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## **Yohannis IV and the Process of Reunification of the Empire in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century**

The beginning of the nineteenth century found Ethiopia in the state of political fragmentation. The Emperors exercised no authority during the period known as “Era of the Judges “ (1765-1850). What linked the north with the south was the long distance trade routes.<sup>1</sup> These were the circumstances when Ethiopia’s second contact with Europe began. The period was marked by the presence of foreign missionaries, businessmen and official envoys. Both political fragmentation and European presence formed the setting for the events to come. The emperors responded to the two challenges in a number of ways. However, it is generally agreed that centralisation and unification became the dominant themes of this period.

The years 1850-1890 were formative decades for the reconstruction of the monarchy and the state. It still remains unclear how Ethiopia, an indigenous monarchy, not only successfully managed to escape European conquest but also recreate and subsequently expand its own empire. The reason for it is partly the heavy reliance on external European sources and the trend that dominated the scholarly literature of following a pattern of reconstructing European history in Africa, as opposed to looking at the Ethiopian side of the events. It is usually accepted that it was unification and

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<sup>1</sup> Bahru Zewde, *A history of modern Ethiopia, 1855-1974*, London-Athens-Addis Ababa 1991, p. 174.

centralisation of the state that lie behind the survival of Ethiopia's independence.<sup>2</sup> However, the development of these processes remains unclear. As the literature on Tewodros (1855-1868) and Menelik (1889-1913) is relatively rich, the reign of Yohannis IV has been almost habitually overlooked. He seems to be overshadowed by his charismatic both successor and predecessor. Tewodros who reunited the kingdom after the period of disintegration was a charismatic figure that centralised all power in his hands. He was, no doubt, the first ruler to have authority over the nobility. He was also the first to set a trend of looking into Ethiopia's glorious past and utilising symbols drawn from there.

However, my opinion is that it was Yohannis who placed the monarchy firmly on the institutional bases by reviving the traditional councils and tribunals. By doing so he enabled the provincial nobility (*mekwonent*) to play their traditional part in government. Instead, scholars concentrated on his religious policy seen as evidence of his overreligiousness, even fanaticism.<sup>3</sup>

Religious policy played, indeed, a very important part in Yohannis' reign. It also appears that he made a reform of the Church and its doctrine an instrument of his purpose, which was an enlargement of the ruling Christian elite by imposing Christianity on Muslim and pagan chiefs and leaders. None of those aspects has been fully investigated. Indeed, Yohannis' religious policy is generally regarded as fanatical and counter-productive.<sup>4</sup> Even historians like Bahru Zewde point out this fact as a failure: "[...] it lacked liberalism and spirit of tolerance that he had showed in the political field".<sup>5</sup> The great majority of scholars fail to see his religious policy as a part of a bigger political plan. Instead, they look at it from an ethical point of view.

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<sup>2</sup> S. Rubenson, *Survival of Ethiopia's independence*, London 1976, p. 321; Bahru Zewde, *op. cit.*; H.G. Marcus, *The life and times of Menelik II. Ethiopia 1844-1913*, New Jersey 1995.

<sup>3</sup> Hussein Ahmed, *Islam in nineteenth-century Wallo, Ethiopia*, Leiden-Boston-Koln 2001, p. 169; G. Tsyarkin, *Ot rozdrobnosti do politicheskoy centralizacii*, Moskva 1980, p. 106; Bahru Zewde, *op. cit.*

<sup>4</sup> Hussein Ahmed, *op. cit.*, p. 169; G. Tsyarkin, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

<sup>5</sup> Bahru Zewde, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

## General facts

*Dejazmach* Kassa Marcha, as this was Yohannis' original name, aspired to the imperial throne, but was cautious, and therefore referred to himself as Head of Nobles of Ethiopia before the official coronation. He acquired a large number of firearms from Napier during his campaign against Tewodros in 1868.

As a native of Tigray he could prove descent from principle Tigrayen noblemen of the preceding century. He also paid a considerable amount of money for *abun* Atnotewos who finally arrived in Ethiopia in 1869.

Yohannis IV was officially crowned in 1872 in Axum according to traditional rite, as legitimacy and tradition played a crucial role during his reign. He personally negotiated with the Egyptians to procure a new *abun*, without whom a legitimate coronation could not take place.

The reign of Yohannis was a time when the spread of European commerce rapidly transformed the internal setting of the Horn of Africa. The literature generally agrees that he had to deal with a number of external dangers. The opening of Suez Canal in 1869 sped up the activities on the coast of the Red Sea.

In 1875 the Emperor successfully faced the Egyptians driven to a conflict by Khedive Ismail, grandson of Muhammad Ali, who sought to place Egypt on the equal level with European powers. Ismail wanted to create an Egyptian empire in the greater Nile Valley.

Ismail obtained Massawa from Turkey in 1868, and between 1872-1875 managed to occupy the whole of the African coast of the Red Sea.<sup>6</sup> The first expedition (1875-1882) resulted in the occupation of Harar in Southern Ethiopia. The subsequent one (1872-1887) conducted from Massawa on the coast aimed to expand into territories between the Egyptian garrisoned towns of Massawa, Keren and Kassala. This was the reason for launching

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<sup>6</sup> K. Darkwah, *Shewa, Menilek and the Ethiopian Empire, 1813-89*, London 1978, p. 74.

the first Ethiopian comprehensive initiative with Europe. The Emperor's envoy Kirkham was sent with letters to Britain, Austria, Germany, Russia and France- all proved unsuccessful. However, the Egyptian attempts to penetrate deeper into Ethiopia resulted in the humiliating defeat of the Egyptians during the battles of Gundet (Nov. 1875) and Gura (March 1876).<sup>7</sup>

In 1881 Muhammad Ahmad proclaimed himself Mahdi, and successfully mobilised Sudanese forces against Egyptian rule. British occupation of Egypt put an end to the Egyptian empire. However, the Mahdist state placed an even greater challenge for Ethiopia. In 1882 the British withdrew the Egyptian garrison from Harar and all their Red Sea posts. Shortly after the Italians replaced the Egyptians in Massawa. Hence, Yohannis was faced with two external enemies.

In 1884, Britain sent a diplomatic mission led by Sir William Hewett to negotiate safe withdrawal of the Egyptian troops to Massawa through Ethiopian territory. The treaty was signed in Adwa, and is widely known as the "Hewett Treaty". According to the subsequent peace treaty, Emperor Yohannis agreed to facilitate the withdrawal of the Egyptian troops from several garrisons in Sudan through Ethiopia to Massawa. In return Ethiopia was promised free transit through Massawa, including arms and ammunition and reoccupation of Egyptian territories that were to be evacuated by the Egyptian in Northern Ethiopia (Bogos area). Yohannis respected the agreement. The British, however, allowed Italy to occupy Massawa. This was the end of Egyptian domination on the Red Sea coast and the beginning of the competition of three European powers—Britain, France,<sup>8</sup> and Italy—on the Ethiopian Red Sea coast and the Gulf of Aden.

Subsequently war between Ethiopia and farther encroaching Italy was only a matter of time. In 1885 Italian troops landed in

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<sup>7</sup> Haggai Erlich, *Ethiopia and the challenge of independence*, London 1986, p. 43.

<sup>8</sup> S. Rubenson, *op. cit.*, p. 354; Hussein Ahmed, *Military aspect of the battle of Dogali*, in: *The centenary of Dogali. Proceedings of the International Symposium*, Addis Ababa, Asmara 1987, p. 42.

Massawa. Gradually, Italy not only stretched her colony from Assab (purchased in 1863) to Massawa, but also occupied the garrisons previously held by the Egyptians. The Italians started to expand their territory to the interior. Moreover, Ethiopian goods had to pay duties at Massawa and all importation of arms was prohibited.<sup>9</sup> The year 1887 brought the battle of Dogali and the victory over the Italians in a famous clash, in which the Italian battalion was annihilated.

The battle of Matamma in 1889 against the Mahdist ended in the death of Yohannis IV. Some historians believe that Yohannis' faithful implementation of Hewett treaty re-directed Mahdist anger against Ethiopia. Mahdist encroachment was gradual and facilitated by trans-frontier trade and the presence of Muslim population in the region. They penetrated deep into Oromo territories. Conflict consisted of border raids and several clashes, for which the battle of Matamma was the most important.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Internal policy***

Yohannes' internal policy is generally believed to be significantly different from his predecessor's. It is accepted that he was prepared to share Ethiopia with his subordinates with the only requirements being recognition of his suzerainty.<sup>11</sup> According to Bahru Zewde, it was a policy of "controlled regionalism". He recognises the advantages of such approach in establishing a unity of the state. However, he sees it as encouraging the centrifugal tendencies.<sup>12</sup> Bahru recognises that Yohannis pursued policy of maintaining a political equilibrium between his main vassals: Menelik, *ras* Adal of Gojam. In order to control this hereditary ruler of Gojam, Yohannis assured Adal's rights to the throne of Gojam. Adal submitted at Ambachara in 1874. Yohannis began to support him as a counterweight to Menelik of Shewa. In 1881 Yohannis

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<sup>9</sup> Haggai Erlich, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

<sup>10</sup> Bahru Zewde, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

<sup>11</sup> Bahru Zewde, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

<sup>12</sup> Bahru Zewde, *op. cit.*, p. 43 and 162; G. Tsyarkin, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

elevated Adal to the rank of *negus* of Gojam and strengthened him in his rivalry with Menilek for control of the southern territories, which were a rich source of the commodities convertible to fire-arms through trade. The emperor also approved of Adal's expansion to the south of the river Abbay in order to forestall Shewan ruler.<sup>13</sup>

In 1878 Menilek finally gave submission to Yohannis in Leche (Shewa, 20 March 1878). This agreement resolved political uncertainty of Tewodros period. Yohannis' suzerainty was finally recognised. Menelik had to carry the traditional stone of penitence and prostrate himself in front of his overlord. He agreed to pay an annual tribute to the emperor and to provide supplies for the imperial army when it passed through Shewa. Yohannis made Menelik renounce the title of *negusa nagast* (king of kings) but sanctioned Menelik's assumption of the title of *negus* (king); by doing so the Emperor acknowledged Menilek and his descendants as lawful rulers of Shewa.<sup>14</sup> After this agreement Menelik opened his eyes to the south, mainly because Wallo was no longer his domain.

In 1881 Yohannis made Adal *negus* of Gojam and Kaffa: in this way he was publicising the desire to deprive Menelik of the resource rich southwest.

Yohannis exercised indirect rule over Gojjam and Shewa. The territory north of the Mareb river (Mareb Mellash) up to the Red Sea was administrated by his trusted general Alula Abba Negga. The emperor promoted this man of humble origin from *shaleqa* (major) to *ras*. In this way Yohannis gained his outstanding loyalty. However, his promotion provoked dissatisfaction of the nobility. In the Mareb Mellash the local leaders had cooperated with the Turks and also later on with the Egyptians since the late sixteenth century.

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<sup>13</sup> G. Tsyppkin, *op. cit.*, p. 106; D. Crummey, *Land and society in the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia from the thirteenth to twentieth century*, Univeristy of Illinois Press, Urbana 2000, p. 96; R. Caulk, *Religion and state in nineteenth century Ethiopia*, „Journal of Ethiopian Studies”, 1972, X, no. 1, p. 41.

<sup>14</sup> H.G. Marcus, *op. cit.*, p. 56; K. Darkwah, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

Such alliances helped them to maintain their autonomy from the emperors and the ambitious Tigrean chiefs. They allied with the Italians against Yohannis. Therefore, *ras* Alula, loyal “king’s man” was appointed. Alula established a village of Asmara and turned it into a commercial, military and administrative centre. This centralised regime was economically based on the trade with Massawa, especially the profitable arms trade. With the death of Yohannis, Alula lost his sources of power outside his province. The Tigrean ruling families found it very hard to accept the extent of Alula’s power. His career is a very inspiring example of the flexibility of Ethiopia’s institutions (state system).<sup>15</sup>

The religious dimension of Yohannis’ policy of unification played an important role in the process of reunification of the country. The council of Boru Meda of 1878, which took place in Wallo, put an end to doctrinal controversies.<sup>16</sup> The aim was to eliminate doctrinal disputes. *Tewahdo* was declared the only doctrine and all others were condemned. The council was no doubt a positive measure of restoring unity of the Church, which was an ultimate goal of the emperor, who undoubtedly aimed at unity of the faith. One way of achieving this goal was by raising a number of Egyptian bishops from one to four, which was precedence in Ethiopia. In 1882 *abun* Petros with bishops Matewos, Marqos and Luqas arrived in Ethiopia. Each of them was assigned to different provinces of the Empire (Tigray, Semien, Shoa, Gojjam and Kaffa) empowered to consecrate Ethiopian clergy, which was of major importance for evangelisation undertaken by Yohannis.<sup>17</sup> He also adapted a harsh policy towards foreign missionaries.

Yohannis’ religious policy has been often criticised. The Emperor is accused of passing law that forced the Muslims to either convert to Christianity or have their property confiscated.

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<sup>15</sup> Haggai Erlich, *Ras Allula and the scramble for Africa: A political bibliography. Ethiopia and Eritrea 1875-1897*, The Read Sea Press 1996, p. 107.

<sup>16</sup> Bahru Zewde, *op. cit.*; A. Bartnicki, J. Mantel-Niećko, *Historia Etiopii*, Wrocław 1984, p. 187.

<sup>17</sup> P. Henze, *Layers of time. A history of Ethiopia*, London 2000, p. 150.

However, what is often overlooked is the fact that Muslim chiefs and hereditary rulers had the choice of converting and retaining their rights: "If you wish to live in peace preserving your belongings, become Christian, thereby you will govern in this world and inherit the one to come."<sup>18</sup>

Muhammad Ali, main chief in Wallo, was baptised and given the title of *ras*, and a Christian name Mikael, as well as governorship of large parts of the lands in central Wallo.<sup>19</sup>

Menelik applied the same policy as instructed by the emperor. He had Abba Wataw baptised *dejasmach* Hayla Maryam: again it was accompanied by grant of lands to govern (adjoining those of *ras* Mikael). Menilek also adapted Yohannis' religious policy in Wallo, by receiving the submission of Wallo chiefs in Werra Ilu.<sup>20</sup>

According to Hussein these events marked a turning point of Muslim resistance, which from this moment was led only by Muslim clerics. On Yohannis' order new churches were built in order to provide the newly baptised with places for worship. The process of evangelisation concerned also Oromo leaders converted to Christianity.

Both Hussein and Caulk agree that the most important aspect of conversion was the way it reinforced the dependency of Mikael and other governors on the Emperor and Menilek through filial ties of baptism.<sup>21</sup> It is hard and pointless to disagree with this notion. However, both authors fail to take it further and see the religious policy as a carefully considered plan of creating a homogenous society in order to recreate the state system used for the core regions, the so-called Abyssinia, which would accommodate for a different ethnic make up of the nineteenth century Ethiopian society. In my opinion this is a way of inquiry that should be pursued.

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<sup>18</sup> R. Caulk, *op. cit.*, p. 26; *Gebre Sellasie Chronicle*, p. 156.

<sup>19</sup> Hussein Ahmed, *Islam in nineteenth century...*, p. 174.

<sup>20</sup> Hussein Ahmed, *op. cit.*, p. 176; R. Caulk, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>21</sup> R. Caulk, *op. cit.*, p. 28; Hussein Ahmed, *op. cit.*, p. 180.



Muslim of Wallo in particular posed an obstacle to the establishment of a religiously homogenous society, as well as political, since they constituted a "foreign state" in the middle of Christian land.<sup>22</sup>

What must not be overlooked about Yohannis' religious policy is the fact that the converts were to be fully accepted into the community and given equal rights. He insisted on the rights of converts to marry freely and enjoy inheritable landed property (*rist*) with those who have been Christians from birth.<sup>23</sup> This to me indicates a carefully considered political dimension of Yohannis' religious policy.

### ***The treatment of the subject in secondary literature***

The literature of the reign of Yohannis was usually considered from the point of view of European expansion and the "miraculous" resistance of Ethiopia. The question of Ethiopia's independence throughout the era of European colonization remains a fundamental issue in the modern history of Ethiopia. For a long time those writing on Ethiopia pointed out geographical features of the country, underlining its inaccessibility. They saw the Ethiopian Highlands as a main reason for retaining country's independence.

The person who addressed this subject more exhaustively was Sven Rubenson in his book.<sup>24</sup>

According to Rubenson, Ethiopia's geographical features played no role in the preservation of the country's independence. As evidence Rubenson indicates the possibility of infiltration from the coast, via Zeila or Massawa. He sees the notion that the Ethiopian Highlands acted as a natural fortress for the country as misleading. The evidence shows that Napier, who led the British against Tewodros in 1868, had little difficulty marching through the country in order to reach Makdela. In 1875-76 the Egyptian army

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<sup>22</sup> Zewde Gebre Sellasie, *Yohannes IV of Ethiopia. A political biography*, Oxford 1975, p. 96-100.

<sup>23</sup> R. Caulk, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>24</sup> S. Rubenson, *Survival of Ethiopia's independence*, London 1976.

also penetrated beyond the border mountains of Hamasen and Akkele Guzay where they were attacked and destroyed. The Italians also managed to cross the mountains and then they were finally stopped at Amba Alege in 1895.

The notion that the interest of European powers in subduing Ethiopia was weak is also classified by Rubenson as false. However, he admits that the emphasis shifted with the economic and political conditions in Europe. Nevertheless exportable resources and potential market as well as the strategic importance of the Nile waters, and new seaway to India and Far East were an unquestionable fact. Therefore, the French and British pressure to gain commercial control and political influence remained constant.

According to Rubenson the withdrawal of the British (after Makdala expedition) was due to the stubborn resistance that Tewodros provided against the introduction of special rights and privileges for Europeans and not the lack of interest in the area.

The reason that the Ethiopians managed to neutralise the attempts to partition the country or to limit the sovereignty and ultimately subdue, lay according to Rubenson, more in awareness of spiritual and national identity than in material resources.

Awareness and attachment to the monarchy, directly or through hierarchy of feudal lords, also contributed to national consciousness. Rubenson also emphasises the determination in which this heritage of national consciousness and political skill was developed to meet the new challenges.

Institution of monarchy, whose roots go back to the Old Testament common faith, traditions and culture of an ancient Christian Church were valuable assets in the formation of national and political consciousness essential to survival.

The main theory of Rubenson's work is that the unification and consolidation that occurred during the period under discussion and the diplomatic awareness and activity were underestimated by European powers. The unification and centralisation lies behind the survival as an independent state. However, despite his belief he deals with Ethiopian internal politics only in relation to the foreign pressure.

Rubenson points out that historical literature followed the pattern of focusing on European history in Africa. He recognises the need to examine the Ethiopian side of events and developments. This approach is, as Rubenson states himself, unsatisfactory in the efforts to fully understand the process of the reunification.

## ***New trends and approaches***

Recently, the scholarly literature on Ethiopia of this period has grown and covered more fields of inquiry. D. Crummey seems to represent a new trend in the approach to the period in question. He recognises and emphasises the fact that power must be understood within social context.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, he conducted a study of interaction between social relations and economic production, by addressing the question of how social relations affected the conditions for economic production. He seeks answers to the problem, what were the mechanisms and institutions that linked rulers and ruled, and how did the rulers of Ethiopia extract from the subjects the wealth which sustained them.

His proposed line of investigation is through *gult*, an institution of land tenure, which brought together producers and privileged.<sup>26</sup> The Ethiopian state and its rulers affected the common people through the system of taxation and tribute. In pre-modern Ethiopia the land did not belong to the ruling classes but to the peasants that cultivated it, this form of ownership was called *ristenna*. But the *gabbar* peasants were obliged to pay tribute. They were subjected to the ruling classes, who had the right to receive this tribute. This right was designated *gult*<sup>27</sup>, which was basically the right to extract surplus from allocated lands allocated by the emperor or an overlord.

In this way two different property rights, *rist* and *gult*, would be held by two different individuals belonging to two distinct

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<sup>25</sup> Merid W. Aregay, *Alula, Dogali and Ethiopian unity*, in: *Proceedings of the International Symposium*, Addis Ababa, Asmara 1987, p. 39.

<sup>26</sup> D. Crummey, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>27</sup> *Gult* was a payment or reward for service to the emperor or overlord, very rarely permanent or hereditary.

classes. The Ethiopian ruling class consisted of *gult* holders. The farmers who worked on inherited lands were controlling agricultural production and lived on the land, which was their source of power. The role of the state was primary in legitimising the system of *gult*.

Tadesse Tamrat unlike Crummey emphasised that *gult* originated from military conquest, as the emperor had “free” land at his disposal in order to distribute to his followers.<sup>28</sup> He also agrees that *gult* rights were an integral part of Amhara administration.

All, Hoben, Crummey and Tadesse recognise that by granting *gult* rights to individuals the state imposed obligations on them in return. According to Crummey there were different types of obligations such as leading troops in battle, or conducting religious service. Crummey is sceptical about tying the origin of *gult* to conquest, which in his opinion provided only an occasion for the emperors, who had acquired new territorial resources in this way due to the available resources to grant their followers with land in the form of *gult*.<sup>29</sup>

Unlike grants of *gult* to military and other leaders, grants of *gults* to churches were permanent, due to the sanctity of the Church as recognised by the State. Churches could re-grant those rights to individuals in return for service. *Gult* often functioned as a distinct form of property rights on the same land on which *rist*<sup>30</sup> rights existed.

Towodros (1855-1868) the first emperor to rule Ethiopia after the period of disintegration is often perceived as a unifier of modern Ethiopia, great reformer and moderniser. Although, Bahru Zewde a modern Ethiopian historian, and the author of the latest work on modern Ethiopian history, notes, however, that Tewodros’ reign was marked by vision more than method.

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<sup>28</sup> Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, Oxford 1974, p. 76.

<sup>29</sup> D. Crummey, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>30</sup> *Rist* - general rights to inherit the patrimony of one’s parents. This type of land tenure existed in the core regions of the empire. These rights had only the descendants of those who cultivated the land first. The emperor had no rights to these lands.

He was without doubt the first ruler to have authority over the nobility. The evidence shows that he was seeking changes in the distribution of *gult*. The attitude to land distribution was central to his approach to government. He projected the image of change and reform, which can be seen especially well in European sources. However, what the reform actually was remains unclear. Travellers like Plowden seem to have been fooled by the image and subsequently influenced Ethiopian and European writings. The changes in *gult* rights that Tewodros attempted to implement in order to increase his revenue and thereby to strengthen the army, seem to have led to his downfall. The army was essential for Tewodros not only to obtain power, which would be the norm, but also to maintain it. He was looking for ways to regain a part of the revenue, which had been redistributed as *gult*.<sup>31</sup> This policy led him to reduce land ownership of the Church in an attempt to revert tenure from Church to military. According to Stern, who sees it as a "reform" the land allocated to the clergy was just enough to support the minimal number of priests to conduct a Mass service in the area. Rubenson agrees that it was a step forward. At the same time,

Tewodros made governors and judges into his salary appointees. All military forces should be integrated into a national army under his command. This army should take the place of personal privileges. Tewodros' governors and judges should be his personal salary appointees, as all military forces should be integrated into a national army under his command.<sup>32</sup>

According to Plowden, Tewodros was striking a mighty blow to the feudal system in Ethiopia. In reality, it eventually led to his isolation and death in Mekdela in 1868, as such policy attempted to change fundamentally the way the Ethiopian State operated.

The discussion over Tewodros' reform of the system of *gult* is part of a wider attempt to explain the origins of the modern Ethiopian State, greatly stimulated by the demise of the monarchy in 1974. This attempt covers not only institutional and political

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<sup>31</sup> S. Rubenson, *King of Kings, Tewodros of Ethiopia*, Addis Abeba 1966, p. 94.

<sup>32</sup> S. Rubenson, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

history, but concerns itself with the idea of empire inherited from the distant past.

Thus Shiferaw Bekele tackles the problem of certain elements of the state system that linked the regional governors with the court (centre of the state). They were the so-called central institutions of the state, the system by which the army was organised, as well as the national ideology.<sup>33</sup> This applied to the so-called core regions of the Empire, which shared commonality of polity, land tenure, culture, and religion.

He points out the need for further examination of the institutional development of this period. Shiferaw points out that Tewodros degraded the office of a governor to that of *mislene'* (meaning „district officer, deputy”). It was an administrative function over given territories. His purpose was to help an emperor with managing *gults* in the absence of a governor. He did not exercise all the powers of a governor. A *Mislene'* was not obliged to counsel the king or sit on the royal tribunal. His court protocol was accordingly much lower than that of a governor. He had also less authority than a governor in his province. He could not issue any administrative matters without the permission of the overlord for whom he deputised. His revenue from the actual *gult* went to his master, either governor or king. Consequently, he would have had a smaller following or retainer force. Therefore, it was difficult for a *mislene'* to grow into a powerful political figure.<sup>34</sup> There is a lack of any record to confirm that Tewodros held the royal council, which proves that he, indeed, was acting against the traditional system. Such activity led to strong dissatisfaction of the nobility, which became excluded from the ruling process.

The collapse of the Empire stimulated debates about the origins of the modern Ethiopian State. Scholars tried to understand the continuities linking it with ancient past. The majority agrees that there is a relation between the two.

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<sup>33</sup> Shiferew Bekele, *Kassa and Kassa. Papers on the lives and times and images of Tewodros II and Yohannis IV*, edited by Tadesse Bayene, R. Pankhurst, Shiferaw Bekele, Addis Ababa University Press, Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa 1990.

<sup>34</sup> Shiferew Bekele, *op. cit.*, p. 279.

Shiferaw Bekele tackles the problem of certain elements of the state system that linked the regional governors with the court (centre of the state). They were the so-called central institutions of the state system in which the army was organised and the national ideology.<sup>35</sup> This applied to the so-called core regions of the Empire. Yohannis' regional policy was based on the enlargement of this system, available only for the Christian elite, through inclusion of other ethnic groups as well as creating a link between provincial governors and the court, centre of the state. The policy was based on re-adaptation of the existing system modelled on the Gonderine example.<sup>36</sup> The central offices like the one of the governor enable the emperor to control the office holder.

In general, Yohannis preferred method of administering was through traditional leaders and the value system that allowed regional and local initiative. The governors had control of local armies, exercised judicial authority and dealt with religious issues in their local domains. However, no in-depth study has been done about the development of these mechanisms. Often scholars fail to see these means of governing and controlling as a part of a system; instead they simplify it to a "federal approach". Some even see this policy as encouraging centrifugal tendencies.<sup>37</sup>

Yohannes was also often perceived as conservative person.<sup>38</sup> Some historians place allegations against him that he was not interested in innovation and enlightenment and preferred to keep his country isolated. Few, mainly Zewde Gebre Selassie, perceive his reign otherwise. Zewde, indeed, points out Yohannis' broad correspondence with European courts, as well as the number of foreigners working for the emperor.<sup>39</sup>

The accusation that Yohannis was anti-progress cannot be sustained, and should be revised. This stereotype was created mainly by the missionaries, who were not welcomed by Yohannis

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<sup>35</sup> Shiferaw Bekele, *op. cit.*

<sup>36</sup> Zewde Gebre Sellasie, *op. cit.*

<sup>37</sup> Bahru Zewde, *op. cit.*

<sup>38</sup> G. Tsyarkin, *Ot rozdrobnosti...*, s. 125.

<sup>39</sup> Zewde Gebre Selassie, an unpublished paper.

for reasons related to his religious policy. Zewde, however, builds a different image of Yohannis. He claims that the emperor was very much against slavery and therefore cared about welfare of the people. As proof, he sees the fact that the emperor issued the warning to Mini'lik, king of Shewa, stating his disapproval of seasonal raids against the Gurage people in the south.<sup>40</sup> However, it seems that we need to be careful with this argument as Mini'lik undoubtedly was the most powerful vassal of the emperor, and therefore the most likely to rebel. What is more, most of Mini'lik's profit came from participation of Shewa in the slave trade.<sup>41</sup> Slave markets in Ethiopia were situated in remote regions, most of them under the authority of the princes. As they were autonomous it was difficult for the emperor to intervene.

All together it appears that Yohannis was far from being fanatical as the Europeans judged him to be. He sought to unite his country through gaining the goodwill and co-operation of his vassals. It seems like he was fully aware of the failure of his predecessor Tewodros II and was realistic enough to understand that he was not in the position to defeat all the leading families in the various provinces and to redistribute land through the empire, thus creating set of loyalties based entirely on the monarchy. Instead, he worked to create a federal structure modelled on earlier experiences (Gonderin) and the key to this policy was a compromise with hereditary rulers, such as Menelik of Showa and *ras* Adal of Gojam. Yohannis certainly managed to pacify the country by power sharing and accommodation of regional aspiration.

Simultaneously, Yohannis tried to encourage the spirit of Ethiopian Christian nationalism in order to achieve a cultural uniformity in the empire. Religion—Ethiopian orthodoxy—was central to Yohannis' understanding of himself as religious concepts determined his understanding of kingship, but his religious policy as a part of a political plan seems to be underresearched and

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<sup>40</sup> Mengistu Lemma, *Metsafe Titz za Aleqa Lemma Hailu Wolde Tarik*, Addis Ababa 1976, pp. 52-56.

<sup>41</sup> H.G. Marcus, *op. cit.*



underestimated. He pursued a harsh policy of implementation of one doctrine in the country and backed it up by numerous ecclesiastical endowments to the representative of the chosen school. Here his policy was very different to Tewodros' who sought to benefit from the wealth of the Church and utilise it for the enlargement and improvement of the army.

The key factor in emperor's undertakings aiming to uniform the country culturally with the use of religion is the policy of allowing the converts to be fully accepted into the community and given equal rights. He insisted on the rights of converts to marry freely and enjoy inheritable landed property (*rist*) with those who have been Christian from birth.

Erlich proposes an interesting notion of socio-political flexibility of Ethiopian State. He emphasises the role of talented individuals coming from whatever background who were able to enter the power-sharing elite on the basis of their leading abilities. Such cases were encouraged instead of being blocked by traditional values. Young princes were seldom born into power. They had to compete for position and titles in the political struggle. This aspect of social mobility should not fool us into thinking that there was no system of state institutions and mechanisms of implementing control and exercising the authority. On the contrary, in my opinion an in-depth study of state institutions, mechanisms and structures that kept the semi-autonomous regions together is needed with special reference to landed property.

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