

HISTORIC AYTEYEFE HALL: AN IMPOSING ARCHITECTURAL PIECE IN DESSIE, ETHIOPIA

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Abstract

The study examines how and why *Ras* (later *Negus*) Mikael moved to and permanently settled at *Jemie* hill (later renamed *Ayteyefe*) and built his palace complex including the *gibir* or banquet hall, known popularly as *Ayteyefe Addarash* (*Ayteyefe* hall). The construction of the hall was a milestone for the emergence and development of Dessie as a regional capital of *Negus* Mikael, which subsequently became the administrative center of the whole of Wallo. By closely examining the available written and oral sources, an attempt is made to fathom why, how and when Mikael managed to build this unusually huge structure at the majestic hill of *Ayteyefe*. Valuable historical lessons can be drawn by looking at how *Negus* Mikael mobilized the workforce, both foreign and local, and succeeded in realizing his dream of having one of the historically largest banquet halls in the country. *Ayteyefe* has been mentioned in the literature haphazardly, and this article endeavors to provide a full historical portrait that it deserves. The study also attempts to draw attention to a better appreciation and conservation of this little-known architectural piece.

“Forget the past and you will lose both eyes.”

— Alexander Solzhenitsyn

Historical Background

*Ayteyefe*¹ is a huge banquet hall built by *Negus* Mikael (born c.1850)² in the precinct of his palace complex following his coronation as *Negus* of Wallo and Tigray (better to say *Negus* of the north) on May 31, 1914 with the royal order of his son *Lij* Iyassu (1913-16).³ Though *Lij* Iyassu did not attend this extraordinary event, he sent his senior officials (foremost among them were *Ligaba* W/Gabriel and *Bejirond* Yiggazu) to Dessie. *Ras* Mikael was crowned *Negus* by *Abuna* Petros, Emperor *Yohannes*’s own bishop, in front of a huge gathering and a highly orchestrated spectacle at a nearby *Mugad* field. As Bahru stated “The [coronation] ceremony at Dessie appeared to have been culminated to accentuate [Mikael’s] historic transformation in the stature of the man and the importance of the region.” This event, taken probably as part of *Lij* Iyassu’s enterprise to establish an alternative powerbase outside of Addis Ababa, demonstrated the ‘pinnacle of power’ *Abba Shanqo*⁴ Mikael ‘had managed to attain.’⁵

1 This entirely updated research work has drawn valuable information from my undergraduate thesis submitted to the Addis Ababa University History Department in 1984 titled: “The Court of *Negus* Mikael and A Description of the Role of *Ayteyefe* Hall.”

2 Gobeze Tafete, *Abba Tena Iyassu* (Amharic), (Addis Ababa, Maison Des Etudes Ethiopiennes, 1996), P. 99; *Ras* Mikael became *Negus* of the north as a whole which theoretically included Gojjam and Gondar.

3 Bahru Zewde, *The History of Modern Ethiopia 1855-1974* (Addis Ababa, Addis Ababa University Press, 1997), p. 125. According to Gobeze Tafete, the coronation ceremony was held at a wide esplanade called *Hotie*. See Gobeze Tafete, *Abba Tena*, p. 99. *Hotie* is currently the main place in Dessie where the feast of *Timket*, *Meskel* and other public holidays are celebrated.

4 *Abba Tena* and *Abba Shanqo* were the horse-names of *Lij* Iyassu and *Negus* Mikael respectively.

5 Bahru Zewde, *The History of Modern Ethiopia*, p. 125.

The construction of *Ras Mikael's* palace at *Ayteyefe*, which became the nucleus around which the Dessie town was born, immediately started following his crucial decision to make Dessie the center of his regional administration. Though he did not stay for long, Mikael had once shifted his administrative center from Wore Himano (Tanta) to a nearby spot from *Jemie Hill* called *Kuru Amba* at Gerado⁶ in Tehuledere, the then administrative division that constituted Dessie and the surrounding areas. But his final shift to Dessie and his permanent settlement at *Ayteyefe* (or *Jemie hill*) was made a few years after his designation as overlord or 'governor-general of Wallo' by Emperor Yohannes IV (1872-1889) in February 1886. Dessie before Mikael had served as the administrative center of first Abba Watew (Mikael's cousin) and later of his son, Abba Jabal; and yet, both of them did not reside at *Ayteyefe*.⁷

Mikael's speedy transformation from a local chief to that of a very powerful political figure also transformed Wallo from being 'a buffer zone to a political centre.'⁸ Securing this privileged position and validating the suitability of Dessie for his regional administration; Mikael came to Dessie and settled at the northern tip of the *Jemie hill* (later renamed *Ayteyefe*). Besides the availability of a permanent source of water, fire wood and food crops in and around Dessie, there was a major economic reason that persuaded *Ras Mikael* to make Dessie his regional capital. Even if Dessie by then was not an important trade center, a major trade route passed through it. The caravan route that stretched from Addis Ababa to the port of Massawa, one of the many trade routes that crisscrossed the country, passed through Wore Ilu, Borumeda (near Dessie), Samale, Magala,

6 Socioeconomic Study Team Development Partners, "History of Dessie," June, 2010, p.6

7 Until his death in 1882, Abba Watew (later *Dajjach Haile Mariam*), the son of Mastayit and cousin of Mikael, was one of the major power contenders of Mikael in Wallo.

8 Bahru Zewde, *The History of Modern Ethiopia 1855-1974*, p. 125.

Adwa and finally Asmara.⁹ For controlling the trade routes and trading centers Mikael appointed two of his chief customs officials, *Nagadras* Workiye and *Nagadras* Kassa, for the trade routes passing through Dessie to Tajura and to Asmara respectively.¹⁰ In view of that Mikael even before he decided to move to Dessie seemed to have deliberated upon the economic benefits of the trade routes. The economic importance of Dessie had been ascertained and eventually increased following Mikael's move to Dessie and the establishment of *Segno Gebeya*, a weekly market, in the southern part of the town. This market, which played a crucial role in the town's development, also attracted people of the surrounding region and traders from all over the country, including the many itinerant businessmen 'who used to traverse the region in search of market.'¹¹ Some of the traders also settled permanently, laying the foundation for the emergence in Dessie of a neighborhood called *Atari Genda* or 'Retailers' Quarter.'¹²

As there was constant fear of attack from rival chiefs, Mikael's decision to make the-not-perfect plateau of *Ayteyefe* as his residential and administrative center was a sensible one. This kind of danger could only be minimized by choosing hilly or mountainous areas as settlement sites. *Ayteyefe* is one of the highest points around Dessie.¹³ Due to the prevailing political turmoil in the country, Ethiopian kings, nobles and regional lords used to erect their residential quarters on hilltops. This would help them observe the movements of their enemies from afar and take appropriate measures to protect

9 Richard Pankhurst, "The Trade of Central Ethiopia in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth century," *JES*, V.2., 1964, P.73; Fekadu Begna, "A Tentative History of Wollo: 1855-1908," B.A. Thesis, History, (Addis Ababa University, 1972), p. 29.

10 Asnake Ali, "Aspects of the Political History of Wollo: 1822-1916," M.A. Thesis, History (Addis Ababa University, 1983), p. 120.

11 Socioeconomic Study Team Development Partners, "History of Dessie," p.14

12 *Ibid*, pp.14-15

13 Emperor Tewodros II is said to have been the first person to use the name Dessie which subsequently became the appellation of the emerging town.

themselves.¹⁴ The strategically-sited *Ayteyefe* had actually provided Mikael an exceptional level of security from any surprise attack of his adversaries. Besides enjoying the magnificent view of the surrounding areas from *Ayteyefe Ras Mikael* had an additional advantage of four directional security observation and control of the forces of his opponents as far afield as Tehuledere and Ambassel in the north and north east, the lowland plains of Qallu and beyond in the east, Wore Himano in the south, and Gerado Bilen in the west. More importantly, the *Tossa* mountain range to the west and the Massifs of *Azwa Gedel* and *Doro Mezleya* to the east made Dessie a fortified and a naturally defended town. The five main gateways: *Titaber* and *Qurqurber* to Tigray; *Kutaber* to Begemider; *Girarambaber* to the southeast; and *Bilen-Geradober* to Shewa and Gojjam conferred the town an enormous strategic advantage.¹⁵ In essence, *Ras Mikael's* well-thought-out calculated move from Tenta, his previous administrative center, to *Ayteyefe* had greatly reduced his security anxiety and assisted him to extend his rule to the eastern low lands.¹⁶

The construction of *Ras Mikael's* palace at *Ayteyefe* immediately began after the surrounding forests and wild beasts had been cleared. It was completed around 1900 EC (1907/8), and Mikael started to live there. According to local oral tradition, emperors Tewodros II (r.1855-1868) and Menelik II (r.1889-1913), and also Empress Taytu, chose *Ayteyefe* as a temporary camping site during their brief sojourns in Dessie.¹⁷

Having this in mind, this study attempts to figure out why and how the construction of *Ayteyefe* hall, which became the heart of

14 Mahteme Selassie Wolde Meskel, *Recollections of Things Past* (Amharic) (Addis Ababa, 1942), p.7

15 Socioeconomic Study Team Development Partners, "History of Dessie," pp.6-7

16 Oral Informants

17 Wollo Provincial Administrative Office, "*Yawallo Tarik*" (History of Wallo) (Amharic), mimeograph, written by seven elders, N.D. p.89; see also Gebre Selassie Wolde Aregay, *A History of the Period of Emperor Menilik II of Ethiopia* (Amharic), (Addis Ababa, 1959 EC.), pp.168-171.

Mikael's *Gebbi*, was desired and consummated. An effort will be made to provide a better historical account of this magnificent hall--both as an embodiment of a regional court structure and as a vital achievement of *Negus* Mikael during his brief political prominence in the early twentieth century.

The Construction Process

Even before he became king and the construction of *Ayteyefe* hall, *Ras* Mikael, seeking to enhance his prestige and to create a vital bond with his followers, used to offer festive banquets in large tents and awnings. In order to strengthen their powerbase Ethiopian emperors, regional rulers and nobles were accustomed to preparing and throwing *gibir* on a regular basis.¹⁸ Preparation of *gibir* "especially on festive days" for the soldiers of their provinces was an indispensable duty of regional governors.¹⁹ "In former times," wrote Kebede Tessema, 'the system of administration was [focused on] establishing a relationship through food and drink, whereby the princes, aristocrats and the nobility all the way down to the common people would [either offer or] 'eat' *gibir*."²⁰ After he became king, *Negus* Mikael, being the judicial and military head of several sub-regional and local governors and surrounded by a great number of civil and armed retinues sought to construct a large *gibir* hall, which would allow him to throw bigger banquets. But some informants affirmed that it was *Lij* Iyassu, who frequently traveled to Dessie and stayed in his *Elfigne* at *Ayteyefe*, persuaded his father Mikael to build a big

18 Emperor Menelik used to offer feast every day, but after the completion, in 1897, of the new banquet hall, which holds more than six thousand people, where he threw *gibir* every Sunday and Tuesday; but later on it became once a week that is on Sundays and during annual holidays only.

19 Kofi Darkwah, *Shoa, Menelik and the Ethiopian Empire*, (London, Heinemann, 1975), p. 125.

20 See Kebede Tessema, *A Memoir of History* (Amharic), (Addis Ababa, Artistic Printing Press, 1962 EC.), p.100.

banquet hall that would match up with his newly-conferred title of *Negus* or King.²¹

Ayteyefe hall measures 27 meters in width and 48 meters in length.²² Including the veranda the hall occupies a total area of about 2,100 square meters.²³ The veranda has 4 meters width on both sides of the hall. This huge rectangular structure has one main entrance door and two windows, and they look to the north. To the east, there are three doors through which services were rendered at the time of *gibir*.²⁴ There are also two big windows in the same position. On the western side, there are three windows and two medium-sized doors which were used as exit. At the backside there are two huge doors solely used by the *Negus* to enter and exit the hall.

To augment the internal visibility of the hall there are several glasses in a roughly semi-circular shape on the top beam of all the doors and windows. At the front entrance of the hall we read: ማካኤል ንጉሥ ጳዖን ፲፱፻፯ (Mikael, King of *Tsion* 1907 EC), on an engraved marble plate and a carved lion right on the top of this colossal double doorway. There are also two crosses sliced out of stone on both sides of the door.

To protect from the possible danger of wind the roof is firmly fastened by a spliced wire and tempered steel with the timbers which have been employed to intercept the stone building. Here the technique of using timber in a stone building is clearly visible. To support the rooftop of the hall the veranda is equipped with seventy oblong, straightly-curved wooden posts. Inside the hall there are

21 Oral Informants

22 This is the researcher's measurement. But *Ras Imru*, describing the beauty and strength of this massive structure of lime and stone, wrote that the interior part of the hall measures 25 x 45 meters. Imru Haile Selassie, *From what I Heard and Remember* (Amharic), (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2001 EC.), p. 48.

23 According to the Dessie Culture and Sport's Bureau, the hall occupies a total area of 2130 square meter.

24 Similar to the Emperors' court, *Negus* Mikael also offered *gibir* for some selected individuals every day at his *Elfigne Addarash*.

twenty more pillars firmly affixed to the roof ceilings. All the rectangular beams, each measuring about a meter in circumference, the doors and windows as well as all the rafters and the ridge poles are of *yahabesha tid* (*Juniperus procera*). Moreover, all the beams that are deeply buried in the ground and firmly attached to the roof have been fastened with locally-made iron nails. Originally, the whole veranda was provided by a railing of reed of about a meter high. This huge banqueting hall, according to informants' estimate, can accommodate over 1500 people at a time.

Inside the hall a raised dais (vanished long ago) was erected for *Negus* Mikael on the wide platform that was used by members of the nobility, whose seating position was arranged according to political position and seniority.²⁵ On the eastern side of the hall there is an elevated platform for the *masinqo*²⁶ players or the traditional music performers. At *gibir* times these musician singers entertained Mikael's guests with various cultural and patriotic melodies. Appointments (and also prizes) were mostly given during *gibir* times held on holidays like *Meskel* (The Finding of The True Cross), *Timket* (commemoration of the baptism of Christ) and *Lidet* (a holiday to honor the birth of Jesus Christ), and these events were publicly announced with the beatings of a huge ceremonial drum called *Negarit*. The *gibir* on *Atse Meskel* (every year on Meskerem 10) was exclusively prepared to members of the church community. As a signal to the beginning and end of the *gibir* feast, the sound of traditional blowing instruments of *Embilta*, *Turumba*, and *Melekat* would also fill the atmosphere of these generous banquets. Holiday *gibir* provisions were much bigger than those offered at other times because all district governors along with their retinues and armies came to attend them. Smaller *gibir* was regularly thrown every month on St. Mariam and St. Mikael commemoration days.

25 On the similarity of the *gibir* ceremony in *Ayteyefe* and Menilik's banquet hall, see Imru Haile Selassie, *From What I heard*, p. 49.

26 *Masinqo* is a one-stringed instrument with which the *Azmari* (minstrels) sing and play music.

In terms of its external appearance, the elevation of the roof gives a false impression about the size of the hall; it looks much bigger than it actually is. The height of the hall is about 8 meters, but the place on which it has been erected gives it an image of being extremely large. If compared with the old *yagibir addarash* (banquet hall), burned down around 1892, of Emperor Menilik in the Grand Palace, which measures 120 cubits or *kind* (about 60 meters) in length and 60 cubits (about 30 meters) in width,²⁷ however, *Ayteyefe* hall may not be regarded as an astonishingly huge and architecturally marvelous structure outside of Addis Ababa, the then imperial capital.

As hinted above, the construction of the hall was started soon after Mikael's coronation as *Negus* and was completed in 1914\15. Mikael garnered a substantial quantity of corvee labor and expert skill for building this massive structure of timber, lime and stone. A legend woven around this massive structure has it that eggs and wheat flour were immensely used for the construction purpose. Such assertion, which was not uncommon in Ethiopia, appears to have served to magnify the value of the hall, has been a less likely claim. In fact, the project undoubtedly required massive construction material and labor force. To this end, thousands of *gabbar* peasants had been mobilized.²⁸ In addition to mobilizing the necessary labor, governors of the surrounding districts, from whose territories construction materials had been largely collected, were also entrusted with coordinating the works.

All the construction materials were transported by the *gabbars* and their draught animals. The soldiers of Mikael did also participate in this venture because in times of peace they were expected to carry out such kinds of court-sponsored works. Together with the male

27 Gebre Selassie, p. 281.

28 *Gabbars* were landless tenants who worked on agricultural lands held by the state, the church or private owners. They had several obligations to fulfill; among these erection of houses and fences for provincial governors, and building or repairing of churches. Richard Pankhurst, *State and land in Ethiopian History* (Addis Ababa: Central Press, 1966), pp.174-177

domestic slaves, the armed retinues of Mikael being close to the construction site were particularly active in bringing stone from the surrounding quarries for this particular project.

All the *tid* or juniper beams were brought from Salmane, later the capital of Albuko *Woreda* in Qallu *Awraja*.²⁹ This area was well-known for its enormous forest resources. After the *gabbars* of the nearby villages cut down the huge juniper or *tid* trees, *gabbars* of the adjoining areas had transported them. This could be done after the branches of the fallen trees were trimmed and roughly carved. This roughly prepared *tid* log was called *alengo*. The *gabbars* had to carry the *alengo* to *Ayteyefe* by their shoulders, a distance of about 50 kilometers. Because of the heaviness and length of these monolithic logs many people were believed to have died or seriously injured. This happened mostly when they got tired or they felt uncomfortable. The roughness of the terrain in which they traveled was an additional factor to their casualty. Though it is not possible to get the exact number of human carriers of one *alengo*, it is believed that between 60 and 80 individuals were needed to transport a single log.

The *gabbars* also participated in the collection and transportation of sand and stones to the construction site. While sand was collected from the nearby Borkena and Gerado rivers, the stones and gravels came from the surrounding hills. The kind of red stones placed in at the corners of the doors and windows were particularly obtained from Kutaber, Mutiqollo, and Galesa area. According to an informant, *Negus* Mikael once in a while came to the quarries to see how the work was going on, and, in a symbolic gesture, he would carry a piece of stone first then all the nobles, retainers and soldiers would do the same.

29 By exploiting the forest resources of Salmane, *Ras* Mikael built several churches in and around Dessie. The churches of Medhane Alem, Giyorgis and Mariam were among the prominent ones. In fact, Mikael made Wollo one of the provinces with many churches. Mersae Hazen Wolde Qirqos, *Of What I Saw and Heard: The Last Years of Emperor Menelik and The Brief Rule of Iyassu* (Amharic), (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Printing Press, 1999 EC.), p.224

The lime used as cement came from a locality called Segora (around Geshen) in Ambassel *Awraja*. Extraction of lime or calcium oxide, from materials containing calcium carbonate used in making mortar and cement, was an extremely difficult job that required an expert knowledge of burning the limestone and differentiating the lime from other stones or soils. As Hassan Araqi, an eyewitness and one of the transporters of the lime and a prominent figure in the mining, burning, and extraction of lime at Segora, pointed out that the *gabbars*, filling the lime in goat skin sacks, transported it to *Ayteyefe* with their donkeys. Some amount of lime was also extracted from a place called Felana in Qallu sub-district (or *woreda*), he added.

Excluding the kind of nails forged locally, it is not clear as to how the corrugated sheets of zinc and factory-produced nails were procured. Notwithstanding this ambiguity, there is a general agreement among oral informants that all the corrugated iron sheets and nails came from Addis Ababa. Enormous quantity of corrugated sheets of zinc and nails were being imported to Ethiopia through the Franco-Ethiopian railway which reached Dire Dawa in 1902, Aqaqi in 1915 and Addis Ababa in 1917.³⁰ This suggested that Addis Ababa was the likely place where these imported construction materials could be obtained. It was with hundreds of pack animals that these materials were transported from Addis Ababa to Dessie.³¹ The local ironsmiths working at the construction site produced diverse kinds of tempered steels, hinges and nails, including the long and chunky ones. The huge amount of iron ore required for this particular purpose was smelted and came from the Borena (a district or *awraja* in Wallo) area.

To satisfy the water needs of this ambitious construction project, all the domestic female slaves of *Negus* Mikael were assigned to fetch

30 Richard Pankhurst, *Economic History of Ethiopia, 1800-1935* (Addis Ababa, Haile Selassie I University Press, 1969), p. 404.

31 After more than 50 years of service, the original corrugated sheet of zinc of its roof was changed by a new one in 1968.

water from the River Borkena. The male slaves, on the other hand, had to perform all the menial works deemed essential.³²

The above account gives us a good deal of insight on how the unskilled labor was mobilized, regimented, and harnessed. It is thus imperative to say a few words on how the skilled labor was organized and the role of the expatriate elements in the execution of this huge undertaking.

As the many changes in the socio-economic condition of the early twentieth century clearly demonstrated, the participation of foreigners in the economic life of Ethiopia was increasingly perceptible.³³ This nationwide developmental trajectory had directly impacted the construction of *Ayteyefe* hall. To implement this construction project, the workmanship and supervision of a few Arab masons and carpenters was said to be decisive. Despite the difficulty telling from which country or countries these Arab workmen came, most oral informants remember the names of the prominent craftsmen. Among the allegedly seven main contractors informants remember *Sheikh Abdalla*, Ali, Ismail, Basera, and Behakim. Owing to the invaluable service they rendered, *Negus Mikael* had given them a place to settle in Dessie permanently; and their neighborhood is still known as *Arab Genda* (Arab Quarter).³⁴ In fact, these Arab craftsmen

32 Many of the domestic slaves came from Wolayta following Mikael's participation in Menelik's campaign to the south. Mikael also got hundreds of slaves from his son *Lij Iyassu* who campaigned against the Gimira people. According to Cipolla's estimation *Ras Mikael* had possessed about 3000 slaves. Quoted in Richard Pankhurst, *Economic History of Ethiopia, 1800-1935*, p. 75; Vanderheym, who accompanied the campaign of Menelik and Mikael to Wolayta, also reports that "*Ras Mikael* of Wollo was a great exporter of slaves and sent numerous slave caravans to the coast." Quoted in Richard Pankhurst, *Economic History of Ethiopia, 1800-1935*, p.106

33 Richard Pankhurst, "Menelik and the Utilization of Foreign Skills in Ethiopia," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, V.1., 1967, p. 29.

34 Hussein Ahmed, "Archival Sources on the Yemeni Arabs in Urban Ethiopia: The Dessie Municipality," *History in Africa*, Vol. 27 (2007), pp. 31-37.

and their descendants (some of them are still living in the same place) have been well-remembered in Dessie. Informants also mentioned the presence of other Arab workmen who had been employed to assist the seven main contractors as well as a few Indian masons and carpenters. In addition, they also hinted about the participation of few skilled Ethiopians working in the capacity of stonemasons and carpenters alongside these foreign construction experts.³⁵

Although it is very difficult to get information on what kind of contractual agreement/s had been employed or how much (or for how long) they were paid, all the foreigners were said to be remunerated with Maria Theresa silver coins or thalers. In connection with this, oral informants asserted that these expatriate workmen were also provided with food and drinks throughout the construction period. By contrast, commented informants, the *gabbars* who offered inestimable amount of manual labor were never paid or provisioned; they were rather required to bring their own provisions.

Significance of the Hall

Based on the data gained from local oral tradition and informants, it is safe to surmise that the name *Ayteyefe* was given to the *gibir* hall by the ordinary people. It was an accolade to the lavish feast which Mikael offered them in the *gibir* hall. *Ayteyefe* would literally mean 'a hall of no segregation in which any person, rich or poor, including the infirm, was entitled to eat and drink' during *gibir* times.³⁶ For the purpose of observing seniority, informants claimed, there was in fact a very strict control at the time of entering the hall; but if a person managed to pass the doorway and entered the 'non-discriminatory' hall, he would not be repulsed or punished. It was actually a hard task for anyone to break order and enter for he/she would be beaten and returned by the *Agafari* (banquet superintendents) and *Kelkay* (guards). Otherwise, the ordinary folk would be allowed to eat and drink as long as they behaved and acquiesced to the *gibir* procedures.

35 Informants could not remember the names of these Ethiopian masons and carpenters.

36 Oral Informants

Even after the defeat of *Negus* Mikael at Segelle³⁷ by the Shewan forces and his captivity at Dandi in Zeway Island (for 2 years and 5 months) and his subsequent death in Holeta (after 6 months of detention there) in September 1918 around age 68,³⁸ the hall and the hill continued to bear the same name. In spite of the unfortunate end of Mikael, the daring combatant of Matemma and Adwa, the name *Ayteyefe*, epitomizing the generosity and reputation of its founder, has been retained to these days. Despite his proverbial, outstanding valor, Mikael's defeat at Segelle, attributed partly to his bravado and impulsiveness, was a reversal of the astounding victory he had scored at Tora Mesk (130 km. northeast of Addis Ababa) a few days earlier. The battle of Segelle, which was the greatest and bloodiest domestic battle since Adwa³⁹, sealed the fate of Mikael and the momentary ascendancy of Wallo in the power politics of the early twentieth century Ethiopia.

This rapid sequence of events after Segelle also shuttered the socio-political and diplomatic importance of *Ayteyefe*.⁴⁰ Had *Abba Shanqo* Mikael been victorious at Segelle, he might have built other magnificent palaces and banquet halls in his vast kingdom, a realm that would have been much wider than the current one. Unfortunately, this did not happen. With the exception of few *gibir* preparations, the hall remained unused throughout the long reign of

37 The battle of Segelle was Mikael's unsuccessful military endeavor to reinstall on the Imperial throne of his son *Lij* Iyassu, a young prince overthrown by the Shewan aristocrats via a palace coup on September 26, 1916. Iyassu has been remembered as a victim of the first coup d'état in modern Ethiopian history.

38 The mortal remains of *Negus* Mikael was later exhumed from Wajit Medhane Alem Church in Holeta, transported to Wore Himano (his initial power base) and reburied in February 1929 in the Church of Tanta Mikael, a church of his own making. Mersae Hazen, p. 223.

39 Bahru Zewde, p. 125.

40 Asfa Wossen made the palace compound (or *Ghibi*) of *Negus* Mikael at *Ayteyefe* his residence till the eve of the Italo-Ethiopian war, when he soon shifted to the vacant Italian Consulate compound (later renamed *Meriho Ghibi*).

Emperor Haile Selassie; and during the *Darg* era, the provincial Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) used the hall as a warehouse in which it accumulated considerable amount of grain and other famine relief items. Towards the end of the military government, the hall and the entire area around *Ayteyefe* became a military camp and a command post.

In conclusion, *Ayteyefe* hall, which has an architectural uniqueness of its own and an approximate age of more than a hundred and ten years, deserves to be considered a historical edifice. It was in the late 1960s that *Dajjazmach* Mamo, a onetime *Enderassie* (governor-general) of Wallo had changed the old corrugated iron sheet of *Ayteyefe* with his own money; and his request for reimbursement was said to be blatantly rejected by the Emperor.⁴¹ Until recently no attempt has been made to look after or to maintain it. Due to old age, misuse and negligence, its condition was deteriorating. And if it had not been repaired recently, its total obliteration could not have been that far. To avoid future physical damages and mishandlings, this venerable edifice must obtain constant attention of the responsible sector offices as well as the many individuals and non-governmental organizations that have a stake in preserving and passing on of such an important and revealing legacy to the next generation. It should also be remembered that a well-protected and renovated *Negus* Mikael's banqueting hall will certainly contribute to the fast-changing cityscape of the historic Dessie town. In order to buttress the significance of the hall, contemporaneous buildings at *Ayteyefe* should be given similar repairing and protection. Besides the main banqueting hall, there are about seven other stone-walled structures around Mikael's palace compound. These are: *Negus* Mikael's residence or *Elfigne*; his Law Court (office) and Prayer house; a Security post; *Lij* Iyassu's one-storey *Elfigne* (which had been noticeably dilapidated for long); a Weavers' cubicle (*Fetel Bet*) and a concrete-roofed semi-belowground

41 Oral Informants

interim detention cell. To date, all but *Negus Mikael's* residence or *Elfigne* have been recently repaired.⁴²

Wallo owes much to *Negus Mikael* for choosing *Ayteyefe* as his residential and administrative spot and for making it “the navel of the rising city” of Dessie. This Mikael’s action also made Dessie a contemporaneous urban center with Addis Ababa, the newly-founded capital city of the Ethiopian Empire, in 1887. Attendants and domestic servants of Mikael’s court were given land to build their homes around *Ayteyefe*;⁴³ and the building of residential houses of the nobility in different parts of the town had given rise to the cropping up of new neighborhoods or *Sefers* (*Ras Yimer*, *Ras Yazew*, *Ras Ali Gebreyes*, *Ras Gebre Hiywot*, and *Liqā Mekwas Abegaz*, etc.) in Dessie. This new regional capital, part of the area known formerly as Lako Melza,⁴⁴ progressively grew into a city of thousands of inhabitants. In the early 20th Century, Dessie had few European-type buildings owned mostly by Greek and Armenian nationals. In a country where a thatched-roofed wooden structure was the predominant building technology, *Negus Mikael* must be credited for his personal wisdom in pioneering a new type of construction in the region much earlier than the introduction of the Italian style architecture during the five year fascist occupation period and thereafter.

42 They are part and parcel of the palace complex.

43 Their neighborhood, formerly called *Chercharit*, became known as [Wolamo] *Sefer*, denoting that the majority of its settlers came from Wolayta. The same is true to the ‘*Gimira Sefer*,’ a neighborhood of war captives who had been brought from Gimira area and resettled at this particular place.

44 See Tayye Gebre Mariam (*Aleqa*), *History of the People of Ethiopia* (Amharic), (Addis Ababa, Qedus Giyorgis Printing Press, 1964EC); also Zergaw Asfera, “Some Aspects of Historical Development in Amhara Wollo: Ca. 1700-1815,” B.A. Thesis, History (Haile Selassie I University, 1973).

Conclusion

The royal settlement of *Ras Mikael* at *Ayteyefe* was an epoch-making choice. Being on a majestic hill and representing an attractive architectural workmanship, the hall will continue to serve as one of the premier historic markers in the region.⁴⁵ All said, if due respect is given to the glories of the past, a properly protected *Ayteyefe* hall, which casts light on the level of past human-environment interactions, modes of resource utilization, and a high degree of artistic mastery, will certainly qualify as a potential site of tourist attraction and a source of some economic benefits. A portion of the generated income will certainly be reinvested for the conservation and protection of the hall. It is commendable that some renovation or repairing activities have been carried out on the main banquet hall and a number of other contemporary buildings that exist around. In order to attract and increase the number of visitors, the previously asphalted road (constructed around the early 1960s) has to be fully and properly repaired. It is also worth noting that those who undertake the renovation works of these historic buildings have to be assisted by specialists/experts of ascertained historical, structural,

45 As the rain waters pouring down from the rooftop of the hall demonstrate, it is located in-between the two major drainage systems. The rain waters of the eastern side of the roof flow to the Awash River, and the waters of the western side of the roof rush to the confluence of the Blue Nile River.

and architectural knowledge and skills. Such expert collaborations are vital to ensuring the employment of original construction materials in the restoration works and verifying the renovated edifices have actually regained their former postures. Finally, this glorious architectural edifice, erected in the second decade of the 20thc and a couple of years before his ignominious end at Segelle, is the greatest of all memorials of *Negus Mikael* in Dessie.



AYTEYEFE HALL, SIDE VIEW

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