

Adwa: The Battle for Unity, the War on Memory, and the Call for a Second Adwa

Amsal Woreta, March 3, 2025

One Hundred Twenty-Nine Years Later: Adwa's Unfinished Battle

On March 1, 1896, Ethiopia delivered a resounding blow to colonial ambitions at the Battle of Adwa. This victory was not just a military triumph but a powerful testament to the unity and resilience of a diverse nation. However, today, the legacy of Adwa is under threat, deliberately undermined by those who seek to perpetuate division for their own gain.



Menelik II, King of Ethiopia from 1889. "Le Petit Journal", Paris, 10 November 1898 Menelik at the Battle of Adwa (Adua) 1 March 1896. Ethiopia defeated Italy First Italo-Ethiopian War. (Photo by: Photo12/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

The Italian Ambition: A Lust for Empire

Italy, a latecomer to the imperial scramble, sought to establish itself as a colonial power by targeting Ethiopia. The Treaty of Wuchale, manipulated by Italy, was intended to establish a protectorate over Ethiopia. However, Emperor Menelik II saw through the deception and refused to submit, igniting a powerful sense of national unity.

Forging Unity: A Nation in Arms

The Italian invasion did not fracture Ethiopia; it united the nation. Menelik II, with Empress Taitu Betul playing a crucial role, rallied diverse ethnicities and regions under a single banner. From Oromo cavalry to Tigrayan warriors, Ethiopians from all levels of society answered the call to defend their homeland. Eritrean fighters, who had been subjected to Italian colonial rule, also played a crucial role in resisting the Italian advance, fighting alongside their Ethiopian brethren in a shared struggle for freedom. This unprecedented mobilization was a testament to the strength of Ethiopian identity and leadership.

Eritrean Heroes in the Battle of Adwa

While Eritrea was under early Italian colonial rule, many Eritreans refused to submit and fought alongside Ethiopia during the Battle of Adwa. Brave Eritrean fighters, defectors from Italian-controlled territories, provided intelligence, disrupted Italian supply lines, and accepted arms in the decisive battle. Their role in Adwa was an assertion of shared history and destiny between Eritreans and Ethiopians. These heroes, like the rest of Ethiopia's warriors, fought for sovereignty, proving that colonial forces could not divide them. The blood they shed on the battlefield cemented the unity of the struggle against imperialism.

Leadership: The Architect of Victory

Menelik II's strategic brilliance and Empress Taitu Betul's tactical acumen were paramount to the victory. They understood the terrain, mobilized resources effectively, and inspired their troops with unwavering resolve. Their leadership was a beacon, guiding Ethiopia through the darkness of invasion.

Empress Taytu Betul's (1853-1918) strategic acumen and unwavering patriotism were pivotal to the events leading to the Battle of Adwa. Her deep understanding of both domestic and international politics, particularly regarding colonial

ambitions, made her an invaluable advisor to Emperor Menelik II. He consistently sought her counsel on critical governance matters.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

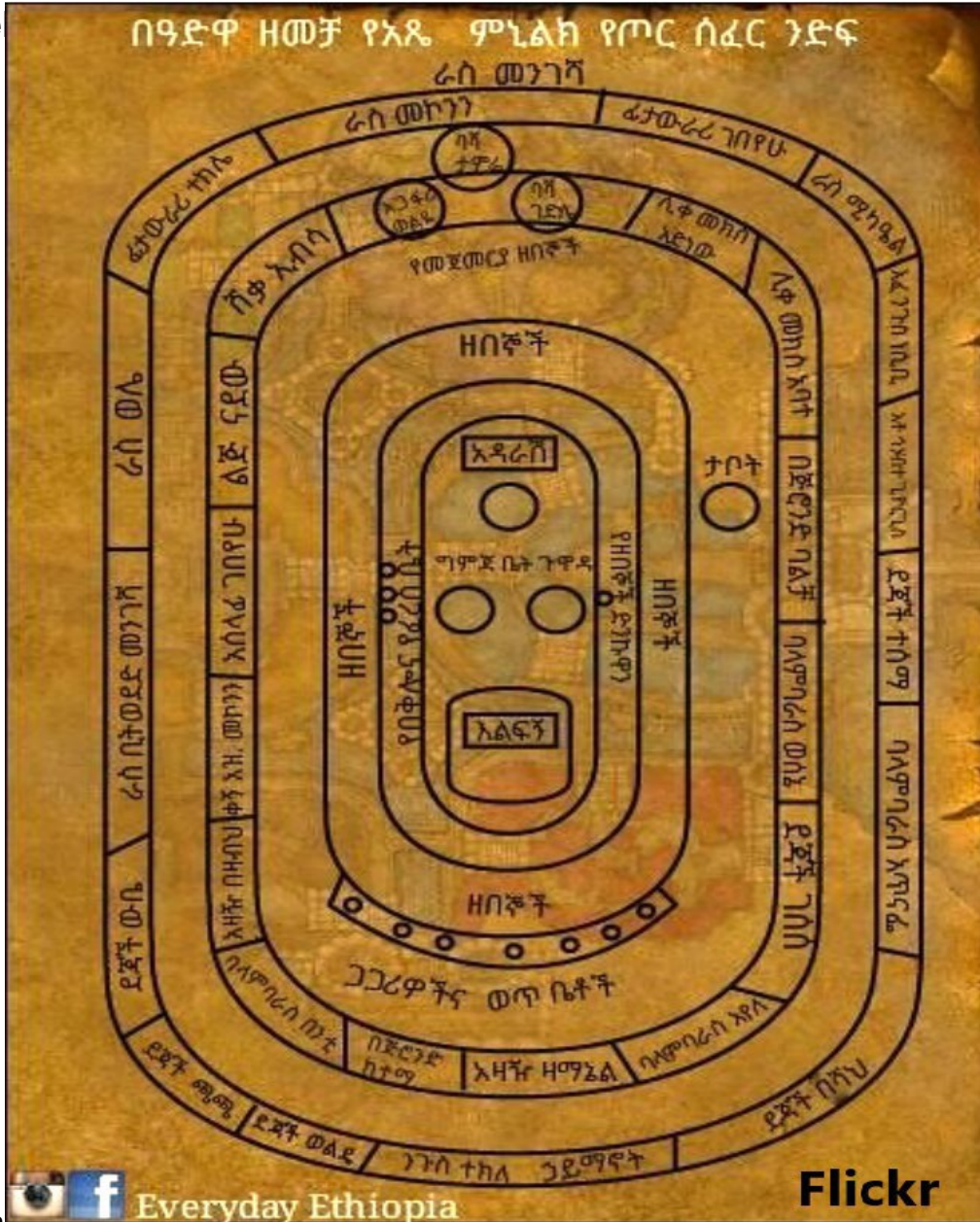
Supplément du dimanche. Paris, March 29, 1896. Courtesy of Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Historical accounts, such as Augusto Salim Beni's diary, highlight her crucial role in unifying Ethiopia. Salim Beni, an Italian engineer present during treaty negotiations, noted her ability to clarify complex issues for Menelik and her remarkable personality, which impressed foreign observers. Beyond her diplomatic skills, Empress Taytu possessed a fierce commitment to preserving Ethiopia's sovereignty.

Her dedication to the emperor during the Wichale Treaty crisis exemplifies her influence. The discovery of Article 17, which aimed to establish an Italian protectorate over Ethiopia, ignited her fury. During the ensuing negotiations, her resolute stance against Italian encroachment was unmistakable. Her persuasive advocacy for war against Italy was instrumental in the declaration that led to the decisive Ethiopian victory at the Battle of Adwa in 1896.

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Adwa



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The War on Memory: Erasing Adwa's True Meaning

Historical memory is a powerful tool. Those who control the narrative of the past can shape the future. Today, Ethiopia's ruling elites have attempted to distort the legacy of Adwa, fragmenting its unifying power by rewriting history to fit divisive agendas. Instead of recognizing Adwa as a national victory that brought together diverse Ethiopian forces, some attempt to reduce it to an ethnic triumph, erasing its significance as a symbol of Ethiopian unity.

This war on memory serves a larger political goal: to keep Ethiopians divided, ensuring that collective national identity remains weak. Leaders who fear unity seek to dismantle historical consciousness, for an awakened people who understand their past will resist oppression in the present.

The Betrayal of Adwa's Legacy

Today, the principles that led to victory at Adwa are under threat. Instead of national unity, Ethiopia faces division orchestrated by those in power. A leader who openly admits to having been a spy for a superpower raises fundamental concerns about national sovereignty and allegiance. Rather than prioritizing the nation's territorial integrity, he has fueled internal conflicts, waged endless wars, and overseen the destruction of Ethiopia's social fabric and economic stability. His rhetoric is not one of reconciliation but one of division—turning ethnic and political groups against one another in a calculated effort to maintain control.

Instead of focusing on reclaiming land taken by neighboring countries, the government has directed its military might inward, leading to mass killings, destruction of infrastructure, and economic ruin. Harvests are burned, towns are razed, and innocent citizens are caught in the crossfire of state-led violence. This is not governance—it is the systematic dismantling of a nation. The legacy of Adwa was about securing Ethiopia's sovereignty and

Undermining Oromo Participation: A Deliberate Distortion

By systematically undermining the undeniable role of Oromo warriors and leaders in Adwa's victory, manipulative leaders seek to sever the connection between young generations and their own history. This calculated distortion prevents them from fully embracing the powerful, unifying spirit that once galvanized

The Colonial Backlash: Divide and Conquer

Humiliated by their defeat, European colonial powers intensified their efforts to undermine Ethiopia and the broader African liberation movement. They employed the "divide and conquer" strategy, exploiting ethnic and regional differences to sow discord and mistrust. This division was influenced by missionaries who established an education system that led people to reassess their own culture and adopt Western values.

Since the apartheid system of ethnic federalism implemented by both Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and the pretentious preacher of Ethiopianness, Abiy Ahmed, neither has been enthusiastic about celebrating the victory of Adwa. Their tribal and colonial mentality weighs heavily on them, preventing them from honoring Menelik II. It has, in fact, become a crime to wear anything with Menelik's image. Last year, even those who printed shirts featuring Menelik were jailed. In anticipation of Adwa Day this year, numerous young individuals have been detained without provocation due to their connection with the celebration. What a paradox—those in leadership today would not even be in power without Menelik's

The Need for a Second Adwa: A Call to Unite and Reclaim Ethiopia's

Ethiopia needs a new Adwa—one that is not fought on a battlefield with weapons, but through unity, resistance to oppression, and a collective vision for national renewal. A Second Adwa must be a movement of the people, transcending ethnic and political divisions to restore the sovereignty, dignity, and stability of the nation. Just as the first Adwa proved that unity is the key to victory, so this new struggle must prioritize national cohesion over fragmentation,

A Nation Reborn: Emulating the Spirit of

The spirit of Adwa calls for unity, not division. Just as Menelik II forged a nation from diverse peoples, we must rise above the



Ethiopians united hands for the second Adwa

We must dismantle the mental constructs of colonial ideology and embrace a shared Ethiopian identity. The victory at Adwa was not just a historical event; it is a living testament to the power of unity and resistance. It is a call to action, a reminder that we must never allow the forces of division to undermine our strength. Let Adwa be the inspiration for a truly liberated Ethiopia, a nation united in its pursuit of a shared destiny.

Conclusion: The Time for Change is Now

The spirit of Adwa must not remain a relic of the past—it must be a guiding force for Ethiopia’s present and future. A leader who betrays his country, wages war on his own citizens and undermines the nation’s integrity cannot be trusted to uphold Adwa’s values. Ethiopia stands at a crossroads: continue down the path of division and destruction or rise together in a Second Adwa to reclaim the nation’s future. The war on memory and the betrayal of its legacy must be confronted with truth, resistance, and a collective awakening. The choice is ours, and history will judge the path we take.