingdom era we were left in peace. After the Turks occupied Samhar and Barka they raided us many times and in order to force us into Islam they seized our wives, children, and cattle. Our neighbours, the Maria, Halhal and Habab, afraid of the consequences, have been converted to Islam. We hate to become like them, we rather prefer to remain in our religion and freedom."

"We are aware of the fact that when the Turks raided us last time the French king remembered our cause and helped us..."¹

Their appeal for urgent help from fellow Christians was not limited to the French: they also wrote similar letters to the British. But opportunists like Munzinger, however, had other plans for the area. At the head of 120,000 men he occupied Keren on 2 July, 1872, not long after Emperor Yohannes's coronation. A well timed move since he knew the country's internal situation fairly well. Yohannes's vassal, *Dej. Tassera*, was defeated by the Oromo at Maqdala, and was forced to withdraw to Soqota, and all this was due to Yohannes's sudden return to Adua from his Azebo expedition. The Emperor now could not travel to Gondar to receive the formal submission of *Ras Woregna* at the risk of exposing his northern flank. Keren was lost during his southern expedition and now he was faced with another dilemma. The situation was fluid. The Egyptians, imitating the British example, took advantage of the situation, expecting another Maqdala debacle for Ethiopia. Although cautious not to be stabbed in the back by insubordinate vassals when facing the menace from the north, Yohannes was not afraid openly to challenge Munzinger: "Get out of this country, otherwise, I will come to fight!"² But for the time being he could not do more than launch a diplomatic campaign in Europe in order to buy time. Bogos was ruled undisputedly by the Egyptians for three years, 1872-1875. The encirclement and harassment continued. In 1872 the Emperor was deprived of his annual salt revenue of 1,000,000 francs by the seizure of the salt plains. Nevertheless Yohannes continued his internal consolidation and diplomatic activities. I quote from one of the protest letters to the European potentates:

"...በገራ አዘቦ የሚባል የጋላ የሰላም አገር አለ ከርሱ ሺቶታ ተነሳብኝ
እርሱን ለማጥፋት ዘመትሁ እርሱንም በእግዚአብሔር ኃይል አጠፋሁት።
ወደ ከተማየ አድዋ ብመለስ ቱርኮች እስላሞች የእስማኦል ባሻ ሰዎች
አገሪን ይዘውት አገኘሁ። ፈቃደኛው ገን እኔን ሊያሰልሙ ሕዝቤንም
ባርያ አድርገው ሊሸጡ ነው። ምነው ጥኑ ክርስትያን ነገና ይህንን
ደብዳቤ የጻፍኩልዎ የገፈን የተገፋሁትን ወሬ ሊሰሙት ብየ ነው።"

ተጽሕፈት በ፲ ቀን ነሐሴ በ፲ወ፲፫ ነወ፱ ዓመተ ምሕረት (13 August 1872) ዓድዋ ከተማ³

"... በኔ እንኳ የሄደው አገር በሪ ዐሣውርታ ዙሳ አስገደበችላ
 ዓድሃብተማርያም ባርያ ቀይሕ ባርያ ለሊም ዓድወለተማርያም ሐላሐላ
 ሞገስ ታንደር ሐብብ መገሰዕ ቢደል ጨተል ጉሕመት ዴን ደሀንሳ ሻሆ
 ወይታ ታኩያ እናርያ ሐባብ ኩናማ ባዘን ጋላቤት ገደርፍ ሃራር። ደሀ
 ነው እርቅማ ነገሥሥታት ምድር ከላስታረቃቸሆኝ ነገሥታት ለማይን
 ወርደው ያስታርቁኛል የቆጠርኩትን አገራን አስመልሱልኝ እርቁንም እጁ
 እስታርቁኝ"

ተጽሕፈት አስመራ ከተማ ለመ ፲ ወይስ የካቲት በ፲ ወ ፲፫ ፳፱ (17
 Feb. 1881)

"In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God; praise be to Him. An epistle of the Elect of God, Yohannes, King of Seyon, King of Kings of Ethiopia. May it reach the illustrious and esteemed Welhelm [=Welhelm I.], Kaiser of Garmanya [=Germany], King of Buresya [=Prussia]. How are you? My army and I are well, honour and thanks be to the God of the saints, for His mercy is everlasting. Your respected letter with its insignia, which was written in clear conscience and enlightened mind, reached me through the hands of the chief councillor. Dr. Girhard Rolfs [=Dr. Gerhard Rohlf]. I was delighted to hear of the well-being of your army, the safety of your country and of your consideration for the settlement of my case. As far as the peace settlement [of the dispute] is concerned, I had written to you last year how the Turks inflicted injustice upon me; Your Majesty, too has, heard it. As to those [Turks], they have not yet refrained from doing justice to me even today. To illustrate this to you, they ambushed and exterminated the people I sent to the Šanqella country to collect tribute. They took the Christians and Islamized them. This happened not long ago. It was as recently as last November. My restraint is not due to lack of power, thank God, but because I did not want [to act] without your, the sovereign's warrant. In fact, I have not retaken my land which is nearby, let alone that which is afar. And now, if you intend to mediate between us, I agree on condition [that I get] the country as it was at the hands of my fathers, the Emperors of Ethiopia, before Mahamad Grañ devastated it, and the state disintegrated. After the invasion by Grañ, it was later regained by Sarda Dengel, Iyasu and Fasil. Then arose one called Gugsä and let it once again be taken. In fact, is there anything about Ethiopia that you, the sovereigns of Europe, do not know? Its limits to the east and south are the sea. To the west and the north where there is no sea, all

the lands - except Noba, Sawakin, Kartum, Barbar, Senar, Ennarya, Sudan, Balaw, Dengula, Haran Dawa, Gaši, Mesewa, Badaw, Šihu, Teltal - inhabited by the Galla, the Šanqella and the Adal are mine. As a matter of fact, a country called Harar in Šawa has recently been occupied. I listed all this in detail in order to make the boundaries of my country known. The following are the lands that were lost in the time of the princes under Ali and Webé as well as recently under Negus Téwodros and myself: Bori, Asawerta, Zula, Asagade, Baqla, Ad Habta Maryam, Barya, Qayih, Barya Sallim, Ad Walatta Maryam, Halhal Mogas, Tander, Hehub, Mansa'e, Bidal, Catal, Guhmat, Dume, Dahmila, Šaho, Wayta, Takuy, Ennarya, Habab, Kunama, Bazen, Galla Bet, Gadarif, Harar. With regard to mediation, will the Heavenly Kings descend to reconcile me if you, the earthly Kings do not! Restore the lands I have listed as mine. And I coonsent to your mediation. But I have told your official, chief councillor Dr. Gerhard Rohlf, to represent me at the negotiations, and I seek the permission of Your Majesty so that he may be able to be my representative.

"Written on the 11 Yakkatit 1873 A. Mis. [= 17 February 1881] in the city of Samara."⁴

Britain, France, Germany, Austria, etc., ignored Ethiopian pleas because of their own commercial interests in Egypt. The enemy continued its machinations for the destabilization and dismemberment of the country. Ismail Pasha moved to encircle and crush the Emperor. His real objective was to control the head-waters of the Nile and claim the Red Sea all the way to the coasts of the Indian Ocean. One Egyptian army was sent via the occupied territory to capture Adua, the Emperor's capital. Another was sent to Awsa under Munzinger's command via Tadjura. Both of these efforts were crushed. Yohannes, almost abandoned by his vassals, who wished him doom and extinction, singlehandedly faced the invading army. A resounding victory put the Egyptians to an ignominious defeat. To revenge this shameful encounter with another attempt they hushed up any news of the event and continued preparations for a punitive expedition. Still the Ethiopians put a better trained and equipped army to worse shame. Keren, intended as a gate of conquest and victory, witnessed the shameful flight of an Egyptian army in disarray. Defeated in open battle the Egyptians instigated rebel chiefs to attack the country from their sanctuaries in the occupied territory. Robbers, common criminals and rebels became instruments of revenge and instability. The land was repeatedly devastated, eg. by Woldemichael Solomon, Debbab Araaya, Kassa Gulja (*Abba* Kayssi), Kaffel (Kifleyesus, Goffar), Bahta Hagos, the sons of Woldemichael, etc. Raids, counter-raids, pillaging and plunder ruled the day. On one occasion the Egyptians tried to blackmail the Emperor by offering the notorious *Abba* Kayssi in exchange of Bogos, way back before the definitive occupation of the area.

Even after his two resounding victories over the Egyptians, Yohannes could not recover the occupied territories. The formal restoration of the territory had

to wait for a totally circumstantial event. The Adwa (Hewett) Treaty was signed between Yohannes and the British on 3 July, 1884. On the basis of this treaty Bogos was returned in return for the safe conduct of the Egyptian troops stranded in Kassala, Abedib and Senhit (Keren) by the rise of the successful Mahdist revolution. Through his generalissimo Alula Engeda, Yohannes tried to establish a permanent rule in Keren but failed. Alula could not dislodge the Egyptians ensconced in the Keren fortress with their mountain guns. He could raid the land at will but not govern it. From the heights of Debreseina he was able to proclaim a tax decree, yet its implementation was problematic as long as the Egyptians, who levied their own taxes, were present. Yohannes's misplaced trust in the British further handed over the land to the Italians through deceit and treachery while the ink of the Adua Treaty was still not dry. It was another tragic coincidence that Keren was occupied by the Italians less than three months after Yohannes's immolation at the battle of Matamma.

NOTES

1. A letter by the Christian chiefs of Ansaba, Bogos, Mensa, Bejjuk, and Ad Gaim to Napoleon III, Emperor of France. As recorded in Abba Teklemariam Semharay's notebook known as Tomare London, Keren Catholic Seminary Library.
2. J. de Coursac, *Le règne de Yohannes* (Romans, 1926).
3. Bairu Tafla, *Ethiopia and Germany: Cultural, Political and Economic Relations, 1871-1936* (Wiesbaden, 1981).
4. *Ibid.*, p.200.

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