
The Missing Sovereign: the Fallouts of *LEJIYASSU*'s Demise, 1916-1974

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Abstract

Based on the personal recollections of local oral informants and the available written records, the study attempts to deconstruct and reinterpret the conventional narratives on the circumstances surrounding the overthrow of *Lej* Iyassu, the legitimately designated successor of Emperor Menilik II, and the political conditions that prevailed in Wällo following the unsuccessful military endeavors of *Negus* Mikael to reinstate his son on the imperial throne. The main object of this article is to rekindle a historically informed debate on why the Imperial regime under Haile Selassie would want to get rid of Iyassu without a trace, after keeping him in custody for about a decade and a half. It has been widely accepted that Iyassu's removal from power had nothing to do with his alleged conversion to Islam, rather his vigorous efforts to introduce a new set of domestic and foreign policies, exposed the young sovereign to a very stiff opposition from Menilik's notable officials who, antagonizing the new policies switched their support to the then Ras Täfäri, the son of Menilik's cousin, a major instigator and the nemesis of Iyassu. By bringing fresh findings and insights, the study emphasizes the need for a focused and reasoned effort in resolving the baffling questions of Iyassu's death and his final resting place. The suppression of information on this unsolved mystery was possible because it was a sophisticated crime, a crime that may be considered reprehensible, if not wholly irreparable, as a historical blunder in Ethiopian power politics.

Keywords: Asfa Wossän; Dessie; Haile Selassie; Iyassu; Mänän; Mikael; Sägällé; Šäwa; Täfäri; Wallo

Introduction

The geopolitical location of Wällo, the home of the Zagwe dynasty (c. 1150 to 1270) and the initial base of the 13th century so-called restored 'Solomonic Dynasty' as well as the *Mamädoç* and *Wore Sheikh* ruling families, had frequently exposed its people to ruthless pillaging and destruction, stemming mostly from political instability and repeated military interventions. The leaders of the Muslim *Mamädoç* (also called *Wärrä Himäno*) dynasty

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(Mesganaw, 2008 EC: 14) maintained their rule throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, and in order to legitimize their rule and obtain the backing of the central government, they were converted to Christianity in the late 19th century. *Ras Mikael*'s (born c.1850) effective control of the two vital trade routes running to the coast and to Šäwa helped Wällo become an economically thriving region. Wällo also served as a 'cultural mediator' between the two religiously contrasting regions. *Ras Mikael* (*Imam Muhammed Ali* until 1878) maintained a delicate balance between the central Christian authority and his predominantly Muslim inhabited dominion. By making use of "existing integrating cultural practices, such as god parentage, conversion and [political] marriage, [Mikael] became part of the Ethiopian royalty" (Yates, 2009: 249). In the post Mikael period these and other locally-nurtured integrative methods, extensively assisted the Šäwan officials, their families, and retinues as well as public employees or private business owners, to easily assimilate into the acquiescent and welcoming Wällo social fabric. Wällo's centuries-old non-confrontational, absorbing way of life made the region a melting pot of different linguistic and cultural groups. Most of all, this highly-valued cultural asset was to become the hallmark of the demographically mixed and economically thriving city of Dässie.

IYASSU's Removal, SÄGÄLLÉ and its Fallout

Mikael's position began to be seriously challenged soon after the declaration of Iyassu as a legitimate successor of the then ailing emperor, Menilik II. This was because most members in and around the Šäwan ruling circle were not in favour of Iyassu, whom they viewed as the son of a former Muslim Oromo chief from Wärrä Himäno, Wällo (Yates, 2009:245; Del Boca, 2012:57; Ficquet, 2014:5-29). It was within this political backdrop that *Lej Iyassu* became the uncrowned 'king of kings' of Ethiopia in 1913. He actually ruled the country right from the death of *Ras Tessema Nadew*, his regent, in 1911 up to his deposition in 1916, a total of around six years. With regard to the opposition and the subsequent removal from power of the young ruler, the majority of written materials produced during Haile Selassie's more than five decades of administration (heir-designate-regent 1916-1930; emperor 1930-1936 and 1941-1974) were either one sided or extremely biased. Even the invaluable account of an Ethiopian delegation that toured around Europe and the Middle East, in 1911, under the auspices of Iyassu did not see the light of day until Bahru Zewde fortunately published the reconstructed memoir of Hiruy Wolde Selassie's travel story with the Ethiopian Academy press in 2017 (Hiruy, 2009 EC).

Most of the written sources during the Imperial rule have unreasonably dwelt on Iyassu's flamboyant personal behaviour, arising in large part from his strikingly handsome physique, and his purported polygamous/adulterous nature. Echoing the personal observation of a visitor of the early 1930s, Greenfield later wrote: "People do not really speak of him [Iyassu], for the whole country is policed with spies" (Greenfield, 1965:105). It is not difficult to detect the dissemination of pseudo and irrelevant evidences (Fischer, 1970: 43-47) for widening the political/regional rift between the Šāwan ruling elites and *Ras* Mikael of Wällo. On 31 May 1914, Iyassu crowned his father *Ras* Mikael 'King of Wällo and Tigray', who in due course became de facto 'king of Tigray, Gojjam and Gondar' or 'King of the north.' This move, probably taken as part of *Lej* Iyassu's project for establishing an alternative powerbase in Dässie (Ahmed, 2013: 106), an apparently convincing argument, was at the crux of the disagreement. It eventually evolved into an open conflict with Menelik's disgruntled old guards who were fearful of losing their long-time monopoly of power. They were joined by Täfäri, who had lost the chance of succeeding his father *Ras* Mäkonän, the son of Menelik's paternal aunt, Tānangnäwork Sahlä Selassie, the likely successor of emperor Menilik, now stripped of his governorship of Harar, on one side, and the highly influential Mikael, and his son Iyassu on the other (Del Boca, 2012:59, 61).

History has not satisfactorily and conclusively shown how much fact or fiction lies behind the allegations against Iyassu. What would have happened had Iyassu survived the coup and remained in power? What would Iyassu's course of action have been in the succeeding decades? Such questions should be squarely dealt with by critically examining the grand projects Iyassu envisaged on nation-building and national integration. For example his efforts in addressing religious inequity, social and economic injustices, recognizing and empowering the autonomy of Muslim communities (Merara, 2003:69; Del Boca, 2012:61-62; Ahmed, 2014:88), as well as a range of other exemplary and visionary initiatives he had endeavoured to put in place during his short-lived reign (Gobeze, 1996:67-75; Atnaf Seged, 2006 EC:102-128). Concerning his Muslim subjects Iyassu proclaimed: 'Though we differ in religion and tribe, I would wish all of us to be united through a nationalist sentiment [...] cooperation with the rest of your Ethiopian brothers will keep your country united and her frontiers secure.' (Gäbrä-Igziabiher Elyas, Quoted in Marcus: 15). Besides his benign intentions, "Ethnic affiliation and religion made no difference in his policy though he lacked clear comprehension of the political realities of the nation and that of himself as a ruler", noted Ahmed

Hassen Omer (Ahmed, 2013: 109). His effort to enable the different ethno-religious groups on equal footing was a radical departure that made Iyassu an obvious target for criticism and denunciation. The merits or demerits of the abolition of the age-old systems of the *Quragnna* (chaining the wronged and the wrongdoer together until justice was served) and *Léba Śay* (detection of criminals in a traditional way), the restructure of tithe payment and the institution of the city guards plus the ban on confiscation of property for embezzling public funds and the introduction of a system of auditing government money should also be properly examined. Some of the issues Iyassu embraced were unheard of, or "were not dreamt neither by his predecessor and nor by his successor as well" (Ahmed, 2014: 82). Likewise, where would we put Iyassu's anti-colonial stance in Ethiopian history? Is it fair to compare Iyassu with Täfäri who opted to collude with the European legations to misinform the public and to obtain weaponries and other assistances in his effort to unseat the incumbent ruler of his own country? To what degree the internal divisions that came after the unlawful removal of Iyassu affect Ethiopia's capability to effectively resist the Italian invasion?

The next line of inquiry may be directed towards investigating in good faith, whether Iyassu would have implemented a new set of policies quite different from what his successor had introduced later. And to what degree Iyassu had purposely committed some acts of folly (such as concealing the death of Menelik II, which was officially announced after Sägällé; crowning his father without himself being crowned and, most of all, using the crown of Menelik, who was 'king of kings', for crowning his father as 'king' of the north) (Smidt, 2001: 366-367), and whether these acts had actually imperiled his own sovereignty in a system of administration that produced and sustained countless numbers of Ethiopian rulers before him. Did he purposely avoid coronation in order to obtain a certain degree of freedom to introduce some practical changes to the system? In other words, the vows he would be taking as a Christian emperor could possibly deprive him of the legitimacy of protecting his Muslim subjects and indigenous believers. Thus, the preference for not being crowned appears to be a sensible move for Iyassu, to avoid, if not to wholly exclude the abiding oath-taking coronation ceremony indefinitely. What would have happened if Iyassu had been hurriedly anointed as king of kings of Ethiopia? Would this course of action restrain and/or reverse the conspiracy that led to his downfall? No one can tell! Some writers actually indicated that in addition to the demotion of Häbtä Giyorgis from his position of leadership in the cabinet (Fisseha Yaze, 2004 EC:13), Täfäri's

removal from the governorship of Harar on 13 August 1916 was 'the last straw' (Henze, 2000:194) leading to the formation of the anti-Iyassu coalition of "disgruntled persons who were ready to come together to overthrow him" (Bahru, 1991:125); and these measures might have been the greatest, if not the "maddest of follies" committed by Iyassu. These measures by Iyassu must have enormously assisted Tāfāri in setting the stage to attain the power he desired. So far no one can be certain, but these are the kinds of questions that need to be tackled with hindsight. This will be similar to what many historians have done so far on Ethiopia's previous rulers, such as Tewodros II and his successors. It is a pity, due mainly to the lack of a definitive and fairly balanced historical account, that we have practically nothing at our disposal to remember Iyassu's visions and accomplishments; and this limitation has also prevented successive generations of Ethiopians from valuing and immortalizing him.

The predictable consequence of Iyassu's deposition from power in September 1916 in an orchestrated palace plot, and *in a flagrant violation of Menilik's will* inevitably sparked armed confrontation between the Šāwan and Wällo forces. One of the most farcical of the plotters arguments on why Mikael marched against Šāwa was because he strenuously opposed Iyassu's removal from power despite the fact that Mikael disliked his son's conversion to Islam. Notwithstanding such an unbelievable claim, the two forces met at Tora Mäsk first and ultimately at Sägällé. Regardless of his legion and outstanding courage, *Negus* Mikael's defeat at Sägällé, attributed partly to his bravado and impulsiveness, was a reversal of his astounding victory at Tora Mäsk (near Ankober) on 17 October 1916, a little more than a week before. Sadly, Mikael was beaten decisively and captured together with *Ras* Yazew Merid Geto, one of his commanding officers. If Mikael had waited a little longer, that is, until the forces of *Ras* Gäbrä Hiywot and *Lej* Iyassu joined him, he would undoubtedly have raised a formidable army, which could quite possibly have changed the result of the war and the course of the country's history. The arrival of Iyassu at Ankober on "the very morning of the Battle of Sagale" (Henze, 2000:196) did nothing to avert the misfortune that befell his father. Despite the superiority in numbers and armaments plus the timely acquisition of machine guns from France, the deployment of the "Tripolic veterans, those Ethiopian soldiers who had served Italy in its Libyan campaigns," was believed to be a major factor that tipped the balance towards the Šāwan forces (Del Boca, 2012:67). Iyassu was the one who had transformed these Tripolic

veterans (Amharic: *Terenbulle*) into a municipal police force (Bahru, 1991:122).

The Sägällé battle of 27 October 1916, the bloodiest internal war since Adwa, had successfully thwarted the growing power of Wällo and *Negus* Mikael (*Ibid*: 125). Though this Šäwan military victory decisively quashed the determined resistance of *Negus* Mikael, it also had tremendous negative consequences for Wällo. For the victors, achieving success was obviously the most desired, if not the easiest, solution; while for the vanquished it immediately unlocked a floodgate of serious trouble and unanticipated long-term problems in the decade that followed. The trouble for the defeated Wällo army began as it started retreating in disarray from the battlefield. Only those who pledged loyalty to the new government "were permitted to return home unharmed" (Henze, 2000:196). When the victorious Šäwan forces entered Wällo, Mikael's political center, a bloody civil war ensued that continued for about ten months or until August 1917.

Accounts tell of the notoriety of the army contingents of *Cheliya* and *Harar* (locally called *Chebo*). These had been stationed in Dässie and deployed to pacify the region in what appeared to be 'a scorched-earth' policy. These army contingents did not hesitate to requisition, ransack, imprison and kill those who opposed them, and even those who offered no opposition. During this time of mayhem and emergency military-style administration, not only *Negus* Mikael's court, but also several households in Dässie were wildly pillaged, and many of the town's women sexually assaulted or raped (Oral Informants: no. 3;4;6). Until the new government put the region under its control, it unleashed its attack on many individuals who were labeled as enemies of the state. Those who campaigned or were suspected of campaigning with *Negus* Mikael at Sägällé were particularly targeted and were constantly harassed, disarmed, imprisoned, and tortured. As a result, several individuals in Dässie were compelled to conceal their identities or leave the town for other relatively safer places. This vengeful, indiscriminate assault made many families vulnerable to severe security and economic problems. The problems that plagued Wällo did not subside until *Ras* Imru had been appointed to govern the province in 1930. Regardless of his astounding personal efforts, however, Imru's brief governorship (1930-1932) did not provide him with enough time to redress all the existing public grievances and heal the festering wounds of the province. Though very late, he certainly provided some solace and mental peace to the many wronged individuals and families (Oral Informants: no. 4; 6; 7).

On the winners' lust for revenge and their need for 'cheerful submission' and on the indescribable tragedy the Wällo people had to endure, the following excerpt speaks for itself:

"When Wällo [after Sägällé] was freely given to Ras Täfäri's trustees as war booty, the vanquished people of Wällo were exposed to untold misery; thus, the spirit of bitterness that prevailed in the entire region cannot be shunned" (Gobezé, 1996:1).

For some time *Lej* Iyassu and his supporters, including *Negus* Mikael's top military commanders who survived the Sägällé debacle, such as *Ras* Yimer and *Fitawrari* Serah Bezu offered powerful resistance against the central government. Despite the deliberate distortions, fabrications, and accusations made against *Lej* Iyassu, many people in Wällo stood with him to fight against the Šäwan forces. The majority of people in Wällo took the allegation of Iyassu's conversion to Islam as baseless, and a trumped-up story. Though he did not clearly articulate Iyassu's conversion to Islam, Haile Selassie in his autobiography talked about Iyassu's official claim of his genealogical roots (stemming naturally from his Muslim Wällo descent) that linked him to the Prophet Mohammed, a belief wholeheartedly embraced by Iyassu against the advice of some concerned individuals, he argued (Haile Selassie I, 1965 EC: 26-27). But closer examination of the same text gives us a different perception. For instance, after initially mentioning Iyassu's claim to Moslem descent, of which he was proud, Täfäri as a neutral person wrote as if he were later informed about Iyassu's conversion, an idea he accepted in order to legitimize joining the conspirators against Iyassu (*Ibid*: 29) is hard to believe. The use of photo montages depicting Iyassu dressed in Muslim outfits (Berhanu, 2005 EC: 26) was because Great Britain, France and Italy discerned that Iyassu's intentions to reclaiming Ethiopia's sovereignty and territorial integrity using a neutral and 'non-committal foreign policy' in the fight between the Allies and the Central powers during WWI (Ydlibi, 2006: 245) was taken as a serious impediment to their colonial enterprise in the region. Iyassu supported the politics of Germany and Turkey and his officials had closer relationships with the German consulate (Merse Hazen, 2004: 156-157). This action "crystallized a solid external opposition against him by Britain, France and Italy" and they indirectly worked with the "Šäwan nobility and the *Itchägé* to depose Iyassu (Ahmed, 2013:108). It was "with the instigation of the British government" that the famous Colonel T.E Lawrence "was involved in the production of propaganda against Iyasu" (Greenfield, 1965:106).

Iyassu's move to forge regional alliance with the Somalia anti-British and anti-Italian nationalist resistance leader Mohammad Abdella Hassen (alias the Mad Mullah) and his fondness to the Central powers during WWI antagonized him with Britain, France and Italy (Ahmed, 2013: 108). The technologically assisted Europeans' intrigue, as well as their encouragement of the 'Šäwan leaders to act to forestall' (Henze, 2000:194) Iyassu was nothing but a typical case of partisanship and foreign power interference in the domestic affairs of the country (Pankhurst, 2014:97-98).

Contrary to what has been alleged, Hasib Ydlibi, an entrepreneur of Syrian descent and a close associate and official of Iyassu, wrote in his biography that Iyassu told him that he did not change and had never thought of changing his faith (Ydlibi, 2006: xiv). Iyassu also repeatedly and even under oath denied his conversion to Islam, a truthful claim fully upheld by his Muslim hosts after closely observing his religious beliefs and practices during his stay in the Afar desert as a fugitive (Atnaf Seged, 2006 EC: 332), and by his behaviour towards all the Muslim women whom he married after first converting them to Christianity. Had the claim of the Šäwan elites been honest, *Abunä* Petros (the then bishop of the north, not the Ethiopian bishop Fascist Italy executed in 1936) would not have accompanied *Negus* Mikael to Sägällé carrying the Ark of St. Mary with him. If he were not genuinely convinced, the *Abunä*, as a church leader, would never have induced the Wällo people to prove their allegiance and to fight on the side of *Negus* Mikael; or he would not be interested in reinstating the 'converted' *Lej* Iyassu on the Imperial throne. But the *Abunä*, who steadfastly supported the cause of Mikael and Iyassu to the last, was captured at the battlefield, taken to Addis and put under house arrest (Atnaf Seged, 2006 EC:63); and by so doing, he testified the unwavering devotion of Mikael and Iyassu to the Orthodox faith. Focused on what they were doing, the major plotters certainly knew that by repeated usage of the fabricated allegation of Iyassu's conversion, those who accepted their position would provide them the much needed support. They also seemed to have believed that this ingenious scheme would create internal division among the Wällo public, a method some people in Dässie would prefer to call: "a mixed bag of typical Šäwan shrewdness and idiosyncrasy", not to mention the most popular adage: "Šäwan s and termites rove beneath the ground" (Oral Informants: no. 3;6;8).

Likewise, the Wällo Muslims, who made up a substantial segment of Mikael's fighting force, were known to have fought as gallantly on the side of their

leader Mikael, as they had done in Mätamma or Adwa previously. It is therefore inaccurate to reduce this regional power struggle that transcended religious boundaries as a mere Muslim-Christian conflict (Oral Informants: no. 2; 5; 6; 7). It should also be remembered that until *Negus* Mikael began his preparations for the final showdown, the newly assumed Šäwan ruling circle did not even attempt to approach him on the subject of his son's conversion. Several people in Wällo still believe that if Iyassu had really been converted to Islam, Mikael would have been the first person to stand up against his son, and he would also have begun to work towards some sort of negotiation with those who claimed to have discovered Iyassu's conversion. Strangely, while the Egyptian Archbishop and the *Itchägé* succumbed to the secret scheme of the putsch makers, it is not clear why Iyassu's father confessor, *Abba* Wolde Giyorgis of Dima (Atnaf Seged, 2006 EC: 55), was not invited to participate in and endorse the plotters' accusation against his God's son Kifle Yaqob, Iyassu's baptismal name. It has been a long-held tradition of the Church that whenever believers breached, or were suspected of breaching, according to the Orthodox faith, the father confessors were the ones who would take the prime responsibility of advising, correcting or excommunicating their God's children (Oral Informants: no. 3;6).

Other than making a telephone call, as was done to other regional lords, to inform Mikael on the final decision of the ad hoc council that deposed Iyassu from power, there was no prior engagement or discussion between the two contending political groups. It was in a last minute letter he wrote to *Negus* Mikael that *Fitawrari* Häbtä Giyorgis talked about the need for unwavering commitment to preserving the integrity of one's religion, which, in his own terms, "is more important than one's child or crony" (Mesganaw. 2008 EC: 87) gives us good insight into Mikael's stance on this issue and the plotters' unsuccessful attempts at playing off the father against his own son. It had no effect whatsoever on Mikael's will to fight the powerful anti-Iyassu alliance. This proved that the religious conversion of *Lej* Iyassu was just a charade and a fabricated rallying cry which led to a bloody showdown between the two contending Orthodox Christian regional power bases. In other words, Mikael and Iyassu, who were initially perceived as Orthodox Christians and assumed prominence with the help of the Orthodox Church, lost their political power with the conspiracy of the same church that changed its previous position in favour of the Šäwan ruling elite. The leaders of the council and cohorts who vowed to depose Iyassu took an oath in the presence of the *Itchägé* Wolde Giyorgis (Merse Hazen, 2004: 173). Most importantly, the shift in alliance of

the religious leadership at the highest level unmasked a very dangerous act of betrayal that pushed the country and its people to descend into strife and bloodshed (Oral Informants: 3; 4; 7; 8). Witness the following verse coined in Wällo to express the hypocrisy of the elite core of the intriguers who had mischievously and unashamedly succeeded in breaking Menilik's will, for arrogating Iyassu's legitimate throne in the name of saving the endangered Orthodox Christian faith:

Why do you appeal where there is no king?
 Why do you get blessed where there is no bishop?
 Why do worship where there is no 'Sacred Chest'?
 When the devil is flying high riding a mule! (Gobezé, 1996:142)

In spite of the Šäwan military victory at Sägällé, Iyassu's arrival in Dässie and his subsequent entrenchment at Mäqdäla for eight months (Asnake, 1983, 82ff) similar to Tewodros II when he tried to withstand the siege and bombardment of the fortress by the British expeditionary force in 1868 (Mamo, 2000EC:526), enabled *Lej* Iyassu to slip 'back and forth through the siege lines ..., won a few victories, and stirred up trouble' (Marcus, 1998:28) against the Šäwan forces whom the local population viewed as occupiers. Though unsuccessful, Iyassu seemed to have been inspired by the reform agendas and nationalist fervor of emperor Tewodros. Even after escaping from Mäqdäla, Iyassu, serving as a focal point of resistance and enjoying the loyalty of the Wällo peasantry (*Ibid*:29), put up additional resistance to the ferocious, marauding Šäwan forces in Ambassel, Delanta, and the Dässie Zuria areas. Most of all, the ultimately unsuccessful siege of Dässie, the then headquarters of Häbtä Giyorgis, the War Minister, on 5 August 1917 by the Wällo forces under the command of Iyassu compelled the Šäwan army to retreat. However, after taking some respite Häbtä Giyorgis launched a coordinated counter-attack and scored a decisive victory over his adversaries. The capture of *Ras* Yimer (who later died while in custody), and the death of 'many high-ranking officials' (*Ibid*: 30) including *Fitawrari* Serah Bizu Gäbrä, *Negus* Mikael's military commander of Šäwan origin, ended Iyassu's dream of reinstatement (Mahteme Selassie, 1961 EC:29). The release of *Ras* Abate Buayalew, a prisoner at Mäqdäla on the promise of siding with *Lej* Iyassu, was a fatal mistake. Upon his release *Ras* Abate joined the Šäwan forces to fight against Iyassu (Tekle Eyesus, 2002:272). *Ras* Abate, whose incarceration was due to his unbridled ambition to become regent of *Lej* Iyassu after the death of *Ras Bitwadam* Tessema, was made the first Šäwan governor of Wällo after Sägällé.

Unfortunately, he died suddenly in October 1917, just a few days after his appointment.

Following *Ras Abate*, *Ras Kassa Hailu* was appointed over Wällo and he too was transferred to Selale after governing for some eight months (Gashaw, 2003:9; Oral Informants). It was during *Ras Kābādā Mengesha's* time, (appointed in 1918), that the entire Wällo nobility were sacked from their governorship positions; and their landholdings together with the tenants working on them became "retainers and soldiers from Shawa, Harar, and southern and south-western provinces of the country" (*Ibid*, 2003:9). New taxes were imposed on the Wällo peasantry, and the administration of *Ras Kābādā* was characterized by extreme repression and rapacious exploitation, an eccentric system of governance that infringed what Mahteme Selassie has dubbed 'intrinsic Ethiopian virtues' such as fear of God, civility, generosity, hospitality, honesty, and faithfulness (Mahteme Selassie, 1961 EC:9-12). The unbearable injustice and the administrative problems that plagued the region demonstrated the dearth of moral decency and generosity of spirit on the victors' side. The disruptive and harsh conditions obviously caused tremendous suffering on the entire population, and owing to these problems many Wällo peasants were even forced to migrate to neighboring provinces (Oral Informants: 2;3). The following verse clearly demonstrates *Ras Kābādā's* notoriously repressive administration of Wällo:

A dog that slumbers during the day
barks all through the night,
Kābādā Mengesha makes the whole of Wällo scream!

This abnormally troublesome period left a lot to be desired. Perhaps, writing the history of the Šāwan administration of Wällo in the period between 1916 and 1930 along the lines of contemporaneous administrations in the south and south-western parts of the country may well be a distinctively useful area of comparative research.

That being said, the military victory of Häbtä Giyorgis gave the Šāwan army a good excuse to commit unprecedented atrocities on the pretext of punishing *Lej Iyassu's* supporters, including the execution of captives (Gobezé, 1996:110, 113-116; Atnaf Seged, 2006 EC: 180-188). Many informants in Dässie were brought up hearing their families bitterly talking about the Šāwan atrocity which they labeled 'a brazen and deliberate criminal act'. On the other hand, this same tragic event has been depicted as unintentional or as a

collateral damage caused by an accidental miscommunication between the central command and the rank and file of Häbtä Giyorgis's army (Merse Hazen, 1999 EC: 203; Bahru, 2008 EC: 93-97). Whenever an army contingent operated amidst a non-sympathetic and/or hostile population, the occurrence of such atrocities would not be surprising. Soon after bringing Dässie under his total control, Häbtä Giyorgis, while staying in Wällo for about 2 months, went to Mäqdäla and damaged the historic fortress, symbol of Ethiopia's highly-valued independence and national pride, beyond repair (Atnaf Seged, 2006 EC:187-88). The following moving verse, composed in commemoration of *Negus* Mikael during his reburial, about 18 years after Sägällé, tells us much about the existing public frustration as regards the widespread havoc and maladministration that plagued Wällo after his demise.

Abba Shanqo Mame [Mikael] please wake up once
And die ten times later,
Just to see what they [the Šäwan s] have done to your country [Wällo]
(Gobezé, 1996:142-143)

Such remorseful expressions of grief were the direct result of the capture and hand over of *Lej* Iyassu by *Ras* Gugsä Araya of Tigray to *Ras* Täfäri in January 1921, and his near 15 years' confinement at Koremash (Bulga), Fiche and Grawa (Gara Muleta) which culminated in his mysterious death at the start of the Italian invasion in November 1935 (b.1897 and d. aged c.38). This situation undoubtedly exacerbated the bitterness and resentment of the Wällo public towards Haile Selassie, who snatched political power in what may be taken as the first putsch or insurrection, as Shiferaw argued, in modern African history (Shiferaw, 2014:162).

It is therefore legitimate to deconstruct and re-examine existing narratives on why the masterminds of this atrocious act preferred to hide the circumstances surrounding Iyassu's death and his place of interment. For how long should this secret feat remain hidden? Historians must work hard to come to grips with this unsolved and seemingly irretrievable historical blunder. Estelle Sohier tried to compare or to "draw a parallel between Iyassu's tragic end and the destiny of his successor and enemy, Hayle Sillasé", by saying that 'he [Hayle Sillasé] himself having been assassinated and buried in secret in an unlikely location at the heart of Minilik II's palace' (Sohier, 2014:64). However, for those who would like to know the truth about Iyassu, the availability of comparable historical anecdotes is far from satisfactory. In the Imperial edict he issued to designate *Lej* Iyassu as his successor, Menilik is

said to have portended that anyone who had the audacity to defy Iyassu's authority "would die a miserable death and nobody would know his grave" (Bowers, 2016:238). Local oral informants seemed to have associated the tragic end of Haile Selassie with the alleged curse of Menilik. Ironically, however, soon after the overthrow of the *Darg* in May 1991 the 'decapitated' body of Haile Selassie was recovered and reburied while the location of Iyassu's burial ground still remains a mystery. It is unbelievable that we are still unable to find out the truth about the location of Iyassu's tomb, better to call it the missing sovereign's tomb, in a country with millennia of orderly imperial succession!! In fact, we are still grappling with the unresolved issue of knowing the real causes of Empress Zäwditu's, Emperor Haile Selassie's and even Emperor Menilik's death. Yet, no one could cast a ray of light on Iyassu's cause of death nor his place of entombment, which is by far the most tragic and unprecedented affair.

Almost all the available sources agree on the time of Iyassu's death. However, for most people in Wällo the start of the Italian invasion and Iyassu's untimely death were not accidental coincidences. They believed that Iyassu was the only Ethiopian monarch whose death or the circumstances leading to his death were deliberately warped and concealed. Many elderly informants in Dässie solemnly believed that Iyassu was assassinated by the order of Haile Selassie while he was about to move to Dässie to coordinate the Ethiopian army which was being deployed against the Italians. After mentioning Iyassu's transfer from Gara Muleta to Addis in autumn 1935, wrote Asfa-Wossän Asserate, "Nothing more is known about what became of him hereafter. There has been much speculation about the precise fate that befell the former emperor. But a few days later, just before Haile Selassie left for the front, the empress was officially notified of the death of *Lej* Iyasu, and a session of lamentation was held in the royal palace" (Asfa-Wossän, 2015: 51). Basing himself on dubious oral account, Täfäri Berhanu, the personal lawyer of Crown Prince Asfa Wossän, in his recently published book contrary argued that Iyassu's murder had been carried out on 6 May 1936, that is, after the fateful return of Haile Selassie following the defeat of the Ethiopian army at Maychäw and a few days before he left his country for exile in England. In other words, Iyassu, whose death was officially declared seven months before, had been alive until May 6, 1936. Despite the provision of pieces of hair-raising stories on the meeting of Haile Selassie and Iyassu at Dire Dawa on 3 May 1936 for about 10 minutes and the Emperor's instruction to his trusted men to move Iyassu to Gore, which was tantamount to a death sentence and his eventual

disappearance, is hard to accept (Täfäri, 2019: 106-117). How could the Emperor be confident enough to return to his capital unharmed, if not captured or killed at the battle field? How could he trust the two 'trusted' men to eliminate Iyassu in his absence? Given the uncertainties of the final results of the war and the difficulties he faced while returning to Addis, Haile Selassie did not seem to take such a huge risk.

Again the argument/s put forth about Iyassu's deteriorating health around the time of his final disappearance cannot be taken as an alternative explanation for what was done to his body. Being locked up and languishing in prison for about a decade and half, no one would be surprised about the ill health of Iyassu. But in the absence of medical records based on the diagnosis and the kind of treatment/s administered to him, it is impossible to confirm Iyassu's alleged failing health. Unlike the local treatments he received from an indigenous healer for his rheumatic pain, the biomedical practitioner, who is said to have visited Iyassu, should have at least told us the diagnosis of his patient's illness (Fentahun, 1997 EC: 93). The attempt to prove someone's illness without a doctor's testimony is disingenuous. The lack of such confirmation implies that he was not allowed to obtain the necessary medical assistance, and if so, why? The question is thus how the 'frail' Iyassu finally passed away. How on earth could an incumbent ruler be unable or unwilling to offer convincing evidence for the death of an ailing ex-sovereign who was under his custody for so long? The obscurity of Iyassu's cause of death propelled the spread of disbelief among the Wällo public and the denunciation of the Haile Selassie regime.

Many individuals in Dässie claimed to have heard that Iyassu was beheaded and his mutilated body was buried somewhere around the *Genete Leul* palace (Sidist Kilo). Could it be in the precincts of St. Markos church, which is adjacent to the palace compound, as indicated in Wikipedia? Confirming the credibility of the above story, an oral informant also mentioned the names of two prominent individuals who were present at the time when this macabre incident took place (Oral Informant: no. 1). This informant, who is still alive, claims to have talked to the very person who recounted to him openly and graphically where, when and how he carried out this repulsive deed under the watchful eyes of Haile Selassie. After stating the perpetrator's place of origin, the informant did not talk about how and why this person from Merto was chosen to carry out this horrifying deed and why he would want to share this highly guarded palace secret with him (Oral Informant: no. 1). It appears that

the executor, who might have been suffering from an unspecified mental disturbance and seeking an indigenous therapy to ease his unrelenting self-inflicted pain, must have been prompted to consult the informant's father, a reputable local spiritual healer like himself. This meant the said informant had an exclusive opportunity to take part and recount the gruesome story of the final moments of Iyassu. This piece of testimonial from 'the horse's mouth' may trigger additional questions. It is therefore legitimate to ponder and get answers on some critically and directly related issues: had Iyassu not been decapitated, his body should have been shown to his relatives and this would have led to his entombment in the necropolis of one of the several churches in Addis Ababa. At least, Iyassu deserved a burial place in Kechenie Mädhäné Aläm Church, the construction of which he had begun in Addis Ababa a few years before he mounted the throne (as he later built another Mädhäné Aläm Church in Harar), a project Empress Zäwditu brought to fruition after his deposition in 1916 (Oral Informants: no. 2;3;6;8).

So, why would Haile Selassie's government allow the prisoner *Negus* Mikael to be ceremonially buried while it denied similar provision to *Lej* Iyassu? Was it to officially declare Iyassu's death and to express the nation's official mourning that the emperor ordered the seven time gun salute? (Atnaf Seged, 2006 EC: 277). Was this a protocol of comfort for his bereaved family members, friends and supporters who needed to pay their respects to the ex-sovereign and who would also have wanted to witness his proper burial in a marked grave? Is it enough to convince the public by saying that the emperor himself heard the death of Iyassu a few days before he was about to move to Dässie? Would it not be naive to think, given the emperor's attitude towards Iyassu, that whatever happened to his high-profile detainee was beyond his knowledge? Would there be any other mysterious reason behind why Iyassu was thrown into unmarked grave and why the emperor refused to locate it? Was it to deny the anti-Haile Selassie spirit among the supporters of Iyassu, who might have used the grave as a symbol of reverence, so as to break their emotional attachment with him? If that is the case, Haile Selassie had indeed succeeded in depriving Iyassu's supporters of having any remains with which to identify or venerate him. By contrast and as hinted above, Haile Selassie conceded to the exhumation of the mortal remains of *Negus* Mikael from Wajit Mädhäné Aläm Church in Holeta for a reburial in *Wärrä Himäno* (his birthplace and initial power base). The reburial was solemnly accomplished in February 1929 in the Church of Tanta Mikael, a church of his own making (Misganaw, 2008EC: Gobeze, 1996:142-143). By contrast and on the

perplexing issue of the whereabouts of Iyassu's place of interment, the people of Wällo had this to say:

Abba Shanqo Mame [Mikael] your deeds have proven right
 When your remains are buried in your own church;
 While the unfortunate one [Iyassu] had gone away not to come back
 again! (Gobezé, 1996:143)

For Iyassu's adversaries perhaps depriving him an ordinary pauper's burial, if not a state funeral, in a period of alarming insecurity posed by the Italians, may have been considered a rightful decision for a person accused of apostasy. For his opponents, Iyassu's frequent visits to Muslim areas and his marriage relations with Muslim families were considered good evidence of this conversion. Also his unmolded behaviour, neglect of his duties and living a life of riotous pleasure as well as his disrespect to other notables made him incongruous for the leadership position he had assumed (Asnake, 1983:54). Again, this argument is not acceptable by any stretch of the imagination, as Iyassu had very little chance of changing his faith without the consent of his ardent Orthodox Christian father, who was also a counsellor and confidante or as Smidt would like to call him 'a virtual co-regent' of the young emperor (Smidt, 2014:109-111; Oral Informants; no. 5;7). This being so, some writers in fact argued that if Iyassu had died a natural death, his corpse would have been given to his relatives for a decent burial (Zewde, 2005 EC: 220-226; Atnaf Seged, 2006 EC: 271-281; Gobeze, 1996: 145-152). An exception to this near consensual assertion is what Engeda wrote about the secrecy surrounding Iyassu's death. A couple of individuals he pinpointed here and there in relation to Iyassu have concurred with (Fentahun, 1997 EC:93ff) the claim of the above mentioned who talked about the presence of two notable individuals during the dreadful moment of Iyassu's execution (Oral Informant: no. 1). These individuals were later executed on two separate occasions; the one in December 1960 by General Mengistu Neway, and the other in November 1974 by the military government or the Darg. Based on the account of one of Iyassu's daughters, these two individuals along with a well-known patriot have been mentioned by Yilma as the only people who knew Iyassu's exact burial place (Atnaf Seged, 2006 EC: 266).

Aside from the implications of these appalling and incredible stories, all *Negus* Mikael's relatives and protégées, even after a lapse of so many years were not able to win the trust of the Emperor and join the Imperial forces in the fight against the Italian invaders. Besides the mysterious death of Däjjazmač Gugsä

Aliyu (*Abba German*), a staunch supporter of Iyassu, in Dässie, the exclusion of Däjjazmač Belay Ali, the grand-son of *Negus* Mikael, from marching against the Fascist aggression is a classic example (Tedla, 2004 EC:33, 246). This exclusionary measure has been expressed in the following manner:

Do all bad things have been calmed down?
Is the country really peaceful?
So why do they go alone, leaving our men behind? (Oral Informants:
no. 4 ; 7)

Haile Selassie's rapid move to Dässie after physically removing Iyassu, whom he thought Fascist Italy may have used as a puppet emperor, and his sojourn there for more than three months while the Italians were marching towards Maychäw, seems to have been due partly to the emperor's deep mistrust of the Wällo lords who were suspected of instigating a rebellion against his government. On top of the exclusion of the Wällo lords, the deep-rooted animosity of the public towards the central government, a negative attitude further aggravated by the unjustified death of Iyassu, seemed to have assisted the Italians in capturing the strategic town of Dässie without any resistance (*Ibid*: 68; Oral Informants: no. 3;4;5). Using the modern clinic which they opened in 1907 inside their diplomatic compound, the Italians made every effort to gather sensitive intelligence information on Haile Selassie's government. In particular they targeted noted individuals who came to the clinic seeking medical assistance. The Italians knew that many people in Wällo were disgruntled by Emperor Haile Selassie for deposing *Lej* Iyassu from power and the myriad problems that this created. The mind-set of mistrust towards the central government, a widespread sentiment that bedevilled the Wälloyes and the supporters of Iyassu in various places, harmed the unity of the country in a significant way (Oral Informants: no. 2;5;7). The Italians seem to have exploited this situation to the full. On 20 April 1936, seated on a white horse, Marshall Badoglio on his way to the capital Addis Ababa entered the Italian consulate and declared the peaceful capitulation of Dässie. On the eve of the Italo-Ethiopian war, Asfa Wossän had shifted his residence from the palace of *Negus* Mikael at *Aytäyäf*, his initial living quarters, to the vacant Italian Consulate compound (later renamed *Meriho Ghibi*). After a short time, the Crown Prince hurriedly left Dässie without making any effort to defend the town from the incoming Italians while the *Endärasé* and deputy *Endärasé* had gone to Maychäw to join the Ethiopian army (Oral Informants: no. 3;6).

It is also worth noting that Haile Selassie while on his way to Addis Ababa, retreating from the battle front met an ambush from the Wälloyes who were bent on avenging the humiliation they endured at Sägällé and thereafter. Though the Emperor triumphed over the Wällo forces and managed to leave the country, this incident has often been cited as an additional reason for his disenchantment and lack of sympathy towards Wällo. During the occupation however, a number of local freedom fighters emerged in different parts of Wällo and they offered strong resistance against the invaders. Däjjazmač Mengesha Abuye, *Fitawrari* Legesse Asane, *Fitawrari* Zeleke Maru, *Fitawrari* Tessema Wolde Giyorgis, Däjjazmač Hailu Kābādā (posthumously Lieutenant General), and *Wagšum* Admasu Wossän were among these renowned patriots (Gashaw, 2003:21; Oral Informants: no. 3;4;7). Even for those individuals who were at loggerheads with the exiled Emperor, regaining the country's independence was a major priority. For them defeat would mean the loss of their dignity and identity as well as their way of life, local values and institutions (Tedla, 2004 EC: 248-253). Even to the grieved sons and daughters of Iyassu, accepting or assisting the Fascist rule as retaliation for what Haile Selassie had done to them was an unthinkable and treasonous idea.

On the whole, to the disgruntled Wälloyes, glorifying the past and perceiving the future as a threat may not be surprising as can be seen by the 'mythical' labeling of the short-lived Iyassu's reign as bountiful and the post-Iyassu rule of Zäwditu and Täfäri as a time of starvation and abject poverty. Here it is aptly expressed:

During Iyassu's time bread is just a pillow
 During Zäwditu's rule [pull the corpses] the plate is turned down
 During Täfäri's [Haile Selassie's] time even a scrape is lost!
 Where have you gone Iyassu Abba Tena?
 Please hurriedly come back we are starving to death! (Oral Informants:
 no. 4; 8; Gobeze, 1996:1; Fisseha Yaze, 2004 EC: 31)

Endorsing the prevalence of intense public anguish in Wällo after Sägällé, *Ras* Imru, who served as governor-general or *Endārasé* of the province in the early 1930s, wrote that Haile Selassie had started providing some assistance to the Wällo people especially to those who had been ruthlessly maltreated, maimed, looted, and impoverished by the victorious Šāwan forces (Imru, 2001 EC:123).

WÄLLO's socio-political landscape after *NEGUS MIKAEL*

Following Mikael's demise and after bringing the whole of Wällo under his control, Haile Selassie introduced a policy of designating “natives of Šäwa ” to the post of *Endärasé* (lit: 'on my behalf'), a policy he steadfastly upheld and maintained throughout his long reign; and as Markakis (1974) noted, 'departures from this policy were rare' (Markakis, 1974:293). In a supposedly benevolent gesture, *Ras Gäbrä Hiywot Mikael*, Iyassu's eldest brother and the former prisoner of Täfäri, was installed as *Endärasé* of Wällo for some 7 years in the post-liberation period. *Ras Gäbrä Hiywot* did not participate in the Sägällé battle but he singlehandedly fought against the Šäwan s at Wore Ilu, and he was defeated and jailed at Dandi till Haile Selassie pardoned him when he designated Asfa Wossän Chief-Governor-General of Wällo in 1932 (Mahteme Selassie, 1961 EC:85). The appointments of his own family and members of the Šäwan aristocracy to govern over Wällo, clearly indicated Haile Selassie's determination not to reinstate a native governor for Wällo the birthplace of Empress Mänän, the mother of his many sons and daughters (Imru, 2001 EC:123). Haile Selassie had consistently pursued a stratagem for depriving the Wällo lords from taking provincial administrative positions, a hitherto unfamiliar policy he steadfastly applied until the end of his reign and the so-called Solomonic Dynasty in 1974.

Crown prince Asfa Wossän also pursued a similar policy after he became Chief-Governor-General of the province with the assistance of an *Endärasé* and adviser Däjjazmač Wodaje Wube, a Šäwan aristocrat who was known to have captured *Negus Mikael* at Sägällé, together with Däjjazmač Fikre Mariam Yinadu (*Abba Techan*), later became a renowned anti-Fascist patriotic resistance fighter, as deputy *Endärasé* (Mahteme Selassie, 1961 EC: 73, 93). Though it was later proved otherwise, some believed at the time that it was out of genuine conviction and respect to the Wällo people that in December 1932 Haile Selassie designated his eldest son, *Meridazmach* Asfa Wossän, the great grandson of Mikael, Chief-Governor-General of the province. Others believed that Asfa Wossän's choice was part of a calculated strategy to mend and nurture the loyalty of the disgruntled Wällo lords as a whole, and in particular to create a lasting relationship with the Werra Himano (*Mamadoch*) and Ambassel (*Jantrar*) ruling families, with whom Asfa Wossän himself had blood relations through his mother Mänän, the daughter of *Jantrar* Asfaw of Ambassel and the granddaughter of Mikael of Werra Himano. It appears that the main objective of Asfa Wossän's appointment was to water down and stave

off the long-standing tension that beleaguered the relationship between the people of Wällo and the Haile Selassie regime (Oral Informants : no. 4 ;7 ;8).

A crucial point worth remembering is that the seven successive *Endärasé* who had been appointed to govern Wällo in the post-Sägällé period up until the Italian invasion: *Ras* Abate Buayalew (1917); *Ras* Kassa Hailu (1918); *Ras* Kābādā Mengesha (1918-1925); *Fitawrari* Aregay Becherie (1925-1927); *Däjjazmač* Seyum Desta (1927-1930); *Däjjazmač* Imru Haile Selassie (1930-1932) and *Däjjazmač* Wodaje Wube (1932-1936) were all from Šāwa . With the exception of *Ras* Gäbrā Hiywot Mikael (1943-1950), almost all governor-generals appointed over the newly restructured Wällo in the period between the restoration of the imperial rule in 1941 and the downfall of Haile Selassie in 1974: *Nagadras* Berhane Selassie Abba Yirre and Brigadier General Asfaw Wolde Giyorgis (June 1941-December 1942); *Däjjazmač* Mengesha Wolde Giyorgis, a Wälloye by birth and related to Täfäri through his mother, (1950-1955 and 1957-1959); *Däjjazmač* Dereje Mekonnen (1955-1957); *Däjjazmač* Demiss Wolde Amanuel (1959-1962); *Fitawrari* Belay Mersha (1962-1964); the most liberal *Däjjazmač* Mamo Seyum (1964-1971); *Däjjazmač* Solomon Abraham (1971-1973); *Däjjazmač* Legesse Bezu (1973-April 1974), and finally, *Fitawrari* Mahrene Minda (May-September 1974) in the early days of the Darg, were non-Wälloyes (Gashaw, 2003:39-40; Mahtene Selassie, 1961 EC:21-22; Oral Informants: no. 2;3;5)

As Clapham argued, the reason Haile Selassie continued to appoint “natives of Šāwa ” as *Endärasé* for the province, as he had done before he became Emperor (*Negusa Nagast*) on 2 November 1930, was to prevent the Crown Prince from creating an 'independent' and/or an alternative power base far from the capital, Addis Ababa (Clapham, 1969:59). Earlier, this same argument being told and retold for umpteenth time was intentionally used as a rallying cry against *Lej* Iyassu. In any event, the early destruction of the autonomous status of Wällo, and its absorption into the central government inaugurated the arrival of the highly centralized administration of Emperor Haile Selassie, to which other regional entities also fell victim one after the other.

After Täfäri's coronation as Emperor Haile Selassie I and a couple of years before the transfer of Wällo to Asfa Wossän as chief governor-general in 1932, the appointment of *Däjjazmač* (later *Ras*) Imru Haile Selassie *Endärasé* of Wällo was said to be an auspicious one. Before him the only

accomplishment of the Šāwan rulers in Dässie was the construction of a couple of churches: St. Mikael and Trinity in 1919 and in 1920 respectively. It was during *Ras Imru's* time that Dässie saw a few infrastructural and administrative changes. Some socio-economic reforms, such as land tax, reorganization of the provincial administrative system, appointment of the first *Kätäma Shum* (or town chief), and rudimentary town planning and distribution of urban land. In addition, the construction of roads and bridges had begun in earnest in Dässie (Imru, 2001 EC: 162-168). But, as indicated above, *Ras Imru's* promising start did not continue.

The strained relationship between the crown prince and Haile Selassie was in fact a blessing in disguise for the province. In 1947, the Crown Prince still retaining Wällo as his personal fiefdom and enjoying 'considerable financial benefits' (Clapham, 1969:60) also received a purely nominal position in Addis. John Spencer, a long-time legal adviser to the Imperial Ethiopian government, has depicted the august Crown Prince as an indecisive, lethargic and callous personality, who could not deter his corrupt retinues from exploiting the province rapaciously. Spencer also stated that because of the overthrow, in 1916, of *Lej Iyassu* by his father, Haile Selassie, and the grudge that had been fomenting among the population since then, the Crown Prince was not loved by the Wällo people (Spencer, 2004 EC:332).

Working as a onetime personal adviser to the Crown Prince, Thesiger Jr., the son of Wilfred Thesiger, the renowned minister of the British Legation in Ethiopia (1910-1919), described Asfa Wossän as a nonchalant officeholder with very little interest in developmental matters. During his stay in Dässie from 1943 to 1944, and until his subsequent resignation after a year's service, the only thing Thesiger claimed Asfa Wossän had accomplished was the shifting of the old penal complex to a new site having a much better sewerage system. Thesiger also indicated that due to the unpleasant relationship he had with the Emperor, the Crown Prince lacked real political power and, more often than not, he was encircled by rapacious and conservative officials, many of whom had difficulty accepting any modern developmental ideas. (Thesiger, 2005 EC: 149-154; Gashaw, 2003:39). It was with the approval of the Emperor that the crown prince appointed *awraja* and *wäreda*, governors of proven decency and loyalty to the regime and the Imperial throne. Again, these governors being remotely controlled by the Crown prince were at liberty to use and abuse their power. The various administrative blunders lower-level officials committed, and their insensitivity to the plight of the people were by

and large responsible for the surfacing/resurfacing of wide-ranging grassroots disappointments in the province.

After reiterating the exploitative nature of Asfa Wossän, Berhane Selassie commented that even if the people of Wällo swore in his name, the Crown prince did nothing for them (Tilahun, 1998 EC: 368). Asfa Wossän spent most of his time in the capital city with little or no physical presence in Wällo. It was often during *Filsäta*, the two-week fasting time in August that he would come to Dässie to perform his administrative duties. Even then he did not dispense justice quickly; he postponed many of the legal issues presented to his *Chilot* (court of appeal) indefinitely, and several cases were inevitably transferred to the Emperor's Crown *Chilot* (the then supreme court). Asfa Wossän using his power as overlord of Wällo owned a vast amount of agricultural land from which he received considerable personal income. Apart from granting government lands to the landed gentry and the army, he collected money by selling urban lands to some selected individuals. People even accused him of undermining the Wällo patriots and favouring the *Banda*, those who collaborated with the Italians, to whom he assigned farmlands which he had confiscated from the patriots. Informants also stated that both Asfa Wossän and his father Haile Selassie did not want a Wälloye serving in the defence or police forces, to be promoted above the rank of a colonel (Oral Informants: no. 4;6;8).

Empress Mänän also had little practical influence on her husband Emperor Haile Selassie I, she was even powerless to help her son exercise full authority over Wällo. She served as just a little more than a conduit for His Majesty to listen to the many petitioners (or *dajetegne*) who travelled from Wällo to Addis Ababa to present their appeal to the imperial court, often waiting there for several weeks or months. Täfäri Berhanu noted that other than providing some daily sustenance to a number of her and *Lej* Iyassu's family members surreptitiously in and outside of Addis Ababa, the depressed Empress did not actively participate in a meaningful political undertaking until she died on 15 February 1962 (Täfäri, 2019: 153). While cognizant of Empress Mänän's unassuming and ineffectual position, and her incapacity to help the people of her birth place while she was alive, the Wälloyes nevertheless did not hesitate to express their remorse and condolences during her final disappearance in the following touching verse:

Šäwa has a father
 Gondar has a father
 Tigray has a father
 Every region has a father
 It's sad that Wällo is the only one that lost its mother!
 We shall now go back home
 Our kinship with Šäwa is no more without Mänän!
 (Oral Informants: no. 2 ; 3 ; 5)

Conclusion

One can comfortably argue that the unlawful removal of Iyassu from power appears to have suspended the country's promising start on its arduous journey towards creating enduring national unity through judicious and responsive handling of the different ethnic, religious and cultural groups. His prolonged absence from the capital and his dealings with the Afar, the Oromo and the Argobba, as well as the Somali and the Harari alongside the appointment of new local administrators and arrangement of dynastic marriages were part of Iyassu's regional policy of constructing 'wider political integration' and alternative power bases outside of Addis Ababa. Despite the opposition from senior Šäwan political elites and church leaders, Iyassu was trying to address them impudently (Ahmed, 2013:105-108). Oblivious of the impending dangers that these measures would bring, the only option he had was to face up to them and lose his power. After his demise, unfortunately, efforts along these lines came to a standstill, leaving the challenges of integration and nation building to be postponed to an indefinite future (Merara, 2003:63-70). Glossing over this important endeavor of Iyassu and the lessons that would be gained from it inevitably caused the country to pay a heavy price. Many of the regional problems surfacing today are believed to be directly or indirectly related to the unfinished project of nation building, as opposed to state building that had been for the most part accomplished during Emperor Menilik II's reign. Nonetheless, manipulation of regional/religious differences for outmaneuvering political rivals and clinging onto power at the expense of the country's future is a damaging enterprise. This was clearly seen in the struggle between Iyassu and Täfäri, the two political figures and power contenders of the early 20th century, the former representing the much desired national integration question/agenda, a radical departure from the norm, while the latter whose goal was initially inclined towards preserving the status quo but quickly shifted to the creation of a highly centralized state authority. However, the vision and accomplishments of Iyassu should not be overshadowed by Täfäri's

personal success and achievements. After all, history has repeatedly shown that leaders lacking self-esteem or having too much ambition for power do not want to recognize the deeds and achievements of their predecessors. The high-level plot to oust Iyassu by piling up trumped-up charges and causing him to disappear without trace after long years of captivity is definitely a heinous crime that cannot easily be forgotten, or consigned to the dust bin of history. Trevor-Roper, who researched the final days of Hitler soon after the end of WWII, wrote: "people do not disappear or evaporate [even] in a period of catastrophe. They either perish or remain alive; there is no third possibility" (Trevor-Roper, 1995: xxvi). In the case of Iyassu, who would not have been able to escape from prison or hide himself somewhere, the label 'missing' is an appropriate term to use, not because we have failed to ascertain that he was alive but because we were left in the dark even as to the possible whereabouts of his mortal remains. The clues that appeared here and there were simply ignored and no one has pursued the phantoms of Iyassu even for the sake of human decency, or for discharging moral responsibility. The military or the Darg government was not interested in perusing the puzzle of Iyassu's tragic end including the 'ultimate disposal of his body'. Despite the obvious differences in detail as to how he was executed, raising the forgotten issue of locating his grave based on the oral data used here or the possibilities this study suggests should hopefully not displease even those who have preferred to accept other versions of Iyassu's final days or hours.

In short, to reconstitute the missing sovereign's brief administration (r.1911-1916) in its proper historical place, historians should make every effort to come up with a conclusive narrative of the final days of *Lej* Iyassu (better to call him "Emperor-Designate Iyassu V", definitely not emperor-in-waiting). It was in an act of 'public repentance [or] a nationwide exorcism of historical guilt' (Massie, 1995:149) that a well-planned work of scientific recovery has been executed on the mortal remains of the last emperor of the Romanov Dynasty, Nicholas II, in the first few years of post-Communist Russia. The fruits of similar endeavors will definitely assist students of Ethiopian history and the wider public to have a sound and concrete justification to commemorate and appreciate Iyassu's forward looking ideas and his actual deeds. History, unlike individuals, cannot forever be stifled. History, as a final court of appeal, should pass its verdict and give what is due to Iyassu in a balanced and impartial manner. Uncovering the final resting place of the missing sovereign will enable us to revisit the enigmatic political history of his short-lived administration.

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