

Which Way to the Sea, Please?

By Nuraddin Farah

Horn of Africa – Journal, October/December 1978

Volume 1, Number 4, Pgs 31-36

Republished by WardheerNews

March 4, 2015

Editor's note: *As part of our ongoing remembrance of Said Samatar, Nuruddin Faraah, Somalia's eminent writer, and a longtime acquaintance of Prof Said was gracious enough to once again republish his timeless essay for this occasion. It is befitting that this piece, the third in a series, which initially appeared on the Horn of Africa Journal in 1978, a Journal managed by the late Said, reinforces our objective of remembering Said through Somalia's political history. WardheerNews previously published this piece in 2010*

Part I

Shall we let the flames illumine the unlit sections of our memory? If we do that we shall learn, for instance, that there have been wars fought for the control of the Horn of Africa and its long coastline. We learn that for centuries, foreign powers have alternately come, conquered, and colonised the peoples of the area. For centuries, the Horn has been the scene of big-power showdowns, manoeuvre diplomacy, of conquests and re-conquests. The Ottoman Empire. The Khedive of Egypt whose viceroies controlled the entire stretches of the Somali and Eritrean coastlines. Italy. France. Britain. Portugal (even if briefly). Name one colonialist, and you needn't name them all. But why all these diplomatic manipulations, why these wars for the Horn. Why? Enscorced in the darker shades of the fire's flames, there are the ghostly figures of Yohannis, Menelik and Haile Sellassie. Soft are their voices; hesitant, too. Quiet their movements. Now you meet them in the corridors of diplomacy, initialing sealed letter to the Kings and Emperors of Europe. Now you meet them amass firearms. But let us take a break while we can, let us ask a question: Is today's war in the Horn significantly different from the previous ones? Granted, it rains a skyfull of MiGs, it shells T-62s and polemicised accusations. Granted, it is a war in which a world



superpower fully backs a 30-million Ethiopia against a 3-million Somalia. But think of Shoa, a small inland kingdom, Tigre another. Think of Somalia whose sandy shores smell of the incensed fire, and Eritrea, too. Imagine

I suggest we turn a few pages of documented history, Indeed, I suggest that we let Ethiopia's Kings and Emperors come out of their hiding places and speak for themselves. I suggest we watch Ethiopia change her leopard's skin; that we listen to her kings contradict themselves. I am afraid, however, that before we are in position to do that, we need to clear a jungle of present-day contradictions. For example: Has Somalia any reason to fear that Ethiopia (supported by a foreign power, give it whatever name you please) might invade Somalia with the intention of taking Berbera and Zeila? Has this incident any precedent in the history of the Horn: some incident, some event which leads one to think that Ethiopia might stretch its long arms solely to grab and occupy the ports of Berbera and Zeila? I shall dismiss the Soviets and the Cubans if you don't mind, as a latter-day invention of history 'of ideology if you will, or better still, of twentieth century technology. But has Ethiopia in a recent or distant past ever used a foreign power or the services of a foreign power to take any port on the Horn of Africa? Has Ethiopia ever connived or interested other powers in occupying ports which belonged to other countries directly or indirectly? Has she ever planned to diplomatically manoeuvre the conditions in order to acquire an outlet to the sea? To answer these questions, I shall let Ethiopia speak for itself through its Chieftains, Kings, Kings of Kings, and Emperors.

Part II

Shoa had been an inland kingdom, small in size as was her king in stature, a king who, although small, had grand ambitions, large and uncontainable like the waters of the sea. A small kingdom, Shoa was isolated, for centuries sandwiched between the highland mountains like saxifrage. Encircling it were rival kingdoms such as Gondar, Gojjam and more importantly that of Tigre. There were constant seismic wars between these kingdoms, seismic wars which shook the foundation of these feudal eggshell state-structures. History had taught these rulers a few things. For instance: whoever had arms and European assistance had an upper hand in case of conflict. Yohannis, the King of Tigre, had proven this. His kingdom had been for a time the strongest because he had received the benevolence of the British Government and gifts of arms in abundance for having done unto the British a favour. In return for these services, it was promised that he would be granted the free use of a port. Yes, after all these years a port of import-export, a port of importance, a coast.

But the coastline had always remained the possession of other peoples, whether they were foreign powers that had conquered or local peoples such as the Eritreans, the Somalis and the Danakils. And so we see these Abyssinian Kings, their Emperors and their aides change tactic, change strategy, tone of voice, and request; we see them assume different positions; we see them change stands. We listen to them appeal to the Christian solidarity of Europe when it is the Turks and the Egyptians (Muslims) who have control of the Red Sea coast. Then we listen to them as

they make gross and unfounded territorial claims later when a European power doesn't, for political reasons, allow them the free use of the coast. Menelik, the King of Shoa and later Emperor of conquered territories, for example, makes declarations defining the boundaries of his dreamed ideal when astraddle a bed of high fever and anger. Whether for Menelik or for Yohannis we note with sufficient documentation that the Kingdom's essential "commodities" are the coast and arms. Who has the latter, they believed, has a chance of gaining access to the former by conquering it. Who has the coast (or easy access to it on account of a European power's granting the use of it) has more of a chance to acquire arms to help him expand territorially.

Yohannis and Menelik, to cite only two kings for now, play their trumps, they both play hands of aces. Ranking high amongst these aces are favors the European powers bestow on the king in question, European powers who play one against the other, European powers who arm one and not the other, European powers who, regardless of whether or not they consent a Yohannis or a Menelik to use the ports, never consult the subject peoples, say, the Eritreans, the Somalis, the Danakils, subject peoples who are kept unarmed, unconsulted and unprotected from Abyssinian raids. Be he a prince of Tigre, or its King; be he a King of Shoa or a self-proclaimed Emperor; be he a Haile Sellassie of modernity: the shackles of this need for an outlet to the sea, the shibboleth of diplomacy, the Ave Maria, a word most often repeated, the coast. We watch each King play all the aces in order that his dream is washed in the launderette of the sands of the Red Sea shore, in order that his land is whipped clean with the healthy saltiness of the Indian Ocean. The coast. And arms. And these Kings hold the Cross of Christ in full vision as though the European powers would otherwise lose sight of the issue; they paint the Cross on the foreheads of their mountains as though it were a lighthouse.

I answer. Therefore, I quote:

Mv country is far distant from your country. My road to the coast, to Zeila, Tajura and Aden is at present closed by the Muslims. They prevent my receiving into my country provisions, arms, agricultural implements, artisans or even messengers of the Gospel. *Will you kindly raise your powerful voice in order that I may have this way opened to me*, for I desire to inaugurate in my country European civilisation, intelligence and arts. [2]

This is not 1978. No. We are in 1878, yes, a hundred years ago. And the passage quoted comes from a letter written by Menelik, then King of Shoa. It was addressed to the heads of the governments of Italy, France, Germany, and England. The Muslims who had closed the way to him were not the Somalis of Zeila and Tajura, but the Khedieve of Egypt whose power controlled the entire stretches of the Somali coast, and who held the key to Babel Mandab, Hafun, Zeila, Berbera and the Ogaden including the city of Harar. [3] And Menelik, like his rival and contemporary, Yohannis the King of Tigre, shows the Cross of Christ and plays the

diplomatic hands he can in order to have direct access to the coast. During this period, we note, however, that he doesn't make any territorial claim of any city on any coast. I wouldn't exclude the possibility that Menelik hadn't even heard of Mogadiscio, of Merca or Brava, three city states on the Somali coast, to mention only a few, city-states which had known the splendor of world fame as grand centers of commerce. [4] But he had heard of Zeila and Tajura (the former now in the Republic of Somalia, the latter in the Republic of Djibouti, ex-French Somaliland) for these were the ports through which his kingdom imported "provisions, *arms*, agricultural implements, artisans or even *messengers of the Gospel*."

And it was these ports which he used for his country's exports. [5] Menelik, then a mere pawn on the chessboard of international politics, Menelik an unknown entity, Menelik a small man with grand ambitions, yes, we see that the man is capable of sending off an appealing letter to the Heads of European governments in order that they *raise their "powerful voice"* so that "*I may have the way opened to me,*" the way to the coast. He doesn't recommend their raising a hand, no, just their powerful voice, and he hoped the way to the Red Sea might open. Like one of the miracles of Moses! He wishes to *possess* the coast, religiously speaking ... the sea itself a giant beauty, the sea itself life's enormity! Maybe we shouldn't get carried away, maybe it is high time we asked: but why should these European powers help Menelik? What credential has he?

"Although my country is very distant from yours, I, too, am a Christian like you are." [6] The tone is still mild, the request very simple: the point very clear: Menelik would like the European powers not to take arms against the Egyptian Muslims, not to take these ports for themselves or to give it to him. He would like them to show their Christian solidarity by raising their powerful voices.

I suggest, however, that we leave Menelik for now; I suggest that we let the taste and falsity of this phrase linger on the periphery of our tongue; I suggest we return further and further into the womb of mother-time. We shall find history generous, we shall find her a faithful companion to the oblivious. We are in Tigre, a prominent kingdom later and always in the Abyssinian (or Ethiopian) mosaics of gain-access-to-the-coast politics, her king Yohannis then a major rival of Menelik's. But this before Yohannis' days. The year is 1827. It is fifty years before Menelik had written his letter to the Heads of the European Governments. This, as a matter of fact, is during the first quarter of the year 1827. And a prominent political figure of Tigre Dejjazmach Sebagadis Weldu writes a letter to King George III that his (the Dejjazmach's) country "needed *fire arms* which could only be obtained with European assistance through Massawa." [7]

Fire-arms again? We'll let this pass for now. Although I must remind you that Massawa is now in the hands of the Turks and not the Egyptians – the Turks themselves Muslims. But what suggestion has Dejjazmach Weldu) "We want you to take Massawa from the Turks and either hold it (yourself) or hand it over to us as our country is lost by it ... and the Muslim on the Red Sea coast." [8]

The same predicament as Menelik's, the same need but a different prescription. The Dejjazmach takes a much more decisive position. Although he, too (and neither will Yohannis when we come to him), makes no territorial claim on the coast. Nor, like all the others, does he speak about the people of the coast. Menelik wishes "the way open to me," but the Dejjazmach suggests King George's government taking the coast then "either hold it or hand it over to us." It is worthwhile remembering that the Tigrean chiefs and kings don't mention the ports of Berbera and Tujura by name – presumably because they had never used them. Although again, years later, another Tigrean voice, this time that of Yohannis corresponding with a British envoy (General) Gordon says that in the event that the taking of any of the ports is rendered impossible, the King of Tigre would be satisfied if granted at least "territorial, and not only functional, access to the sea." [9]

Part III

If we now return to Menelik again!

Although Menelik had sown the seeds of his dreams when asleep, we discover that he had reaped none when awake. By this time, the city-states on the Somali coast had fallen into the hands of Italy and those included the Sultanates of Obbia and Mejjertenia, and smaller and less significant Somali kingdoms. The ports of Tajura and Obok had gone to the French. The ports of Berbera and Zeila to the British. Massawa and Asseb: the Italians. Menelik, we find, hasn't as yet found an outlet to the coast and it pains him enormously. He had sown the seeds of his dreams when asleep but reaped none when awake. [10]



Part IV

I am about to die from anger because I have remained without bringing one (new) skill, imprisoned (as I am) I am a man who has been sentenced to imprisonment for life and prevented from bringing into this country *rifles, cannon* and workers. [11]

Rifles. Cannon. We see him desperate as ever, we see him grope in the dark impossibility of an impasse. He had fought wars and won almost all. He had conquered and taken Harar by force. It had dawned upon him that perhaps there was a way out of all this, perhaps there lay hopefully a way to the sea. And he took the idea to the French. Menelik said to the French putting it in the frankest of terms that he was willing to give the city of Harar (which had become his because he had conquered it) in exchange for a port. [12] The French weren't ready to buy the idea, but they had one of commerce and of compromise. The French would sell to him all the firearms Menelik

had been in need of. However, that, too, on one condition: he should use for his imports and exports the French-held ports of French Somaliland, and not Berbera and Zeila which were British-held. [13]

The French trade in arms was a great boom for the economy of France in the colonies. Arthur Rimbaud in one of his letters talks of “24,000 guns of various kinds” sold to Menelik. [14] Italy complained to Britain about this great influx of arms which the French had sold to this “barbarous nation.” [15] Menelik had begun riding the real horse of the expansionist and there was no stopping him. However, he hadn’t as yet developed the articulateness to verbalise his dreamy thought of a grandiose Shoa King who had vast territories annexed, a man who had proclaimed himself King, then King of Kings, then Emperor. The guns and firearms which he had imported from France gave him supremacy over all the other minor entities in the region. The Italians and the British forbade the Somalis and the Eritreans under their protectorate to procure arms; neither would they do much to protect their protectorates from being raided by Menelik. [16] Whereas the Abyssinians were heavily armed with the most modern of weapons [17], the Somalis, wherever they were found, were specifically kept unarmed and helplessly defenceless; they would have risen against their oppressors. Gordon’s plan to “procure an outlet to the sea for Abyssinia” failed again, and Menelik had had to continue using Djibouti’s port for the country’s foreign trade and importations of arms. A few more wars, a few more promises. The wars were won on the battlefield, Shoa had grown bigger, Menelik had now conquered and annexed other kingdoms. The small man gave himself grand titles; he had christened the territories; he had annexed “Ethiopia,” and crowned himself “Emperor.”

On the other hand, if we return to Yohannis, himself an emperor, too, we find him as have been all Tigrean princes and Kings, much more determined—a man who wants to take a coastal city come what may. From him we have: “I do not wish (to open) a counsel in Massawa – I wish Massawa itself.” [18]

However, when writing a letter to Queen Victoria, Yohannis [19] is determinedly less aggressive. For after the usual flattery and we-are-Christian-brethren-bit, he says that he doesn’t very much mind sharing the pagan districts around the coast with the British, but with no one else. [20] Yohannis was unfortunate in that he had fallen out of favour, the European powers had found him persistent in his asking for an outlet to the coast – is cost what it might.

There were unsettled accounts between him and Menelik. The Italians wanted him punished. At one point, the Italians offered Menelik 5,000 rifles on condition that he attacked Emperor Yohannis—after which, the two agreed, they would divide the territorial conquests between themselves.

Let us, however, close this section with a Menelik a great deal stronger:

If I cannot take Tajura by sea, it is not difficult for me to seize the port from this side (overland). However, without coming to blows, I hope that civilised Europe will render me justice and give satisfaction

A little later in the same letter: “we hope that our crown which honours Jesus Christ will never be trampled to the ground by the children of Mohammed.” And yet a little more: “If truly you are the protectors of Christians, it is today that you must give us proof.” [21]

Part V

Came the scramble for Africa, the slicing of Somalia with Ethiopia being given her share. But no outlet to the sea, yet. We re-encounter Europeans famished like locust, the Ethiopians more so. But still no outlet to the coast for Menelik’s Kingdom. And it is now that the territorial claims over the coast, over any of Africa’s watery expanses, begins. *Khartoum. Lake Nyanza. Lake Sambura. The Indian Ocean. The Red Sea Coast.* The waters are the limit.

Part VI

Menelik again but in 1891. This is another famous letter he sent to the Governments of Britain, Italy, France, Germany and the Czar of Russia. We note there is a change of voice, a change in the man, a change in the form of request he makes. It is a long letter which mentions in the grandest detail the boundaries of his (dreamed) Ethiopia. Let us comment no more, let us have it straight from him: “Ethiopia has been for four centuries a Christian island in a sea of pagans.” [22] A determined voice, a subtle reference to the war fought for the control of the city of Harar during the fifteenth century by Ahmed Gurey, the Somali warrior. [23] But let us stay with Menelik. Stand warned and firm: don’t ever be surprised by Menelik who writes, “*Formerly, the boundary of Ethiopia was the sea ... our frontiers on the sea coast fell into the power of the Muslims.*” [24]

We shall note one thing: that at this stage, the sea remains so far unnamed, the coast as well. The boundary of Ethiopia was the sea. When? What sea? And when did the frontiers of Ethiopia (if even we accept the concept as Menelik had), specifically the frontiers on the sea, fell into the power of the Muslims? But who are the pagans that surround him? The Somalis? The Gallas) The Eritreans? And had he considered it his duty as a Christian to carry the pharos of Jesus Christ to the heathen peoples of the coast? I am afraid we shall have no answer from him. But we have this; we have a mention of intentions; we have Menelik’s word for it:

At present, we do not intend to regain our sea frontiers by force but we trust that the Christian powers guided by our Saviour, will restore to us *our sea coast-line . . . at any rate, certain parts of it.* [25]

We've seen above that he said he could "take Tajura by sea. . (or) to seize the port from this side" but wouldn't do it because he had faith in civilised Europe's rendering Caesar what is a Christian's! And now: "the Christian powers guided by our saviour will restore to us our sea coast-line ... at any rate, certain parts of it." But these powers wouldn't be guided by Christ the Saviour, these powers were guided by their colonial interest. Use of the port facilities of Djibouti: is that the best these brothers in Christ would offer? (As though) from his death-bed a message: "If God gives me strength, I shall re-establish the ancient frontiers (tributaries) of Ethiopia *up to Khartoum and as far as Lake Nyanza* with all the Gallas included. [26]

There were other grotesqueries of irrationality and erroneous claims he had made, other places he had mentioned in this circular-letter of his when defining the boundaries of Ethiopia. Arafle. Lake Sambura. Rivers Mareb and Arated. Atabar and Setet Rivers. Khartoum. Lake Nyanza. Perhaps, he had fallen under the influence of the high fever of Ethiopian expansionism. God, though, did not give the strength to invade and annex Khartoum, the capital of the Republic of Sudan. Nor did he take Lake Nyanza. But he had conquered and taken a grand portion of the Horn including the Somali province of Harar. And things remained more or less the same from the death of Menelik until the coming of Emperor Haile Sellassie on the political scene.

Part VII

Haile Sellassie would prove himself a more able manipulator of political events, a manipulator of the ouiji-board of international diplomacy. And when we encounter him in 1948, we listen to him present a Memorandum to the United Nations in which he says:

Prior to the race of European powers to divide up the continent of Africa, Ethiopia included an extensive coastline along the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. *It was only the last 15 years of the 19th century that Ethiopia had been deprived of access to the sea by the loss of Somaliland and Eritrea.* The first step in this direction was to seize Massawa by the Italians in 1885. This was followed by a similar seizure of the Benadir and the areas of Somaliland as well as a series of agreements concerning Ethiopia but in regard to which she had not been consulted. It was under these conditions that agreements were concluded in 1880, 1890, 1891, 1894. [27]

The Sudanese and the countries surrounding Lake Victoria must have noted this with sufficient relief: that Erne perm Haile Sellassie had dropped Ethiopia's claim over Khartoum and Lake Nyanza and Lake Sambura but the Somalis, no. He put his finger squarely on Benadir, then British Somaliland's Red Sea coast and the Indian Ocean's Somali coast, and Eritrea.

Was it during the 14th /15th centuries that Ethiopia was deprived access to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean (according to the latter Menelik, the Menelik of 1891)? Or was it during the last 15 years of the 19th century that Ethiopia had been deprived of access to the sea (according to Haile

Sellassie)? And since it was before the “irreligious” body of the United Nations, Emperor Haile Sellassie sensibly drops the Christian/Saviour motif much used by Menelik. What stands out rather like a tumor, to my mind, is Ethiopia’s (be it in its Shoan wear, or Tigrean, or Abyssinian) leader’s obsession with water-as-element, the obtaining of which tempers the rise and fall of one’s temperament. I suggest we list them thus:

(1) *Menelik’s*: a) my road to the *coast*, to Zeila, to Tajura and Aden; b) If I cannot take Tajura *by sea*, it is not difficult for me to seize *the port* . . .; c) Formerly, the boundary of Ethiopia was *the sea* . . .; d) Our frontiers on the *sea-coast* . . .; e) ...restore to us our sea-coast-lines; f) I shall re-establish the ancient frontiers to Ethiopia up to *Khartoum (i.e. the Nile)* and as far as *Lake Nyanza* ...; a mention must be made of the place names which occur in the quoted passages: they usually are a town on the coast, the name of a river, the name of a lake or a settlement of strategic importance.

(2) *Yohannis’/Weldu’s*: a) I wish *Massawa*; b) pagan tribes on *the coast* ...; c) We want you to take *Massawa* ...; d) ...European assistance through *Massawa* ...;

(3) ...territorial, and not only functional, access to *the sea* . . .; f) ...the Muslim on the Red Sea coast ... And now *Haile Sellassie’s*: a) Ethiopia’s frontiers included an extensive *coast-line* along *the Red Sea* and the *Indian Ocean*; b) Ethiopia had been deprived of *access to the sea by the loss of Somaliland and Eritrea!* c) *Bmadir* (coast of Somalia); d) *Massawa*. A student of Freud’s might find stimulating clues to the Ethiopian King’s and Emperor’s watery sub-and un-conscious map of the obsessed.

Part VIII

Eritrea or the Benadir coast. Ethiopia lusted after any coast, any water-way, be it the Somali coast, the Eritrean, Lake Nyanza (Victoria) or the Nile. Year after year, whether men or governments change, whether the claims are altered, Ethiopia needs a coast, a watery expanse – however contradictory the claims, however unconfirmable the dates they offer. Nothing. Promise after promise. No progress. Negotiations after negotiations. No port. In fact, Ethiopia is herself an Italian colony. We are in the second World War. Italy is on the losing side, and Haile Sellassie has enlisted the help of Britain whose Royal Air Force showers leaflets of propaganda proclamations on the Italian colonies. We read:

Eritrean people and the people of Benadir! You were separated from your mother Ethiopia and were put under the yoke of the enemy and under the yoke of the enemy, you still remain.

I have come to restore the independence of my country, *including Eritrea and the*

Benadir whose people will henceforth dwell under the shade of the Ethiopian flag.

In this struggle, *We are neither alone nor without arms. We have the help of Great Britain*, therefore I summon you to strive to deliver yourselves from the alien slavery ...

Eritrean soldiers in the ranks of Italy, *do not fire a single shot against the British who come to help us.* [28]

Vociferous claims. Somalia part of Ethiopia, when) When was Benadir ever part of Abyssinia? Haile Sellassie's declaration of intention in the above quotation, in Haile Sellassie's proclamation of leaflets which the Royal Air Force had distributed, we learn of a direct involvement of Britain whose soldiers have come to help and to restore the independence of his country. *We are neither alone nor without arms. We have the help of Great Britain.* With the war over, however, Britain stayed on as Caretaker Administration over the former colonies of Italy and this included Ex-Italian Somaliland, the Ogaden, Ex-British Somaliland, (the now) Kenyan Somaliland, and Eritrea. It was during this period that there was talk of uniting all the Somali peoples under one flag. That having failed, it was then that the U.N. agreed to place Ex-Italian Somalia and Eritrea under a U.N. Mandate Trusteeship. The idea didn't please Haile Sellassie in the least. Ethiopia's Red Sea/Indian-Ocean thirst, Ethiopia's lust after coasts. "Emperor Haile Sellassie stated in an interview that *Eritrea should be given to Ethiopia.*" [29]

Remember what his predecessors have said. Remember what has been quoted above. Eritrea now. Benadir later. But what happens if Eritrea isn't given to Ethiopia? Neither Eritrea nor Somalia would subsist as separate entities (according to the Emperor). [30] Further, if either isn't given to his country ...

Ethiopia would be compelled in the interest of her own self-preservation to build up armed forces with funds she would otherwise devote to the progress of the people of Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somaliland [31]

Eritrea. Finally, Emperor Haile Sellassie altered his country's demands. Eritrea could become a UN Mandate Trusteeship provided it fell to Ethiopia to administer the country. Somalia came under the Italian-Cum-UN Trusteeship, in the meanwhile. A stop-gap federation between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Then in 1962 annexation of Eritrea-and with it, the ports of Massawa, Asseb, etcetera. At last.

The United Nations, which I here call "organised hypocrisy" [32], voted against his doing so. And in the meantime. Haile Sellassie's government studied in great detail how best she could annex Djibouti. That is too recent a history to skin.

Part IX

Says Mengistu at a press conference very recently: “(*Ethiopia*) *difenderà la sua via di accesso al Mar Rosso anche se questo mare dovesse diventare ancor più rosso per il sangue versato dagli etiopici.*” [33]

And the war goes on. The war for the coast. A war which began centuries ago. Will Mengistu negotiate for peace with the Somalis and Eritreans in whose territories the coasts are found? Or will he be unoriginal and follow the footsteps of Sebagiss (“We want you to take Massawa from the Turks and give it to us”), Yohannis (“I do not wish a counsel in Massawa -I wish Massawa itself”). Menelik (“If God gives me strength, I shall reestablish the ancient frontiers of Ethiopia up to Khartoum as far as Lake Nyanza Victoria ...”; or “If I cannot take Tajura by sea, it is not difficult for me to seize the port ...”) or Haile Sellassie (We’ve been “deprived of access to the sea by the loss of Somaliland and Eritrea”). History, they say, repeats itself. I say it doesn’t. It is we who are not original.

Will Mengistu request the Russians and Cubans to take the ports of Zeila and Berbera, keep them for themselves or give them up to Ethiopia? Russia would certainly love to take full possession of the port of Berbera again.

In the meanwhile, the war goes on. And the world looks on with sufficient indifference.

By Nuraddin Farah

Reference

[1]. Ken Kesey. *Sometimes a Great Notion*, (London: Penguin, 1977). Nuruddin Farah is a novelist based in Rome, Italy.

[2]. F.O. 407/11 Menelik, December 1878. Cited in Richard Pankhurst. *Economic History of Ethiopia*, (Addis Ababa: Haile Sellassie University, 1968), pp. 101-2.

[3] Foreign Office Handbook (British Somaliland 1920) p. 20.

[4] Cfr Robert L. Hess, *Italian Colonialism in Somalia*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966, pp. 6—12

[5]. Cfr Thompson & Adloff, *Djibouti & the Horn of Africa*, Stanford: Stanford University Press (1968) pp. 3-11.

[6]. F.O. 407/11 Menelik. See Pankhurst, *op.cit.* p. 101. Text given here is re-phrased by author in order to avoid verbosity and monotony.

[7]. Sven Rubenson, *Survival of Ethiopia's Independence* (Heinemann 1976).

[8]. *Ibid* Also text given p. 314 reads: "We hope you will take the port Massowen and give it up to us or keep it in Your Majesty's possession. See below, No. J9.

[9]. *Ibid.*, passim pp. 335-39.

[10]. The European powers' interests in holding onto the coast-line each had conquered intersected and, at times, encountered like the bus routes of a grand metropolis. A. Menelik or a Yohannis or a Tewodros would be given a bus ride from a given terminus and would be dropped mid-way. The services of ports and sale of fire-arms would be offered. But before they got to getting a strip of territory on and of the coast, the bus would stop and drop.

[11]. Rubenson, *ap.cit.* pp. 345-46.

[12]. Enid Starkie, *Arthur Rimbaud in Abyssinia* (1937), p. 48 (cited in *Somali Peninsula*, Mogadiscio 1962, p. 23).

[13]. *Ibid.*, p. 107, source same as above, *Somali Peninsula*, p. 26

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 91, vide *Somali Peninsula*.

[15] *Ibid.*, pp. 108-9, vide *Somali Peninsula* p. 26

[16] Silberman, L., *Cahiers Etude Africaine* Vol. II (1961), p. 55, concerning Italy's forbidding the Somalis to arm themselves against the Abyssinian raids. Also see *Red Sea Papers: Indian Office to Foreign Office No. 16*, of 1893 regarding Britain's forbidding the Somalis against the same. The Abyssinians came, robbed and raped and returned. The Somalis remained unarmed until the Somali warrior Sayyid Mohamed comes on the scene a decade Or so later. Is it not a historical irony that Somalia today is again unarmed while Ethiopia is armed to its wisdom teeth?

[17] "Fire-arms were the one European invention most eagerly seized on" by Menlik and other Abyssinian kingdoms, according to Christopher Clapham, *Haile Sellassie's Government*, London: Longman, 1969. Aware of the importance of firearms, he imported them in huge numbers both from the French in the Gulf of Tajura and from the Italians who, for a while, regarded him as an ally against Yohannis (See Clapham, *op. cit.* p. 13). Worth studying also is Richard Pankhurst in particular his chapter on the importation of arms etcetra, *ap.cit.*, note no. 2.

[18] W. Winstanly, *A visit to Abyssinia: An Account of Travel in Modern Abyssinia* (London 1888) quoted in Rubenson *op.cit.*, p. 341.

[19] F.O. 95/379 No. 297, Yohannis to Victoria, May 2, 1879. During this time when negotiations through Gordon were underway, we learn that Ras Alula, Yohannis' most outstanding general, appears to have decided "to take Massawa." He was reported to have said that he wouldn't return to Tigre until he had "watered his horse in the Red Sea." (Vide Rubenson *op.cit.*, p, 342.) And on another occasion Yohannis to Gordon: "You want peace," he declared. "Well, I want retrocession of Metemma, Changallas and Bogos, *cession of the ports of Zeyla and Amphilla, and Abuna and a sum of money from one to million pounds.*" G. Birkbeck Hill, *Colonel Gordon in Central Africa 1874-1879*. p. 411-cited in David Mathew, *Ethiopia*, Greenwood Press, 1947, p. 213. Whereas, in an interview in 1849 with Tewodros, the King of Abyssinia, Consul Plowden "ventured to hint that the seacoast and Massawa might possibly be given up to him" ... "that the two countries (i.e. Abyssinia and Britain) should endeavour to keep open and secure avenues of approach between the sea-coast and Abyssinia."

[20] Charles Beke, *The British Captives in Abyssinia* (Longman" 1867), p. 276.

[21] Rosetti, *Sillria Diplomatica deU'Etiofia* (Torino, 1910). p. 18.

[22] F.O. 1/32 Abyssinia Diplomatic Correspondence. cited in *Somali Peninsula op.cit.*

[23] Cfr Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia* (1952); also I. M. Lewis, *Pastrol Democracy* (London 1961). These books give details about 16th century Harar, the capital of the Muslim Sultanate of Adal which once had its headquarters in Zeila.

[24] F.O. 1/32 *op.cit.*

[25] *Ibid.*

[26] *Ibid.*

[27] I.W.B. of October 20, 1948, para 15.

[28] Sylvia & Richard Pankhurst, *Ethiopia & Eritrea*, Essex: Lalibela House. 1953, p. 23. Whereas Richard Pankhurst's writing is scholarly and scientific, Sylvia Pankhurst's is propagandistic. In her Ex-Italian Somaliland, for an instance, without blinking a researcher/historian's eyelash, she argues for the case of expansionist Ethiopia.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 124. Emperor Haile Sellassie's lobbying to acquire an outlet to the sea, in fact, went Out of proportion on occasion. While the General Assembly of the United Nations were in session, discussing the issue of Eriterea's and Somalia's independence, "Roman Catholic

churches in the Negro quarter were also picketed with an appeal to their Negro congregations to use their influence *to force the Pope to demand seaports for Ethiopia.*” Sylvia and Richard Pankhurst op. cit. p. 218.

[30] Sylvia and Richard Pankhurst, op. cit., p. 124.

[31] *Ibid*, p. 124.

[32] My apologies to Disraeli who originally used the phrase when referring to Conservative government pastiches.

[33] *Carriera della Sera* (Edizione Romana), February 20, 1978.

LETTER sent by Emperor Menelek to the Heads of European States in 1891*

10th April, 1891

Being desirous to make known to our friends the Powers Sovereigns)of Europe the boundaries of Ethiopia, we have addressed also to you (your Majesty) the present letter.

These are the boundaries of Ethiopia:-

Starting from the Italian boundary of Arafale, which is situated on the sea, the line goes westward over the plain (Meda) of Gegra towards Mahio, Halai, Digsu, and Gura up to Adibaro. From Adibaro to the junction of the Rivers Mareb and Arated.

From this point the line runs southward to the junction of the Atbara and Setit Rivers, where is situated the town known as Tomat.

From Tomat the frontier embraces the Province of Gederef up to Karkoj on the Blue Nile. From Karkoj the line passes to the junction of the Sobat River with the White Nile. From thence the frontier follows the River Sobat including the country of Arbore, Gallas and reaches Samburu.

Towards the east are included within the frontier the country of the Borana Gallas and Arussi country up to *the limits of the Somalis, including also the Province of Ogaden* .

To the northward the line of the frontier includes the *Habar Awal, the Gadabursi, and Essa Somalis* , and reaches Ambos.

Leaving Ambos the line includes Lake Assal, the province of our ancient vassal Mohamed Anfari, skirts the coast of the sea, and rejoins Arafale.

While tracing today the actual boundaries of my Empire, I shall endeavour, if God gives me life and strength, to re-establish the ancient frontiers (tributaries) of Ethiopia up to Khartoum, and as Lake Nyanza with all the Gallas.

Ethiopia has been for fourteen centuries a Christian island in a sea of pagans. If powers at a distance come forward to partition Africa between them, I do not intend to be an indifferent spectator.

As the Almighty has protected Ethiopia up to this day, I have confidence He will continue to protect her, *and increase her borders in the future* . I am certain He will not suffer her to be divided among other Powers.

Formerly the boundary of Ethiopia was the sea. Having lacked strength sufficient, and having received no help from Christian Powers, our frontier on the sea coast fell into the power of the Muslim-man.

At present we do not intend to regain our sea frontier by force, but we trust that the Christian Power, guided by our Saviour, *will restore to us our sea-coast line, at any rate, certain points on the coast* .

Written at Addis Ababa, the 14th Mazir, 1883 (10th April, 1891).

(Translated direct from the Amharic.)

Addis Ababa, 4th May, 1897.

This letter was addressed to Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Russia

* Public Records Office (London), Foreign Office 1/32 Rodd to Sallisbury, No. 15, 4 th May.
Also see The Somali Peninsula, p. 86.