
Dechasa Abebe (2013 E.C.). Gobeana: Wetaderawinna Politikawi Hiwot (1810-1881 E.C.). Los Angeles: Tsehai Publishers, 310PP.

Ahmed Hassen¹

Following Brian James Yates' impressive PhD dissertation submitted to the University of Illinois in 2009, historical research on the role of the Oromo in the creation of modern Ethiopia has become quite visible than before.² This does not mean to overlook the seminal works of Mohammed Hassen, who diligently labored on Oromo history in Ethiopia, standing on its two legs.³ All the same, mention should also be made to those works of Professor Tesemma Ta'a.⁴ Here, Brian Yates' work is quite helpful for an obvious reason: after reading his critical study, it is understandable that the contribution of Gobena Dacii has become quite visible, and not hidden for that matter.

In late 2013 E.C., Dechasa Abebe came up with his worth-mentioning work, following the path charted by his prominent predecessors of grand academic quality in reconstructing Ethiopia's Oromo history. I have found his work quite significant in the ranks of the Ethiopian intellectual community and foreign colleagues working on Ethiopia with a capacity to read Amharic, the Ethiopian language of rich literary setting that Dechasa Abebe employed in writing his book under review.

I have clearly observed, after reading this commendable work of Dechasa Abebe, which his effort and the output itself intend to clearly put the career of Ethiopia's strong man of his time in a justified and proper historical setting. There are two contending popular discourses, about *Ras* Gobena Dacii, that are far away from each other. They are far enough away from each other and

¹ Associate Professor at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University, and can be reached at ahmedh20019@gmail.com

² Yates, Brian James (2009), "Invisible Actors: The Oromo and the Creation of Modern Ethiopia (1855-1913)" PhD Dissertation, University of Illinois.

³ Mohammed Hassen (1994). *The Oromo of Ethiopia: A History, 1570-1860*. Red Sea Press, Trenton; idem. (2015). *The Oromo & the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia (1300-1700)*. Woodbridge: James Currey.

⁴ For instance, Tesemma Ta'a (1980). "The Oromo of Wallega: A Historical Survey to 1910." M.A. Thesis, Addis Ababa University, History; *Idem* (1986), "The Political Economy of Western central Ethiopia from mid-16th to the Early 20th Centuries". Michigan State University. Tesemma's (1986) appeared under different title as Tesemma Ta'a (2006). *The Political Economy of an African Society in Trans-formation: The Case of Macca Oromo* (Ethiopia Harrassowitz Verlag: Wiesbaden.

also an extra mile far away from the formidable military and political career of *Ras Gobena Dacii*. Indeed, historical research and genuine judgment should legitimately come into play this time around to understand a given community or individual.

It seems due to this clear-cut professional reason that Dechasa Abebe genuinely distanced himself from the already stated two contending popular views. These are not the views of any historian of professional loyalty, and even general readers can see that they are nothing more than major misconceptions developed around a personage of high repute and remarkable profile who undoubtedly played a critical role in the chemistry of making Ethiopia in the nineteenth century, particularly in the second half of it.

In order to handle the military and political role of *Ras Gobena Dacii*, Dechasa Abebe organized his book into four major rubrics: about the book; the challenging environment against *Ras Gobena's* rise to a distinguished military and political career; *Ras Gobena's* golden years (1870-1878) E.C.; *Ras Gobena's* fate in the course of his last three or four years (1878-1881 E.C.). It is quite impressive that each rubric of Dechasa Abebe's book has its own separate but well-organized units. The first rubric contains the first unit, which deals with the background, methodology, organization, and principal objectives of the book. It also contains the second unit, which treats the Kingdom of Shawa at the time of Gobena's birth; Shewa's boundary at the same time of Gobena's birth; population settlements and settlement distributions as well as peoples' interactions.

Then appears the second rubric covering *Ras Gobena's* child and boyhoods, the duality as servant and as a son-in-law to *Ato Abboyé* by the arrangement of a certain *Ayyäläch Abba Risaa*, to whom *Ato Abboyé* was a responsible caretaker at his own home (pp.57-58). Other parts of the second rubric have to do with Gobena's service as *Däj-Aggafari* for *Däjjazmach Bezzabeh Wariq* alias *Bäzzu Abba Dekkir*, once *Ato Abboyé* justified that a son-in-law should not simultaneously be *Dej Aggafari*. In those days, it was not in the norm to reduce one's son-in-law to such a low profile as *Däj Aggafari* (pp.59-60). One also finds the rebellious Gobena against *Däjjazmach Bezzabeh* or *Bäzzu Abba Dekkir* (pp.64-65). It also goes without saying that Dechasa Abebe successfully and meticulously treated the years of transition of the prominent Gobena during which he was in contact with Menelik of Shawa, his appointment as *Aggafari*, as an acting war commander (*Tor Abägaz*) under Menelik as King of Shawa (1865–1889) and what not (pp.69–90).

The Gobena's further appointment, as war commander and with assuming the title of *Däjjazmach* of Macchaa and his crucial role in the series of the

Menelik's expansions have been well treated. Moreover, his unforgettable crucial play in the Ethiopian politics of his time; and, his relations to *Däjjazmach* Mäshäsha Säyfu, within the Shawa setting; and also at the national level, with Emperor Yohannes IV's (1872-1889) campaign to the Kingdom of Shawa, with his move to check Menelik's ambitions, assumed due consideration in Dechasa Abbebe's work (pp.91-110). In due course, *Däjjazmach* Gobena's appointment by Menelik as "Ras of the Right", while his contemporary Dargé Sahlä Sellasé was "Ras of the Left." This was following Emperor Yohannes' authorization to King Menelik of Shawa (1865-1889) that the latter being King had been assured by the Emperor the right to appoint two notables with the title *Ras*, one for the "right" and another for the left of his Shawa throne (pp.110-11).

Dechasa Abebe's work is quite rich. As one finds in the third rubric of it, there are units dealing with Gobena's role in the completion of the foundation of the Tulamaa Confederacy, his military campaign to the south of Machaa and Kaffa, that of Gobena's campaign to the north of Machaa and Anfillo, that of Arsi, that of Aräb (Bela-Shangul), and the Guragé areas. Dechasa Abebe's approach to historical reconstruction in the treatment of each of the aforementioned events is quite clear with both a qualitative academic eye and that of a pen. Above everything is his academic and professional objectivity (pp. 113-208).

The fourth rubric attempts to determine the last years of Gobena's strong muscle with due attention to his relations with the Orthodox Christianity, with the Catholic mission, with his life within the rank of his own family and with the beginning of the end and his eventual death, either due to sudden accident or the intervention of royal mystery (pp.225-285). Here also, one fact repeats itself in the treatment of the final part of this book - the author's qualitative academic eye and that of pen, the clear mastery of documents and that of academic objectivity.

There is one major point well worth mentioning with respect to Dechasa Abebe and his book under review. In the rubric one and its first unit, Dechasa Abebe confidently underscored the fundamental maxim of his work with clear objectives (p.27): to soften the popular view of contending arguments, be it under the discourse of being Ethiopian, being Amara (Amhara), being Oromo, etc.; to contribute towards inculcating in the minds of the younger Ethiopian generation the deep knowledge about the Ethiopian patriots and that of patriotism of different times in the country's long history; to confront with the historical justification of malicious discourses within the ranks of different elites; and to contribute to the upgrading and enhancing of the not yet finished historical research quite vital for Ethiopian nation building. Without a doubt,

Dechasa Abebe accomplished his goal of writing his book with a qualitative academic eye and a pen.

Having said this, it should be understood that no work is a hundred per cent spotless. This is also the case in Dechasa Abebe's work. For instance, one editorial error has crept into this scholarly work (p.64). The Amharic term "*yämmaläqsäw*" is misspelled as "*yämmaläqäsäw*." This and some others like this need future attention in case the book will have a chance to see the daylight of its second edition. By the same token, the author tried to redress the past derogatory terms in the poem (p.14), which popularly existed in the pre-1974 Ethiopian mores in both oral and literature. If I were Dechasa, I would have exposed such derogatory terms in black and white and then ordained the true identification of the people, for it had already ordained, forever, following the debacle of the Imperial Order in 1974. All the same, Dechasa Abebe (p.7) conceives as if "Gobena was among those or one of the leading role players in Ethiopian history with *awwäzagabi yä hiwotenna yä politika tarik* (with debatable or confusing Ethiopia's history above all in the political realm)". To my knowledge and understanding, it was not his career in both military and political fields, which can be considered debatable or to some extent confusing. Instead, it could be argued that neither his personal life activities, on the one hand, nor his military career, on the other, are debatable or confusing records. Instead, myths of hatred, malicious conversations, and acts undermining and cornering Gobena may have contributed to such a dubious attribution.

Finally, I have never seen such a solid scholarly work on the remarkable personage of the Kingdom of Shawa as the work under review that Dechasa Abebe has come up with at this moment. His work will meritoriously join the solid historical research in what was the Kingdom of Shawa. It will contribute to the withering away of malicious talks and confusing discourses. It is a pity that those with several decades' long opportunities and assuming privileged tables of teaching and research in the field of Ethiopian history have happily passed over or left aside reconstructing *Ras Gobena Dacii's* formidable historical contribution in the making of modern Ethiopia. This seems to have appeared only for two reasons: due to the intrigue of hatred and that of pro-center syndrome by many of us in the field. At this very stage, credit should be extended to Dechasa Abebe, who meticulously crossed such an obstacle bridge to professionally understand the life and career of the famous Tulama Oromo, *Ras Gobena Dacii*. In fact, Dechasa Abebe should not claim to have covered Gobena's life and career in its totality or entirety. This is because no one is perfect, and no historical study can claim to have comprehended the entirety of a given historical event for a variety of reasons.