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Women and Warfare in Ethiopia

Minale Adugna

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A Case Study of Their Role During the Campaign of Adwa,
1895/96, and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935-41

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CONTENTS

Preface	v
Acknowledgements.....	vi
Abstract	1
1. Women and War in Ethiopia: From Early Times to the Late 19 th Century	1
1.1 The Role of Women in Mobilization	2
1.2 The Role of Women at Battlefields	7
2. The Role of Women during the Campaign of Adwa, 1895/96	13
2.1 Empress Taitu and the Road to Adwa	13
2.2 The Role of Women at the Battle of Adwa	19
3. The Ethiopian Women and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935-41	21
4. The Impact of War on the Life of Ethiopian Women	33
References	36

ABSTRACT: This study examines the history of women and warfare in Ethiopia, with particular reference to their role in the Italo-Ethiopian wars of the 1890s and the 1930s. It is based on both primary and secondary sources. It also draws on oral sources, with information gathered by interviewing elderly people mainly regarding their experience of the Italo-Ethiopian war of 1935-41. The study looks at the status and role of women in war. The study shows that though wars were fought mainly by men, women, too, played a significant role in the mobilization of troops, organization and transportation of supplies and provisions, raising the morale of fighters, gathering intelligence information, nursing the wounded, and in the actual fighting. Women that did not go to battlefields had to carry the burden of men's work at the home front. The study also indicates the impact of the frequent wars on the life of Ethiopian women.

1. WOMEN AND WAR IN ETHIOPIA: FROM EARLY TIMES TO THE LATE 19TH CENTURY

Obviously, wars were frequent events throughout Ethiopian history. Internal wars were fought mainly for territorial expansion, political supremacy and because of tribal feuds of one sort or another. Some examples of such wars include: the Muslim-Christian conflicts since the 13th century that culminated in the 16th century war spearheaded by Ahmed Gragn; wars fought during the expansion of the Oromos in the 16th century; the religious civil wars of the 17th century; the frequent wars of *Zemene Messafint* (c. 1769-1855); and the wars fought to implement the policy of unification initiated by Tewodros II and his successors. The Ethiopians also waged wars to defend their country's independence against successive foreign aggressions. The Ethio-Egyptian wars of the 1870's, the Ethio-Mahdist wars of the 1880's and the Italo - Ethiopian wars of 1885-1896, followed 40 years later by the Fascist Occupation wars of 1936-41, can be given as examples of the second category of war. Hence, war was so frequent that it had become a way of life for the Ethiopians. Thus, already in the 17th century, the Portuguese writer Almeida wrote of the Ethiopians, "In war they are reared as children, in war they grow old, or the life of all who are not farmers is war" (Quoted in Pankhurst 1990a, 13). Many writers consider the Ethiopian army as a "natural order of society" and indeed the Ethiopians consider themselves primarily the nation of warriors (Teferi 1971, 12; Caulk 1976, 5; Tsehay 1980, 73).

In fact, as is the case in most feudal societies, the military profession was the most prestigious and somehow lucrative (Teferi 1971, 8; Merid 1976, 30; Caulk 1976, 5-6). The intensity of wars enhanced the social value of a military occupation. Donald Levine thus maintains:

Military virtues have ranked among the highest in Ethiopian value system. Military titles have been among the most prestigious in the Ethiopian social hierarchy. Military symbolism has provided a medium for important national traditions and a focus for a good deal of national sentiment. Military statuses and procedures have influenced the pattern of social organization in many ways (Quoted in Caulk 1976, 6).

In times of war, every able-bodied male snatched his spear and shield and followed his leader. It was his privilege and honour to fight. Society acclaimed him and the Church “absolved him of his sins”, but in the course of it he had developed the concept that war in itself is the biggest expression of manhood. Women often love or aspire to become the wife of brave warriors. *Aleqa Atme* thus wrote of their choice: “Women are not willing to marry one who has not killed and does not grow a *goffere* (Afro-style hair)” (1901 E.C., 62). Therefore it is not surprising that wars were sought and peace was at times thought of as a monotonous thing in traditional Ethiopia. The British consul at the Ethiopian court in the mid 19th century, Walter Plowden, thus wrote:

If the [Ethiopian] did not find a real enemy they have to fight any way. In their past time they played “Waffo wugia, battle in which the aspiring youths mount and join on some appointed plain, village against village, district against district, for the mere love of fighting... the bravest and most distinguished warrior, often fall generally at the hand of some rival for the smile of a beauty, as the girl bestows her favour on the bravest (1868, 125).

Besides reward in terms of glory, military occupation had also been economically lucrative. Firstly, the military class was the greatest beneficiary of the landholding system. Members of this class were allotted the emperor’s land, known as *Dembegna*, free of tax, and in the case of *bale gults* (owners of *gult* land), they enjoyed rights of collecting tributes and of using the free-labour of the peasantry in their respective areas of governorship. The *bale gults* constituted the bulk of feudal administrative officials recruited mainly from within the army. Secondly wars also rewarded the brave with a significant booty from the vanquished. Moreover, successful service during military expeditions most often earned the brave warrior the favours of their kings and promotion to high ranks (Teferi 1971, 12-13; Tadesse 1972, 99; Abir 1980, 153).

1.1 The Role of Women in Mobilization

Commonly wars were mainly fought by men. Various factors, such as biological and social, mitigated the degree of the involvement of women in war in traditional societies. However these factors did not exclude women from warfare. Above all, in a country such as Ethiopia, where war had been a way of life, the role of women was quite significant. In peacetime, for example, women glorified valour and patriotism through their reverence for brave warriors. This was clearly evident in their occasional songs:

I wish I were his equerry,
So that I could always follow him
I wish I were his cartridge belt
So that I could embrace his waist.
I wish I were his rifle
So that I would always live attached to his chest
(Addis Alemayehu 1958 E.C, 233)

These sentiments emanated from the fact that women related to brave warriors by blood or marriage could claim a privilege in the society. Oral informants attest to certain privileges of the wife or mother of a hero, such as getting front seats at feasts and public ceremonies, and priority when fetching water. She can be invited to royal feasts and can

inherit military holdings and instruments in the absence of an able-bodied male successor or when he was a minor. She had retainers of her own.

Both during wedding and burial ceremonies, women chant panegyrics for brave relatives. Conversely, the coward is insulted and regarded as womanish. Likewise, some war decrees also look down upon the coward equating him with his wife. One such decree issued by Emperor Menelik in November 1888 reads:

The man who handles a lance and does not come to this expedition is a woman and no more a man. He shall be called by the name of his wife, and have no share in their common wealth. She may take everything (Tekle Tsadiq 1982 E.C., 517).

Relatives of the coward feel great shame and were also insulted because of his cowardice. A song reflecting this attitude paints the coward and his mother as follows:

A coward renders service to his mother
When she bakes bread he gives her the cover of the stove.
Unless a male is brave
His birth is no better than abortion.
To a son who could not act like his father
Give him wad of cotton to spine it like his mother.
The mother of a coward is identifiable
For she stands at the back and persuades her son to retreat.

Therefore, it was not uncommon to find mothers and wives of the coward wishing his premature death. Women often encourage killing an animal, capturing a slave and bringing back genitalia of an enemy (Prouty 1986, 230).

The possession of firearms has also been equally honoured and the possessor enjoyed prestige in the society while women often wished to marry him. Richard Pankhurst said of this situation in the late 19th century:

A damsel who, it appears decided [not] to be wooed by a man who does not own a rifle, has a rule of ranking eligible competitor. Thus she would not even allow a man with a Russian rifle to walk by her door. A Welterly owner may send a word to her, but a Menlincher owner could approach her personally and if it was a man with a Leben she would take him for a lover. However a man who aspired to marry her has to own a Mouser (1967, 128).

Besides the above-mentioned roles played already during peacetime women were also not passive in times of war. On the one hand, the system of mobilization itself has a reference to women. Obviously the main criterion of recruitment to the army was, among others, the type of land at the disposal of an individual. The holding allotted to the army, known as the *dembagna* was placed under *shalaqas*, some of them ranking as high as *Ras* and *Fitawrari*. Women were generally not allowed to inherit land and other property of the military type. At times, however, it was necessary to have guardians for minors and mothers frequently acted as one for their sons on the illness or death of their husbands or whoever was passing on the inheritance. This privilege of women also worked in cases of the absence of a successor to a deceased husband or a father. In both cases women, be it wives or daughters, did inherit both the land and weapons and they were expected to perform the duties attached to the land and weapons, whether or not the

duty was military or administrative. At a time of war, they can therefore lead their own army in person or can send them under the command of their favourite or close relative (Pankhurst 1968, 8; Tsehay 1980, 74; Damte 1950 E.C., 281). It should, however, be born in mind that such kind of the participation of women in wars is primarily motivated by economic reasons.

On the other hand, it is also not uncommon to find certain war decrees that order women to join military expeditions though they may not be directly addressed. The most common tasks in a mobilization order hinge on the need “to prepare provisions and supplies, to clothe the servants and maids and to feed the mules and horses.”(Bairu 1982, 365) A direct reference to women along with the menfolk can also be seen in some war decrees like the one issued by a Yeju guardian of the puppet kings of Gondar in the first quarter of the 19th century known as Ras Gugsa. It reads: “One who does not join the army of Gugsa, man and woman, will loose his genital and her breast, respectively”(Atme 1901 E.C., 94). Moreover, most of the mobilization orders such as against the Muslim and foreign aggressors underline the need for dying for one’s faith, country and wife, and thus equally apply to both men and women. Indeed such wars affect women in many ways, the most demoralizing of which is their rape and deportation, loss of husbands and relatives, poverty, famine, etc., as a result of which women respond to mobilization orders as soon as it was heard.

The prime role of women in warfare begins with encouraging their menfolk to join military expeditions. This they did in person or through songs performed every night in villages following the mobilization order. On such occasions they sang songs praising the brave and belittling the coward. Old glories of notable warriors were recited (Pankhurst and Girma Selassie 1985, 51).

Moreover some notable women mourners and minstrels were also used both to justify and denounce wars. Both of them are sought for their professional duties at burial ceremonies and songs of weddings and others. Moreover they could express the cultural, social, political and economic problems affecting contemporary society in their poems. In some cases the society provided them with information and poems, in the hope that it would reach the ears of the concerned individuals or groups. Most often the minstrels or mourners themselves composed poems to express public opinion. A few of the minstrels could also achieve noble status and could be given royal land grants for the excellence in their profession.

An example of a poem by a minstrel that incited her men-folk to fight against Tewodros’s brutality reads: “Unable to uproot one stem of a pepper, it scorched and burnt you alive” (Tekel Tsadiq 1981 E.C., 245)

Bairu Tafla tells us that mourners could intervene in wars and avoid or minimize bloodshed by going to the camps of the enemy. This was, for instance, seen when Menelik faced the challenge of Bezabih against the claim of his father’s crown in Shoa following his escape from the prison of Tewodros at Meqdela in 1865. It is said that *Enat Awaju* (literally ‘mother of a proclamation’), a prominent mourner of Bulga, had tried to stop war between the two by conveying a message that declared the legitimacy of Menelik, to soldiers in the camp of his opponent:

Who is it for that you prepare your shield
Who is it for that you sharpen your spears
Who is it for that you sharpen your knife
Alas, it is your master's [King Haile Meleket's] son,
Say, "Bless our souls, Bless our souls".
(Tekel Tsadiq 1981 E.C., 1969, 6-7)

Her message was a sudden blow to the marching army of Bezabih that fought half-heartedly at the Battle of Gandilo and was defeated with ease.

Mourners and minstrels have also been very important as recorders of history through their comments on and observations of major events in their poems. Their poems thus became part of the oral traditions and were transmitted from generation to generation. For instance, Tewodros's suppression of the Shoan revolt in his campaign of 1855 was very harsh and accompanied by the amputation of limbs. A Shoan minstrel thus said in her poem: "How emperor Tewodros was humiliated/ by having greeted all the people of Showa/ by bowing down to them" ['amputation of hands' or 'denial of hands' is an Amharic pun that also means bowing down in respect] (Tekle Tsadiq 1981 E.C., 245).

Minstrels used to join military expeditions to incite their menfolk to fight with great valour. Referring to such minstrels as *Mungerashi*, Plowden wrote that they run in the midst of the battle shouting, calling on the fleeing coward and encouraging the brave fighters (1868, 55).

As a rule the pregnant were not allowed to join military expeditions and, in most cases, those who joined were the slaves and servants. Yet some pregnant women are also reported to have joined military expeditions by hiding their pregnancy in order to avenge the death of their husbands or relatives or to ensure their rights of land inheritance. A Somali informant also said that pregnant wives of tribal war leaders did also participate in wars because they are supposed to be a rallying force if their husbands fell. The Somali also believe that a son born in battle will be very brave. Besides, pregnant women can also be mediators because no one, according to their tradition, will harm them. Despite these exceptions, pregnant women were not generally allowed for the obvious difficulty they face during the long marches and to prevent their being a burden. Moreover, pregnant women were treated with special care. The society believed that they must see and hear only good things, must be served for all their needs, must escape evil eyes, and must be protected from frightening things. All these are believed to cause harm to the foetus (Andromeda 1968, 7).

Despite these prohibitions, pregnancy could not be totally avoided, for women could conceive during the march and in camps because of lack of contraception. In the event of pronged campaigns women used to deliver in caves or camps or near villages. However, one can also find some women who delivered even during the march. Father Massagia wrote of one poor camp-follower that gave birth on such an occasion:

We heard a hustle and a bustle. As the poor woman feeling delivery near, wanted to stop but was forced to continue though her companions lightened her loads. On the road she became a mother and after an hour of rest taking her little creature into a basket she followed along (Quoted in Prouty 1986, 32).

Such a tradition is also reported to be common even during the Italo-Ethiopian war of 1936-41.

The number of women camp-followers depends on the status of the war leader and the individual soldier. Thus some times about 30 to 40 female slaves are reported to have accompanied one well-to-do male or female soldier. As a result most of the literature shows that the number of camp-followers has often been more than the combatants and sometimes even their double (Wylde 1901, 217; Pankhurst 1990a, 68-70).

Women camp-followers start to perform their duties already before leaving their homes. They begin with the preparation of provisions and supplies following the mobilization order of their masters. The work includes spinning cotton for clothes, preparing food and ingredients of local drinks such as *Tej*, *Tella*, *Araki*, particularly for the royal and important chiefs. Simultaneously they prepare goods such as pots for cooking, jars for preparing and carrying drinks, baking pads, baskets, grinding stones and traditional medicines (Plowden 1868, 99).

During the march women perform many duties, though the nature of their duties depends on their rank. Thus while wives, daughters or concubines of high-ranking officials took supervisory roles, the remaining women perform duties that were more burdensome. Firstly, they were responsible for the transportation of every utensil of food and drinks that cannot be carried by draught animals. Many women carry grinding stones, no fewer than 3000 of which are reported for a single expedition by the 17th century Portuguese writer named Almeida (Pankhurst 1990a, 68).

At military camps women had the responsibility of preparing food and drinks for royal feasts and for the consumption of their respective masters and husbands. Thus as soon as a site was selected women took off their burden and dispersed to fetch water, fire wood, for baking *enjeras* and cooking stew. The peace time distinction in food and drinks based on ranks was maintained at camps too. Thus women prepared different qualities of food and drinks for masters and retainers. This and other duties such as washing the feet of their masters, collecting utensils, packing prepared foods and drinks for the next march etc., took them almost the whole night (Pankhurst 1990a; Caulk 1976, 7; Portal 1969, 143)

Besides all these, women were also expected to help in digging trenches, clearing roads, preparing camping sites in the selection of which they also had voices. Women also need to be at alert to awaken the men at dawn. Despite all these women had to keep up with their menfolk under difficult state of marching along inconvenient roads, crossing big rivers, climbing mountains and going down their descents, during which they were often obliged to crawl on their hands and feet. Sometimes they were obliged to fall apart on the side of very narrow roads overcrowded with the army and the animals, to the extent that they even loose life under their burden or an animal falling upon. (Pankhurst 1990a, 260) In all cases only the wives of higher officials and royal families that could ride a mule were safe. But even these felt the burden of long march of about 10 -20 miles a day and suffer from the inhospitable climates of marching routes (Pankhurst 1990a; Portal 1969, 257)

1.2. The Role of Women at Battlefields

The above-mentioned duties of non-combatant women do not mean that they had no role in the main theatres of war. They are reported to have played a significant role in the course of the war. Some women guarded the camp with some soldiers so that it would not fall into the hands of the enemy. Others, served their combatant menfolk by gathering information on the whereabouts of their enemy's lines of combat, its numerical strength, etc. Indeed, women could play pivotal roles in the intelligence services as they were less suspected by the enemy. Others collected booty from captives, the dead, and the wounded. Still others were instrumental in organizing and mobilizing reserve forces and effectively served as communicators between their dispersed or broken army units. A band of women served their menfolk in misleading enemy soldiers by displaying themselves from the hill top and shouting but disappearing suddenly from the site so that the site would be falsely targeted by the enemy (Tekle Tsadiq 1983 E.C. E.C., 227-29).

The majority of women camp-followers joined the battle fields to raise the fighting morale of the soldiers with their war songs, ululations, and prayers. Indeed a war fought in the presence of women had always been bloody, since customarily the men did not retreat and hesitate before the sight of women (Gerima 1949 E.C., 30). Even the coward is therefore most often obliged to become a patriot for fear of the insult and mockery of women.

Quite a large number of women used to pick up the dead and the wounded. While they facilitated the burials of the dead, the great contribution of women was in nursing the wounded. They cured wounds using traditional medicine prepared from the leaves, barks and roots of plants and fleshes of animals. They use pieces of *shemas* (cloths made of cotton) as bandages to dress the wounds. In the absence of better means of transportation they had to carry the wounded to camps on their back. Women did also serve the combatants by supplying water, food and munitions.

Apart from these, it was not uncommon to find women fighting in wars. As early as the 17th century, some women, though mostly members of the aristocracy, are reported to have "mounted mule or horse, spears in their hands with their belts tightened and their *shemas* or togas draped over their heads." Such manly appearance had reportedly displeased Emperor Iyasu, who in 1691, passed a decree against the practice. Nevertheless, women fighters were invariably reported by chroniclers, to have gallantly fought in most battles, particularly taking the rifles of their deceased husbands or relatives who had fallen on the field. Such women often dressed themselves like men (Pankhurst 1990a, 116).

Conversely prominent women of the royalty and aristocracy have been reported to have played decisive roles in military affairs both in provoking and ending wars and leading their army into battles. The number of such women for which we have documentation is very small, but the role they played was tremendous. Such women actively involved themselves in power struggle, promotions and demotions of officials, securing power and wealth for themselves and their relatives, using their position in relation to emperors or during their guardian roles. Below is a brief account of such prominent women with a particular reference to their role in the military history of Ethiopia since the early times.

The first of such women is a pagan queen of Damot known as Gudit /Yodit/ - who was described by many sources as a notorious and cruel woman that destroyed churches and monasteries in the process of her challenge to the Aksumite kingdom, whose Princess she is said to have slaughtered, and ruled between C. 940 - 980 A.D. That she had brought about the first persecution of Christians in Ethiopia and that she had overthrown an Aksumite King was attested to by contemporary Arab geographers and historians (Sergew 1972, 113). Her challenge seems to have been part of the various centrifugal forces that arose against the deteriorating power of the Aksumite kings. Though the Aksumites restored their power following her death, her intervention left a remarkable negative consequence on their subsequent political supremacy. Thus Gudit remained to be an impressive example of women military leaders that wielded great power.

Since the middle of the 15th century, Ethiopia also saw a woman of great power during the successive rulers between 1468 to 1520. She was Queen Mother Elleni, who was an ex-Muslim chief of Hadya baptised about 1445 on marrying king Zere Yaqob (1434 - 68). She is said to have possessed great wisdom and sound political judgment. Her knowledge of the internecine Muslim - Christian conflicts over the monopoly of the booming Zeila trade was so deep that she followed a policy of appeasement towards Muslim neighbours of Ethiopia. She thought that peace with the latter would safeguard the share of the Christian kingdom from the caravan trade. To this end matrimonial arrangements were made with the ruling families of Adal and other Muslim sultanates. The tribute due from them was overlooked in order to cement their friendship and stop their periodic raids of the frontier provinces (Tadesse 1972, 288; Doresse 1967, 126).

At the same time the queen had foreseen the danger of the expanding Ottoman Turks in the Middle East and along the Red Sea coast. Thus without renouncing her policy of appeasement towards the internal Muslims, she wrote to King Emmanuel of Portugal in 1509 declaring an interest in military alliance against Muslims. Of course, the initiative for a Christian friendship had already been taken by Europeans in general and Portugal in particular since the start of the 15th century. The letter of Elleni, however, was an explicit proposal of possible joint attack against their common enemy Egypt and other Muslims. She thus clearly stated her readiness to contribute soldiers and provide supplies. Sylvia Pankhurst integrated the translation of this letter in her study on three notable Ethiopian women, one of whom was the same Elleni. It reads:

...our very dear and very Christian king of Portugal... we have heard that the sultan of Cairo assembles a great army to attack your forces to avenge the damage done to him by the captains and men-at-arms you have in India...Against the assault of such enemies we are prepared to send a good number of men-at-arms who will give assistance in the seaboard areas...

In addition to the above we advise you that if it is agreed to join our forces, we shall have sufficient strength to destroy the enemies of our holy faith... [but] we could not put an army at the sea where on we have no power. For this reason alliance with you, who thanks god are so powerful in maritime warfare, is necessary to us. If you wish to arm a thousand warship we will provide the necessary food and furnish you with everything for such a force in very great abundance (1957, 84-85).

It is worthy of note that she had knowledge of current affairs through Europeans visiting her court and the fact that she clearly stated the means with which the Christian allies could dismantle their Muslim enemy. Interestingly she had also proposed to cement their friendship with marriage relations between their respective royal families (*Ibid*; Sweetman 1984, 29)

The arrival of the first Portuguese diplomatic mission at the court of Ethiopia in 1520 was the result of her diplomatic efforts. By then nothing had come out, but her endeavour had paved the way for the later military aid of the Portuguese who sent their soldiers of 400 strong to assist king Lebne Dingle, based on his letter of 1535. This force arrived at Massawa in 1542 and gave an immense contribution to the victory of the Christians over the forces of Ahmed Gagn in early 1543 (Pankhurst 1957, 85; Tekle Tsadiq 1961 E.C., 22-23) His defeat and death in that year had been one of the major turning points in the history of Ethiopia.

Elleni died long before the coming of the Portuguese soldiers, but the latter met another queen known as Seble Wongel, who was the wife of King Lebne Dingil (1508 - 40). She was a Tigrean queen who was exiled to the inaccessible monastery of Debre Damo after the defeat of her husband by the Muslim invaders. Her courageous activities during the Muslim war were attested to by chroniclers and the Portuguese writers (Tadesse 1972, 276; Sweetman 1984, 29-30) Her exile to her native land had contributed to rallying local support from northern Ethiopia. She stayed in the monastery with a number of ladies and chosen band to guard them. Ahmed Gagn is said to have besieged the impregnable hill top for a long time but he failed to control her fortress. Thus when the Portuguese military mission arrived on the side of Christian Ethiopia it was Empress Seble Wongel and her brother *Bahre Negash* Dori who welcomed them. The Portuguese army secured supplies from the country and the cooperation of the local people, thanks to her presence and efforts. Then she negotiated a military operation with the Portuguese and added her 200 royal escort with 30 women mounted on horses like herself (Doresse 1967, 126-27; Pankhurst 1996, 26)

Seble Wongel was with the Portuguese throughout the campaign, dauntless and unfaltering in the greatest disaster. The empress and the ladies with her helped a lot in looking after the wounded, using their clothes to make bandages and burying the dead. The major battles fought in her presence were two. The first was held in September 1542, at which the Portuguese met Ahmed Gagn with Turkish volunteers of 900 strong who had come to his side to counter-balance the Christian solidarity between Ethiopia and Portugal. The battle proved disastrous for the Christians who lost 200 of the Portuguese soldiers and their commander Christopher Dagama (Doresse 1967, 146-47; Pankhurst 1996, 86). The reorganization of the remaining Portuguese army and the local force was mainly the responsibility of the queen. She advised the march to the south in order to contact a Christian army under her son, Emperor Gelawdewos (1540-59), who succeeded his father, Lebne Dingil. A number of Ethiopian forces rallied to the queen during the advance. Gelawdewos was in Tegulet (Shoa), but proceeded northwards having heard of the Portuguese support. They met in Semen and in February 1543 the united Christian army met Ahmed Gagn at the Battle of Woina Dega. The Muslims were defeated and Ahmed himself killed on the spot. Amidst the resultant confusion

following his death the Muslim army was dispersed. This brought to an end the 12 years Muslim hegemony over the Christian kingdom (Atme 1901 E.C., 31; Pankhurst 1957, 86).

The Portuguese writers acknowledged in their writings Seble Wongel's "steadfast courage in adversity, her kindness and attention to the wounded and to her shrinking from the carnage" (Pankhurst 1996, 28).

Contemporary to Seble Wongel in the Muslim camp was a renowned woman of courage, Bati Del Wanbara, who was the wife of Ahmed Gagn and daughter of a Muslim military commander of Adal known as Mahfuz. Her father had been one of the Adali leaders of the constant frontier attacks against the Christian kingdom until his death in one of the campaigns in 1516. Tradition claimed that Del Wanbara had instigated her husband to avenge the death of her father. Be that as it may, she accompanied her husband throughout his expeditions despite the protestation of his soldiers. At times she had to be carried on the shoulder of soldiers up and down steep and rocky mountains. This was because she is said to have marched even in a state of pregnancy during which she was unable to use mules. Indeed she delivered her two sons during the campaigns of 1531 and 1533 in Ifat and Tigre, respectively (Tekle Tsadiq 1961 E.C., 95).

Like the camp of the Christians there were also other Muslim women along with the wife of Ahmed. They were mainly wives of military commanders and soldiers. One of them was an ex-Christian wife of a certain Tekle Haymanot and was the relative of King Lebne Dingil before she was captured in battle and became wife of Ahmed, taking the name Hajirah. The sister of Ahmed known as Ferdausah, who was married to a Somali tribal leader Ben Uthman (*Ibid*) too participated in the major battle of Shimbra Kurie in 1529 at which the Christian army under king Lebne Dingil was completely defeated. Even though we lack sources of their engagement in actual combat the Muslim women too had been playing the role of nursing the wounded and building the morale of fighters.

Del Wanbara was, however, more important in instigating war even after the defeat of the Muslims in 1543. At the death of her husband, Del Wanbara fled to Harar and made a last bid for revenge. Before that, she secured the return of her son, who was a captive in the Christian court; she secured his liberty in exchange for another captive in her hand known as Minas, son of Lebne Dingil and an emperor of Ethiopia between 1559 to 1563. Obviously, Del Wanbara and Seble Wongel were instrumental in the exchange of the captives who were in fact their sons. Del Wanbara, however, did not give up her role of instigating her menfolk to a revengeful war. In 1552 she married *Emir* Nur Ibn Mujadid, successor of Ahmed, seeing in him the best prospect of achieving her aim of avenging the death of Ahmed. Indeed in 1559 a battle was fought between Ibn Nur and Emperor Gelawdewos in Fatagar, at which the latter was killed and beheaded by the order of Del Wanbara according to some sources (*Ibid*, 78; Sweetman 1984, 29; Doresse 1967, 147) Consequently both Seble Wongel and Del Wanbara made an immense contribution in changing the course of events in the 16th century.

The other period that saw women play decisive roles in military affairs was *Zemene Messafint* (c.1769 - 1855), a period full of civil wars fought for territorial expansion and

for the position of guardianship to puppet Emperors. Chris Prouty has studied the case of eight women, “with spirited personalities who exercised power and influence” (Prouty 1979, 61) during the period. Some of them like *Itege Mentwab* and *Itege Menen* were royal courtesans who played significant roles not only in military affairs but also in political developments in the country using their influential position behind the monarchy. Mentwab was wife of Emperor Bekaffa (1721- 30) and she is said to have dominated the politics of Ethiopia during the childhood of her son and grandson between 1730 to 1769. *Itege Menen*, was mother of *Ras Ali II*, who was guardian of very weak Gondrine emperors. One of these was called Yohannis III she eventually married. (Paulos 1985 E.C., 112-13; Merid 1991, 88-89). This woman was indeed very influential from 1830 to 1853. Her authority came to an end with that of her son, *Ras Ali*, who was defeated by *Dejazmach* Kassa Hailu at the Battle of Ayshal in June 1853. Menen was also known to have led her own contingent to battles. She fought with the Egyptians in the north-western border regions. Another battle was fought in 1850 against a rebel, Kassa Hailu, who challenged her authority despite her efforts to appease him by offering him the daughter of *Ras Ali II*, Tewabech, as his wife. At that battle, she is said to have had under her command about 20,000 soldiers though she was defeated and captured along with her husband. She was released after her son Ali negotiated with Kassa and rewarding by bestowing upon him the title of *Dejazmach* and the governorship of Dembya province (Paulos 1985 E.C., 40; Prouty 1979, 63; Tekle Tsadiq 1981 E.C., 118).

The wives of dignitaries and ordinary soldiers also played a role in military affairs. In 1771, *Ras Mikael Sehul*, who was a king-maker at Gondar, declared that female fief holders should actually lead their soldiers to battles. However, the bulk of his army was drawn not from aristocratic women but from humble camp-attendants whose number was estimated to be about 10,000 at the battle of Gondar, where he was defeated by the joint army of the Amhara and Oromo chiefs.

In general the intensity of civil wars during the *Zemene Messafint* meant great human and material destruction, poverty and social misery. Women were very much affected by their consequences. There were battles at which the slaughter of women was reported. For instance, *Ras Wolde Selassie’s* take-over of Tigre in 1780 saw the massacre of women, including pregnant women, while another Tigrean, *Ras Wolde Rufael*, had slain the women of Wombera in 1816. That is why the period between 1800 - 1840 was described as a “bad time for women” (Prouty 1979, 67). Of course, most of the aristocratic women were not victims of such massacres and assaults by soldiers. They used to be moved to safer and inaccessible villages designed for their exile such as Dima in Gojam and Mahdere Maryam in Begemidir (*Ibid*).

It was also not uncommon to find women with terrible experiences of wars fought between their own relatives, or between husbands and relatives. Some such examples include the wife of *Ras Ali II*, who bore the war fought between her father *Dejazmach* Wube and her husband in 1842; the wife of Kassa Hailu (later Tewodross II), Tewabech, who bore her husband’s fight against her grand mother *Itege Menen* and her father *Ras Ali* in 1850 and 1853, respectively. *Itege Dinkinesh*, wife of Emperor Tekle Giorgis, (1868 - 71) also had to suffer the fighting between her husband and her brother *Dejazmach* Kassa Mircha (later Emperor Yohannes IV) in 1871. Though some of these

women too are reported to have provoked wars of even this sort, obviously the grief they felt was very deep.

On the other hand, political marriages contracted between important chiefs and the ruling aristocracy had, with some exceptions, greatly contributed to appeasing rebels and averting civil wars for a while. One such exception was the marriage of Kassa with Tewabech, daughter of *Ras* Ali. The union did not help to stop Kassa's ambition for the imperial throne that he eventually gained by dint of his military muscle. Tewabech was often described as courageous and used to accompany him to every battle, including the one fought with the Egyptians at Debarq in 1848 and others fought against the soldiers sent by her grand-mother. She is also reported to have encouraged Kassa's rebellion against the royal court because of his disappointment at *Itege* Menen (Tekle Tsadiq 1981 E.C., 136; Paulos 1985 E.C., 113; Atme 1901 E.C., 69). She accompanied Kassa to the battle of Deresge on 11 February 1855, which paved the way for Kassa's coronation two days later. Tewabech finally died during the march with her husband in his campaign against a Wollo rebel known as Amede Beshir in 1859 (Tekle Tsadiq 1981 E.C., 183).

Two other warrior queens contemporary to Tewabech were Mestawat and Worqit of Wollo who administered the region for their minor sons, Amede Liben and Mohammed Ali, respectively. Both women belonged to the Wereshah family of the rulers of Yeju and Wollo. Their position was secured through their blood and the incapacitation of their minor sons. Likewise, other regional lords, these women brought regional challenges to the policy of unification attempted by Tewodros II. Thus from the beginning of his reign *Woizero* Worqit has attempted to trap Tewodros at a place called Gimba during his campaign to subdue Shoa in 1855 by allying herself with the then king of Shoa known as Haile Mellekot. It was planned that the king would fight at the front and Worqit from the rear. Nevertheless their plan failed because the secret agreement found its way to the imperial camp through the dissident factions of Shoa. Consequently, Tewodros first attacked Wollo and took hold of Meqdela fortress of Worqit and then subdued Shoa afterwards (Paulos 1985 E.C., 158-59; Tsehay 1980, 75; Bairu 1975, 20) The second challenge of Worqit to Tewodros, however, became successful in 1865 when she facilitated the escape of Menelik, son of King Haile Meleket and a prisoner of Tewodros since 1855, from the Meqdela prison by allowing his safe passage through her region and by giving him escorts from her contingent and sending messages to Shoa that declared the legitimate restoration of Menelik to his father's crown (Marcus 1975, 25; Bairu 1969, 26; Tabor 1987 E.C., 9).

This alliance of Worqit with Menelik brought upon her the disastrous vengeance of Tewodros, who killed her son in prison. However, Menelik compensated her grief by invading the region of her contender, Mestawat, in Wollo in 1867 with an army of 40,000 (Marcus 1975, 28-29).

Mestawat was one of the dissident regional rulers during the reign of Tewodros (1855 - 68). She sought the favour of the British military expedition that came to facilitate the release of the European prisoners of Tewodros. It is said that she was given the fortress of Meqdala by the commander of this British force, General Robert Napier, when they left Ethiopia in April 1868. This must have helped her to reinforce herself at the expense of Worqit, for the latter was in control of Meqdela before it had fallen into the hands of

Tewodros. In 1876 Mestawot vowed her allegiance to King Menelik, who established full authority in Wollo. Thus she was able to restore her lost position. Since then she kept up a peaceful relationship with Menelik. She gave him military support at the Battle of Embabo, which ended in the victory of Menelik over his rival *Negus* Tekle Haymanot on 6 June 1882 (Caulk 1975, 72). She proved to be an able warrior and commander at this battle. She was reported to have held a spear and fought in the midst of the battle. To sum up, despite the patriarchal nature of the society, the Ethiopian women of former times had played a major role in the administration and military affairs of their country.

2. THE ROLE OF WOMEN DURING THE CAMPAIGN OF ADWA, 1895/96

Most of the wars that brought the Ethiopian women to the battlefields had so far been mainly internal wars. The second half of the 19th century, however, saw their involvement in successive wars fought in defence of the motherland from foreign aggression. Indeed, Ethiopia faced unprecedented type of foreign threat against the survival of her independence in terms of its multiplicity, diplomatic mischief, subversive activities, etc. In the last quarter of the 19th century alone, Ethiopia was compelled to fight defensive wars against the Egyptians, the Mahdists and the Italians. Despite the intensity of the foreign threat, however, the centuries-old integrity and independence was not broken. Undoubtedly, this was due to the great sacrifice paid by the valiant sons and daughters of Ethiopia.

The mobilization orders were enough by themselves in rousing such a patriotic sentiment, for they often equate dying for the motherland to sacrificing one's self for one's own faith, wife, children, etc. For instance, one of the war decrees issued by Yohannis IV (1872 - 89) in February 1888, calling on his countrymen to rise against the Italian invaders, reads:

All sons of Ethiopia, bear in mind that Ethiopia is primarily your mother, secondly your crown, thirdly your wife, fourthly your child and fifthly you grave. Hence, when you march you must realize that you will be defending your country, which corresponds to the love of a mother, the glory of a crown, the kindness of a wife, the joy of a child [and] the charity of a grave (Zewde 1975, 78).

2.1 Empress Taitu and the Road to Adwa

The campaign of Adwa had enlisted thousands of women camp-followers. At the top of these women, however, comes Empress Taitu, who command her own contingent of about 5000 infantry and 600 cavalry men and accompanied her husband to the Battle of Adwa. Though she was not the first to have accompanied her husband to war, Taitu remained to be the last Ethiopian empress to lead her army to war. Moreover, Taitu fought a war that she had paved the way for from the very begging (Bahru 1991, 117).

Empress Taitu was regarded as an intelligent, astute and self-assured woman by many writers. Count Gleichen wrote "Queen Taitu has the reputation of being a woman of much ability and it is generally understood that the king owes much of his success to her

counsels” (1898, 147). Harold Marcus supported this judgement by writing, “she was highly intelligent and politically astute and she often acted as one of Menelik’s advisors” (1968, 28). Emperor Menelik is invariably said to have endorsed her views and proposals in administrative, political, military as well as foreign affairs. Tadesse Zewelde claims to have collected oral tradition from old palace servants and officers of Menelik that confirmed her decisive role in many decisions of the Emperor (1988 E.C., 15-16). On the other hand, Wylde considered her ability as a common trait of other women of the upper class, too:

There can be no doubt that the women of the upper classes of the country are more cleverer than the men and therefore capable of a very high state of civilization. They will play a most important part in the politics of the country and that they will make, themselves listened to by the men. (1901, 302-303).

A remarkable instance of women’s involvement in administrative functions occurred during the reign of Zere Yaqob (1434 - 68) who established a “virtually women’s administration” by appointing his daughters and relatives over key administrative provinces such as Tegre, Angot, Begemidir, Amhara, Damot, Gedem, and Ifat (Pankhurst 1990a, 345-46).

Women of upper classes have also been active participants in the routine power struggle within the royalty and between the royal family and regional lords. Empress Taitu can be considered as one of these women of the upper class.

Empress Taitu founded the city of Addis Ababa at the time that Menelik was engaged in the campaign to subdue sultanate of Harar. Tadesse maintains that Taitu descended from Entoto to cool down the tension that disturbed the people due to the emperor’s absence from his capital for a long time (Tadesse 1988 E.C., 18). In fact, Menelik had delegated Ras Gobena and Taitu to keep order in Shoa. This was, of course, the time during which Taitu had demonstrated her administrative skill. Within a month of Menelik’s departure to Arsi in November 1886, some of the soldiers of Ras Welde Gebriel who were camped near Harar deserted his camp because “their first approach to Harar had been frightened away by a sudden eruption of rocket fire.” Menilik was meanwhile leaving Arsi for Harar (Prouty 1986, 55). Taitu intervened as soon as she heard of this disorder. She sent a message to the local rulers that reads: “If all these soldiers have come to guard me, I congratulate them but if they intend to run away their heads are mine and their belonging will go to those who capture them.” Having heard of her message the deserters proceeded to the capital. Meanwhile, Taitu sent another message to the *Meslenes* (local governors) of nearby districts that reads: “The soldiers who have been with Wolde Gebriel are going to come to you with the pretext that you must feed them. On Tuesday, I intend to chain all the deserters (near me). You on that same day collect the guns of those who have reached you and put them in stocks” (*Ibid*). This was successfully accomplished and this indicates Taitu’s role in military affairs and efficient administration.

The second time that saw Taitu’s experience as efficient administrator in the absence of her husband came when Menelik campaigned to subdue the Tigrean chiefs in December 1889. Taitu accompanied him as far as Dessie, where she stayed to keep order, protected

by her own troops. At this time a certain Zegeye, rival to her brother Ras Wolle, governor of Yeju, threatened to take over the region in the absence of Wolle, who had accompanied Menelik to Tigre. Taitu is reported to have handled the crisis by sending some soldiers to capture Zegeye while at the same time she sent a message warning the people of Yeju not to help Zegeye. The message reads:

Men of my country, it is to prevent suffering that I have come here. Since the time of Gugsa [Taytu's ancestor from this area] until today we have had no quarrel with you. Take care that no dissension explodes between me and you. As for Zegeye, if I should hear that you permitted him to enter and govern Yeju, or even if I learn you allowed him to drink water in Yeju from his cupped hand, we will become, you and I, mortal enemies" (*Ibid*, 69).

This was read in Weldya (capital of Yeju province) and having heard it the people of Yeju sent to Zegeye a message in which they warned him that they would fight him if he continued his march. He stopped his march, and as a result some of his allies were captured by the force of Taitu sent from Desse (*Ibid*; Gebre Selassie 1959 E.C 172; Tadesse 1988 E.C., 21-22). Thus, Taitu averted a challenge to her brother's rule and maintained peace and order in the region.

The above examples clearly show the experience of Taitu in efficient administration and in pacifying rebellions. More than these, Taitu had also been an ardent opponent of Italian colonial ambitions in Ethiopia. To start from the beginning, Count Antoneli, the Italian envoy to the court of Emperor Menelik, reported that Taitu had been very much annoyed at the Italian landing at Massawa on February 5, 1885 (Prouty 1986, 95). She was a supported Emperor Yohannes in his instructing Menelik to expel the Italians from Shoa, following their expansion into the northern highlands. Prouty maintains that Taitu was "more cynical than Menelik about statements made by diplomats in Addis Ababa and certainly did not share her husband's delight in gadgets invented overseas. She asked questions that he did not" (*Ibid* 219) Oral tradition also corroborates this assertion on the usual suspicion of Taitu regarding the activities of foreigners in Ethiopia (Tsehay 1983, 28; Pankhurst 1996, 29).

However, the degree to which she was aware of Italian colonial expansion was not known until 1889, for her husband had been establishing an amicable relation with the Italians since 1876 and there was no report of Taitu's attempt to stop it. Taitu's involvement in diplomatic affairs with the Italians came mainly after the disclosure of the Italian version of Article XVII of the Wuchale Treaty (signed on 2 May, 1889) that reduced Ethiopia to the status of an Italian colony. Taitu might have been aware of it before Menelik did, since it is said that she was impressed by *Aleqa* Atme's warning to the emperor about the danger contained in that Article, but she couldn't save the clerk from being detained for it, as a result of the intrigue of the Italian envoy Count Antoneli (Atme 1901 E.C., 112-13; Tadesse 1988 E.C., 19). Once the secret was disclosed, however, she appraised *Aleqa* Atme and rebuked the Ethiopian translator of the Treaty, *Grazmach* Yosseph. Moreover, she was very much disappointed with the very compromise of her husband with the Italians that she assailed him: "King John never wanted to cede an inch of territory, he fought against the Italian (and)...the Egyptians for

this [principle]: he died for this, and you after such an example, wish to sell your country? Who will [want to] write your history?" (Quoted in Marcus 1975, 126).

Since then Taitu had never reconciled with the Italians. Having already won the support of the emperor for her request to participate in the discussion over major political affairs she challenged the attempts of Antoneli to convince Menelik on the treaty (Tadesse 1988 E.C., 19-20). Bahru wrote of her, "even more than Menelik who was prone to compromise... Taitu was an unrelenting advocate of total rupture with the Italians" (1991, 117). Antoneli himself reported to the Italian government that he faced serious opposition mainly from the empress. Indeed she declared that she preferred war to accepting protectorate status for Ethiopia as provided for in the Italian version of Article XVII. Thus she told Antoneli, "I am a woman and I do not love war, but rather than accepting this [Article XVII] I prefer war" (Quoted in Marcus 1975, 126-27). As a result, Antoneli was forced to modify the article and proposed the signing of an additional agreement abrogating the Wuchale Treaty on condition that Menelik oblige himself not to accept the protection of any other power in place of Italy. He justified his proposal with the fact that notifying great powers about the abrogation of Wuchale would be derogatory to Italian honour. However, this raised a more staunch opposition from the empress who challenged Antoneli with a short response: "we also have our honour to protect" (*Ibid*, 130; Work 1963, 118). Indeed the abrogation of Wuchale Treaty by Menelik in February 1893 was highly instigated by Taitu (Bahru 1991, 117-18; Jacobs n.d, 224).

This event made war inevitable and Taitu was one of the persistent advocates of the use of force against the Italians. When Menelik made his mobilization order in September 1895, she was ready to follow him to the battlefield at the command of her own contingent. Some higher officials had proposed that she should stay in the capital and keep peace and order (Tadesse 1988 E.C., 94; Prouty 1986, 133). Nevertheless, Taitu did not give up her plan. She had already gathered her weavers and potters whom she kept busy producing clothes and utensils. She also sent messages to her estates ordering them to help her organize provisions and supplies along the main routes of the march. This was duly implemented in Meqele and Mersa, where she collected tributes in sheep, cows, honey and butter (Prouty 1986, 133-34).

Besides her own troops, which she herself equipped with the help of Menelik, the empress was accompanied by thousands of Ethiopian women. These included her dames of honour, royal servants, slaves, wives and concubines of officials and ordinary soldiers, minstrels, etc., of different ages. The palace servants were organized into different service units headed by captains whose palace service also extended to war times. They included women for the *Tej bet* (mead house), *Enjera bet* (bakers house), *Tella bet* (Beer house), *Genbogna* (Potters), etc. These women performed the various duties attached to each unit of the palace (*Ibid*, 137; Paulos 1986 E.C., 103; Gebre Selassie 1959 E.C., 243).

All these women and the non-combatant men were armed with spears, shields and swords to participate in the actual fighting in time of need. Berkeley, the British military historian of the campaign of Adwa, wrote, "It is not an army [but] an invasion, the transplanting of the whole people" (1969,10). However, there is no precise estimate of

the number of women camp-followers during the campaign of Adwa. Berkeley estimated the total non-combatant followers to about 30,000 (*Ibid*, 156-57). Major Salsa, who visited the court of Menelik after the end of the war, reported that the war was fought with about 130,000 combatants and 60 - 70,000 servants (men and women) (Quoted in Tekle Tsadiq 1983 E.C. 266-67). The Italian General, Barateri estimated the camp-followers at about 40,000 (Quoted in Berkley 1969, 157). Given the fact that most often the majority of the camp-followers in military expeditions were women, one can safely assume that on average not less than 20-30,000 women had participated in the campaign of Adwa.

With the exception of the royal women, wives of the dignitaries and the captains as well as their maidservants, the remaining women camp-followers performed various duties from the outset of the march, at camps and at battle fields. The first duty at leaving their homes was carrying various utensils such as pots for making *tej*, *tella*, *wat* (stew), baking pans for making bread, mills for grinding flour, jars of honey, horns for drinks and different other materials that can not be loaded on animals for safety purposes. (Wylde 1901, 105; Gebre Selassie 1959E.C., 229) They also did carry different spices for the preparation of royal feasts. Their role in the transportation of goods was quite tremendous, but it found out to be their most burdensome duty, given the long march of up to more than 800 kms from the capital, inconvenient roads crowded with animals and men, accents and descents of mountains, climates, etc. (Gebre Selassie 1959 E.C., 255; Pankhurst 1990b, 260; Tekle Tsadiq 1983 E.C., 266-67). Berkeley described the condition of the march as follows:

They were all crowded one on to the other, amidst donkeys, mules and horses on the same track. And when the road was not wide enough or when owing to the arrival of some important chiefs or a ras or the negus they were obliged to make way, they threw themselves indifferently to the right or to the left (1969, 10-11).

Sometimes women were obliged to crawl on their hands and knees with their burden on their shoulder or waist. Human epidemics could also break out because of the many dead on the road. Moreover, the Ethiopian army often travelled 10 -20 miles a day. The Italian prisoners reported after the battle of Adwa that they were unable to keep up with the Ethiopian army, there being no halt during even the longest march until it reached its camping site for the night (*Ibid*, 48).

All these problems of the march were tolerated by women during the return march, too. Indeed women did follow the army, "singing, laughing and frolicking as if they were at a party," wrote Antoneli (Quoted in Teferi 1971, 142-43; Tekle Tsadiq 1983 E.C., 22-27). They were thus a moral force behind the soldiers during the march.

At the camps, women were responsible for the preparation of food and drinks. Thus as soon as the site was selected and a signal was given for a halt, the women put down their loads and went out for fetching water and foraging for wood to build the fires for cooking. Others helped in the clearing of the camp and arranging the utensils for the cooking, drinking and eating. The different departments of the palace pitched their tents round the royal tents. Then began the preparation of food and drinks for daily consumption and for the next march. Some women baked *injera* (bread) while others

cooked *wat*, (stew) of different qualities. Drinks such as *tej* (mead) and *tella* (beer) were also prepared in different qualities, since all the peace-time distinctions for the upper classes were kept intact during the campaign, too. Besides the preparation of royal feasts, women retainers of soldiers also served their respective husbands or masters in supplying them with food either brought from home or found on their way from looting, or rations (*Ibid*; Prouty 1986, 138-39; Teshale 1989, 207). At the time of great scarcity, such women prepared food from wild fruits, plants, etc. Still others performed the duties of packing food and drinks for the next day, grinding flour, washing cloths and the feet of their respective masters, etc. (Gebre Selassie 1959 E.C., 228).

Further reports on the duties of women camp-followers made references to their participation in the clearing of roads, digging trenches and building fortifications. Women also played a significant role in raising the morale of their menfolk during the march and at camps (*Ibid*; Paulos 1986 E.C., 177).

Obviously the campaign of Adwa, in which the Empress became commander of an army and thousands of women that performed various duties of great significance, revealed the fact that the role of women in war had got due recognition.

As a persistent advocate of the use of force against the Italians, the empress left the capital in October 1895 at the head of her contingent and about 100 women including her step-daughter Zewditu. She had at her disposal about 3000 rifles, 600 horses and 4 guns (Berkley 1969, 269; Prouty 1986, 136-37).

Despite empress Taitu's enthusiasm for war with the Italians, Emperor Menelik and *Ras* Mekonnen were in favour of peaceful negotiations. This seemed to have alarmed Taitu. Thus when *Ras* Mekonnen arrested *Fitawrari* Gebeyehu for having ambushed an Italian contingent at Ambalage on 7 December 1895, Empress Taitu is said to have intervened in favour of the *Fitawrari* and to have rebuked the *Ras*. *Ras* Mekonnen tried to justify his action by accusing *Fitawrari* Gebeyehu of engaging in a fight without his order, but Taitu assailed him, "were you supplying mud [cement/stone] to an enemy that was building the fortification, when he [Gebeyehu] was fighting them?" (Tadesse 1988 E.C., 22).

Taitu's intervention had two likely aims: firstly avoiding conflict among the war leaders and secondly weakening the enemy at separate engagements before the major war. As per her expectation, the victory of Ambalage boosted the moral of the Ethiopian army, for it caused the death of about 2000 Italians including their commander, Major Tosseli, and thereby encouraged further engagement with the enemy (Bahru 1991, 77; Tekle Tsadiq 1983 E.C., 263).

The battle of Ambalage was followed by the long siege and final surrender of the fortified position of the Italians in Meqele on 21 January 1896. It was, however, not an easy victory; it combined great sacrifice and efficient tactics for harassing the enemy. Contemporary accounts on the Ethiopian side invariably referred to the immense role played by Empress Taitu. She could not conceal her disappointment with the Ethiopian generals for letting the Italians build such a strong fortification (Paulos 1986 E.C., 177; Gebre Selassie 1959 E.C., 241).

Thus as soon as they camped in Meqele, Menelik and Taitu encouraged their soldiers to attack the Italians at their fortified position. Later on, however, they realised that attacking the well-fortified Italians would bring more disaster and big losses to the Ethiopians. Empress Taitu forwarded an important and rewarding proposal that was to become one of her remarkable contributions to the war effort. Taitu's proposal was to besiege the Italians by controlling their water supply. This was approved by the emperor.

It was very difficult to convince the Ethiopian soldiers that controlling the water source would be more rewarding than attacking the fort. However, before dawn on 9 January, 1896, 900 men from the Empress's contingent crept down into the ravine as per her plan. They built a barricade to protect themselves from the Italian fire, and they stayed there for two weeks courageously fighting and well supplied by the empress with food and drinks (Gebre Selassie 1959 E.C., 247).

Thanks to the successful implementation of Taitu's plan, the Italians suffered very much from shortage of water and were compelled to accept the unconditional surrender of their fortification and evacuated on 21 January 1896 on the order of Menelik despite the objection of Taitu and some chiefs such as *Ras Mengesha* (*Ibid*, 250; Prouty 1986,150). At any rate this was the second most important victory for the Ethiopians before the final showdown at the battle of Adwa.

Since then, Taitu is reported to have strongly opposed any concession of an Ethiopian land to Italy and she remarked to the chiefs, "Yield nothing, what you give away today will be a future ladder against your fortress and tomorrow the Italians will come up it into your domains. If you must loose lands loose them at least with your strong right arms" (Greenfield 1965, 122). As we shall see in the next chapter her precaution proved to be right.

2.2 The Role of Women at the Battle of Adwa

Though battles were obviously fought mainly with men the tens of thousands of women camp-followers who accompanied Empress Taitu were not passive spectators at Adwa. Both Italian and Ethiopian sources have attested to the various activities of the Ethiopian women at Adwa though the chronicler had Empress Taitu at the top of the achievements of women. The Empress was camped at the reserve position with her husband; the bishop Abuna Mathewos and the clergy were on her side and before them were the clergy of Aksum and the trumpeters (Berkley 1969, 280; Prouty 1986, 156). According to the chronicler:

The empress removed her veil and under a black umbrella advanced on foot as did the other royal women, among whom were *Woizero Zewditu*...Empress Taitu seeing some soldiers hesitating cried to them with all her strength, 'courage, victory is ours, strike.' The soldiers could not run away when encouraged by women and returned to the fighting (Gebre Selassie 1959 E.C., 266; translated by Prouty 1986, 156-57).

At Adwa, women were said to have built up the morale of the fighters through war cries and songs. Apparently it was common to find women to have cried with blood-curdling exhortations such as "kill, kill, the brave man will bring me a trophy" (Prouty 1986,

157). That is why it seems most of the wars fought in the presence of women were reportedly bloody.

Besides the moral support, Empress Taitu mobilized the women to supply water to the fighters and the wounded. An anonymous writer is quoted by Prouty, regarding Taitu's contribution in this respect:

The empress collected her 10-12000 women in the camp and issued water jugs to all of them. This army of another type filled their jugs at the river and were ready to carry water to those who fought whenever in need (1986, 159).

This role of women was also attested to by the Italians whose wounded were given by the Ethiopian women (Gizaw 1956 E.C., 99; Fesehaye 1971, 24-25). The thousand of women under the command of Taitu were also responsible for nursing the wounded fighters whom they carried to camps. They had already prepared traditional medicine for curing wounds. Meanwhile other women were busy redistributing rifles and bullets of the wounded and that of their dead menfolk and captives of war to the combatants. The Ethiopian women were also responsible for facilitating the burial of their dead who had fallen in battle (Gizaw 1956 E.C., 99; Gebre Selassie 1959 E.C., 265; Tadesse 1988 E.C., 95).

Empress Taitu's role as a brave commander was attested to by one witness. In his letter to Mondon Vidailhet, *Grazmach* Yosef, wrote:

The Ethiopian heroine empress Taitu distinguished herself through her valour... She advanced with her artillery in front of her and the riflemen to the left and right... when the men in front were attacked by cannon fire she assembled her forces in a fortified position and ordered them to return the fire from a distance... To prevent the front line from being weakened she returned those bringing prisoners. She also saw to it that those soldiers who had stayed in the rear would get to the front (Quoted in Fesehaye 1971, 25).

That she organized the defence perimeter using her personal army was also attested to by other writers too (Prouty 1986; 156; Tadesse 1988 E.C., 90). Empress Taitu and her women followers were also engaged in gathering intelligence information from local people and enemy camps. Menelik had the support of the local population whose patriotism had been intensified by the Italians' colonial policy of land expropriation for settlement and racial discrimination. Thus local people were willing to show the best routes and report on enemy movements, while at the same time they used to feed false information and maps to the enemy force. According to Berkley, the Ethiopian spies were composed of both sexes and were "fortunate enough in passing to and from the Italian camp which had been in a state of disorganization for some weeks before Adwa (1969, 253). Wylde stated that "many of the women who had free run of the Italian camp were spies for Menelik. They were greatly made use of to obtain news and they have the chance of getting employment in the officer's household and some of them follow the troops in their marches"(1901, 102-103). Some women were also engaged in actual combat taking away the rifle of the dead soldiers. The women of Adigrat are, for instance, reported to have harassed an Italian army by attacking them, and cutting off telegraph wires by rubbing it between two rocks (Prouty 1986, 153).

Women were also responsible for looking after properties, munitions, captives and animals at the camp and nearby areas along with the men camp-followers. Still others were instrumental in uniting broken contingents climbing to hill tops to monitor troop movements and to signal from a distance to their compatriots.

Tigrean chiefs had unsuccessfully tried to convince Menelik to cross the Mereb and chase the Italians out of Ethiopia. Unfortunately, for reasons beyond the scope of this paper, Menelik could not push his victory to its logical conclusion. He ordered a return to his capital. Consequently, what Taitu had foreseen about the danger of ceding territories to the enemy turned out to be true. The victory of Adwa drove the Italians out of Tigre but left them in their colony of Eritrea from where they launched their invasion of Ethiopia on 3 October 1935.

Therefore, it is not surprising that some journals of Europe published in the months following the victory of Adwa, came out bearing the pictures of Taitu and Menelik in their front pages. Regarding European public opinion about Taitu, Prouty wrote: "The notion of a warrior queen caught the popular fancy and evoked references to Zenobia, Cleopatra, Joan of Arc and Catherine the Great" (*Ibid*, 158).

3. THE ETHIOPIAN WOMEN AND THE ITALO-ETHIOPIAN WAR, 1935 - 41

Fascist Italy unleashed its invasion of Ethiopia on 3 October 1935. This came after long years of psychological and material preparation on the side of the Italians. At the root of the Fascist invasion lay the Italian's need to erase the 'shameful scar' of their defeat at the battle of Adwa fought on 1 March 1896. They were determined to restore the glory of the old Roman empire, besides the motive behind contemporary European imperialist expansion over much of the world (Bahru 1991, 151; Baer 1967, 7-9).

The Italians were already in control of Eritrea and Italian Somaliland. Ethiopia remained to be a third country to be conquered to realise the dream of building their empire of *Africa Orientale Italiana* (Italian East Africa). The former two colonies indeed served the fascist regime as springboards of its invading columns from the north and south, respectively (Bahru 1991, 153-54). Their plan was successful and the centuries-old independence of Ethiopia had fallen under the yoke of Italian Fascist Occupation (1936 - 41).

The balance of power shifted towards the Italians. Despite initial victories at some of their engagements, the Ethiopian soldiers were not able to cope up with Italy's superiority in organization, military leadership, air power, arms, munitions, numerical strength, supplies and provisions, medical services, transportation and communication, etc. Where as Italy was armed to its teeth Ethiopia was suffering from the scarcity of arms and munitions due to an arms embargo by the colonial powers (*Ibid*, 158-59). A detailed study of the background and factors for the victory of the Italians in 1936 is beyond the scope of this paper. The objective of this part of the paper is to investigate the role of the Ethiopian patriots in general and that of the women in particular in both the conventional combats of the 1935/36 and the subsequent patriotic resistance movements in the five years following Italy's triumphant control of Addis Ababa on 5 May 1936.

By and large, the Italo-Ethiopian war broke out in a decade of controversy within the Ethiopian state on the question of women's status in military affairs. The first written constitution of Ethiopia, promulgated in 1931, made it clear that succession was to be only through the male line thereby affecting the right of women to inherit land, including that of a military type. One letter of the Minister of Pen, *Tsehafe Tezaz* Wolde Mesqal, dated Miyazya 26, 1926 E.C., which was addressed to the minister of war, for instance, did prohibit the enlistment of women in military expedition. It reads:

...[the daughter of a deceased officer and soldier]...is no longer to enlist in the *damb* and is no longer to hold the rifle but she should be eligible to receive... the security towards the upbringing of the dead officer's or soldiers' sons who are not yet of age to enlist in the *damb*, and to hold the rifle until the boys reach 15 years (Tsehay 1980, 76-77).

Hence, women were confined to only caring for their minors. However, the implementation of the state policy lacks uniformity and some regional governors were reported to be "appointing their favourites and disinheriting their enemies" (*Ibid*). Although the new law could have reduced the number of women involved in military expeditions, this did not materialise since war broke out shortly afterwards. Indeed the mobilization order of Emperor Haile Selassie I issued on 28 September 1935 resorted to the traditional practice by calling on to arms all those who were in the *damb* and those who had a rifle. There was no clear gender distinction. The Ethiopian feudal lords and their retainers joined the war along the traditional lines, accompanied by camp-followers of both sexes. Women landholders too joined the troops (*Ibid*, 77). The Emperor himself later on called for the unreserved contribution of women, in his appeal for money with which to purchase arms, in his speech to the parliament on the eve of the war. In this speech, he stated:

...our women must be taught to nurse the wounded and even to fight. We shall be glad if in Ethiopia, as in some other countries, the women learn the use of military arms and undergo military exercises (Makin 1935, 102-103).

George Steer, the British war correspondent, further added that the emperor declared that "Women would play their part in the war going to the fronts to encourage and feed the soldiers and to tend the wounded"(1936, 45). This was actually the traditional role of women in military expeditions. At any rate the emperor's speeches amply demonstrated the government's recognition of women's contribution to war efforts not only along the traditional lines but also by promoting their status in war through modern training that would enable them to participate in combat as well (Greenfield 1965, 210; Seife Selassie 1953 E.C., 86).

On their part, the Ethiopian women responded to the mobilization order of the emperor as enthusiastic as their menfolk. Thus women started their service by calling on men to take up arms. The women did this by tying a slogan to a stick put on a chariot and by pronouncing the message along the major roads of Addis Ababa. Their slogan reads:

Wake up men
Protect your country
Let alone the men

We the women will fight
(Paulos 1980 E.C., 9)

In August 1935, the Association of Ethiopian Women's Welfare Work was founded by Princess Tsehay, daughter of the emperor, under the patronage of Her Majesty Empress Menen. Princess Tsehay was assisted by Lady Barton, wife of the British ambassador, in organizing women of the capital to prepare clothes, mattresses, gas masks, bandages, and to pack rations for the troops. Lady Barton is also reported to have mobilized more than 1000 women in the preparation of Red Cross supplies (Steer 1936, 286; Makin 1935, 199; Ministry of Information 1958 E.C., 50; Waugh 1936, 82). Under her management the women made about 1800 gun masks which was piled and sent to the northern front in April 1935 (Steer 1936, 286).

There was also a meeting in the capital of aristocratic ladies at which a discussion was made on the formation of a local Red Cross unit and on fund raising for the war effort. It is reported that a voluntary subscription by about 500 women including members of the royal family enabled raising a total sum of 33,000 M.T. Thallers. Another report shows that a similar contribution was made by country ladies and women landowners of western Shoa who sent a sum of 120,000 M.T. Thalers to the Welfare Association (Waugh 1936, 82; Makin 1935, 200).

The traditional role of the empress in war was kept up to this day. Though Menen had never led a contingent of her own to any battle like Empress Taitu and Empress Menen (Ras Ali's mother), nor even had she accompanied her husband to any war, Empress Menen was very busy in the capital organizing funds for the various activities of the welfare association and warning people to protect themselves from bombs (Ministry of Information 1954 E.C., 35). On 13 September 1935, she made a radio appeal to women and men of the world in which she stated:

...There is still time for those who desire justice to take action to end the most unjust of wars... I, therefore, appeal to France the emblem of equality, fraternity and liberty; to Great Britain, defender of justice; for all races and to the whole world to abandon all further delay in saving my country (Quoted in *New Times and Ethiopian News*, 9 May 1936).

Her appeal was part of the diplomatic campaign to be pursued by the emperor following the Wal Wal Incident of December 1934 by which Italy started her fascist aggression. The Empress further stated, "Women of the world unite. Demand with one voice that we may be spared the honour of useless bloodshed" (*Ibid*).

Likewise, her daughter, Princess Tsehay was very active in the diplomatic campaign. In its issue of 22 March 1936, the *New Times and Ethiopian News* came out with her protest addressed to Women's Advisory Council of the League of Nations, against the use of mustard gas by Italy. It reads:

For seven days without break the enemy have been bombing the armies and peoples of my country including women and children with terrible gasses... Against this cruel gas we have no protection... This suffering and torture is beyond description...

Having a fluent command of English and French, Princess Tsehay accompanied her father when he left Ethiopia to lay the case of his country before the League of Nations

in Geneva, during which she served him as a secretary and a translator. Throughout the period of Italian Occupation (1936 - 41) Princess Tsehay stayed in London attending a medical school and at the same time organizing the activities of the Women's Welfare Association abroad whose main duty was caring for numerous Ethiopian refugees in various countries (*Ibid*).

In addition to the aforementioned contribution in the mobilization, welfare works and diplomatic activities, the Ethiopian women of those days, like their predecessors, rose up to join their menfolk in battles. They cleaned the rifles and shields and sharpened the swords of their men. They packed provisions and supplies on an individual basis as in the old days. Indeed the bulk of the Ethiopian army was still traditional despite the government's attempts at modernization and therefore was in need of the service of women camp-followers. Of course, the war of 1935/36 did not see the company of royal women and the empress. An exception to this was Princess Romanworq Haile Selassie, wife of the governor of Bale, named *Dejazmach* Beyene Marid, who accompanied her husband in his fighting at the southern fronts until his death in February 1937. Following his death she followed *Ras* Desta Damtew until her capture by local people of Adami Tulu where she stayed until the Italians deported her to Italy (Seife Selassie 1953 E.C., 182-83). One can also add *Woizero* Lakech Demisew, a great granddaughter of King Sahle Selassie of Shoa and wife of *Dejazmach* Mengesha Aboye, for she accompanied her husband to the northern front holding a rifle and in men's uniform (Tintawit Ityopia Jegnoch Mahber n.d, 9-10).

Women camp-followers were reported to have mainly been engaged in the transportation and preparation of food and drinks for their husbands, brothers and masters. In the event of food scarcity they used to gather fruits and roots of some plants (Gerima 1949 E.C., 194; Mockler 1984, 86-88; Farago 1935, 18).

Likewise, they used to assist members of the Red Cross in carrying the wounded as well as giving first aid or full nursing service using traditional medicines which they prepared from roots, barks, fruits and leaves of various trees. A British transport officer Captain Brophil wrote of their service, "They are fairly good at nursing and are often very successful with their native herbs. After the doctors have dressed the injured the women will take them away to relatives" (Quoted in *New Times and Ethiopia News*, 8 May 1936).

Yet a very small number of women were reported to have rendered services in modern nursing. The most popular of such women was *Woizero* Senedu Gebru, who was educated in Switzerland and was married to H.E. Lorenzo Teezaz, Minister of Foreign Affairs. The career of *Woizero* Senedu was attached to the graduates of Holleta Military Academy which she joined with her sister Desta Gebru and *Woizero* Tsege Mengesha [her mother?] (Ministry of Information 1958 E.C., 102). There is a reference to the presence of her brother, Lieutenant Meshesha, among the cadets. The officers organized a patriotic organization called Tiquir Anbassa (Black Lion), which began its anti-Fascist resistance movement in western Ethiopia. Senedu and other women wore uniforms and hats with Red Cross marks and served the cadets as "impromptu Red Cross Units," tending not only the fighting men but also the civilians suffering from bullets, burns and poisonous gas. They performed their duty accompanying the cadets in Wellega,

Illubabor and the Gibbe region under the leadership of *Ras* Imiru, who led their unsuccessful campaign to liberate the capital. Senedu was eventually captured with many cadets and was deported to Italy where she was detained for two and a half years. (Pankhurst 1990b, 345).

The bulk of women camp-followers and minstrels played a significant role in inciting their men to fight with valour. They also sounded war trumpets amidst the battle and from the rear (Damte 1950 E.C., 282-83). They harassed the enemy forces by sending down avalanches of stones from hilltops and setting fire to their camps (Gerima 1949 E.C., 295; Salome 1958, 78).

The Italo-Ethiopian war of those days did also witness the engagement of valiant women combatants in the major fronts such as at the battles of Shire, Tembien, Ambaradam, Maichew, etc., and the subsequent patriotic resistance movements. Such women include aristocratic fief - holders of a military type who had to lead their own contingent because of the duties attached to the landholding as well as those who replaced their deceased husbands as military commanders (Salome 1958, 68; Mockler 1984, 178). In any case there are references to valiant women of all classes who fought as bravely as the men in different battles.

Makin refers to an Ethiopian Amazon under the command of *Woizero* Abebech Chergos who was a daughter of wealthy landowner. Though there is no other source substantiating his account, Del Boca wrote of the number of her army to have been about 3000. She is said to have fought in Gondar (Makin 1935, 200; Del Boca 1969, 40). A detailed account of women war leaders is, however, available mainly for the period of patriotic guerrilla wars. Below is the exploits of some notable women war leaders who equally shared the burden of patriotic wars of liberation fought throughout the period of 1936 - 41.

The first of these brave war leaders was *Woizero* Lekyelesh Beyan, who fought under the command of Emperor Haile Selassie at the battle of Maichew on 31 March 1936 (Ministry of Information 1958 E.C., 50). Tsehay Berhane Selassie claims to have interviewed this woman in 1972 and describes that Lekyelesh took up her father's gun and carried her four-month old daughter on her back and joined the Kembata army under the command of *Dejazmach* Meshesha Wolde. *Woizero* Lekyelesh had to perform the duty attached to an army land which she inherited in Kembata province, but she could not have a proxy, for her husband too had a piece of land to stand for. As a result both husband and wife joined the campaign at the head of their contingents (Tsehay 1980, 79).

Woizero Lekyelesh and her husband returned to the capital following the defeat of the Ethiopian army in the northern front. However, she did not give up the struggle. Instead she became a guerrilla fighter in Shoa. In the summer of 1936, she joined the abortive attempt of prominent war lords to liberate the capital through a simultaneous attack from different directions. The plan failed due to lack of efficient coordination, but Lekyelesh revealed her undaunted commitment to die for her country. Then she went to Jiru where she continued her patriotic career with her husband who unfortunately lost his life at one of the fierce engagements with the Italians on 10 August 1937 (Ministry of Information

1958 E.C., 50-51). Interviewed on the fall of her husband she is quoted to have remembered:

I could see him firing behind... tall grass. Suddenly he waved to me and fell. I went over to his side leaving my position. He was dead. Enemy soldiers were close by on the other side of the river. Before I started to pull [him] away, I fired across the river and killed three men. I then took his body and his gun and withdrew. The rest of my men were safe. I buried him at the church of Dima Gabriel (Quoted in Tsehay 1980, 79).

This story was supported by a book compiled by the Ministry of Information and published on the occasion of the Silver Jubilee Anniversary celebration of the Liberation.

According to oral informants, many women did join the guerrilla fighters of Shoa and performed bravely. It is said that they did this within a few months following the fall of the capital to the enemy. Of course, many women of the capital joined the guerrilla band leaving their homes open so that "people will not suspect that they have gone away for good" (Tsehay 1980, 78).

By and large the number of women in the actual combat showed a significant increase in patriotic guerrilla wars fought mainly after 1937. There are many reasons for this. Firstly, the triumphant entry of the enemy into the capital at the expense of an immense loss in human and material wealth aroused great nationalist feeling and the need for revenge. Secondly, women were also highly offended by the inhuman treatment at the hands of the Italians engaged in the search for rifles and other war materials. The latter used to flog and jail women that refused to submit rifles or locate the whereabouts of their warrior husbands or brothers. Disarming one's self is intolerable in Ethiopian custom and indeed women prefer dying to surrendering the war materials of their husbands. Informants say that many women used to hide the weapons in latrines, underground stores, water wells, dense forests, etc., if they were unable to flee and join the guerrilla bands nearby. Thirdly, many women left their homes to avoid dishonour at the hands of the fascist rapists. Fourthly, quite a significant number of women joined guerrilla fighters as a result of Italian air bombardment that burnt their homes to ashes and devastated their crops and cattle. Last but not least, most of the patriotic wars were fought in local districts where the chiefs and soldiers had to operate with the whole family (*Ibid*, 74)

Among all the other events and historic reasons, however, a nationwide anti-fascist patriotic feeling provoked by the general Fascist massacre of February 1937, following the unsuccessful attempt on the life of the Italian viceroy, Marshal Rodolfo Graziani (Bahru 1991, 167; Greenfield 1965, 224-25). Following the abortive assassination attempt made on February 19, a reign of terror was unleashed in Addis Ababa. On the order of the Italian officials, the Black Shirts were busy murdering any Ethiopian found in the palace (where the assassination was attempted) and on the streets of Addis Ababa for three days. Thousands of Ethiopians were killed with pistol shots, bayonets and daggers. Pregnant women were disemboweled, heads of dead bodies were chopped off, and houses were burnt to ashes with families inside. A contemporary eyewitness account of the wholesale massacre reads:

...the streets were strewn with dead bodies...The method consisted of setting fire and massacring them without distinction. One could see groups of Fascists chaining the poor men to lorries and amusing themselves by dragging them along from one part of the town to another until their bodies fell to pieces. Others entertained themselves by scourging naked women to death under the eyes of their husbands and brothers, who were of course rendered impotent. Blood flew on all sides in torrents... [Houses and human bodies were burnt with petrol and oil.] (Quoted in Mockler 1984, 176; *New Times and Ethiopian News* 10 April, 1937; Berhanu 1937 E.C., 11).

According to Ethiopian official accounts, about 30,000 Ethiopians of different ages, classes and sex were killed in three days (Mockler 1984, 176; Paulos 1980 E.C., 158).

Anti-fascist struggles and general patriotic feelings had been mounting since the dawn of the Italian occupation in May 1936. It embraced all classes of Ethiopians from all regions (*New Times and Ethiopian News* 3 July 1937). Of course, the first phase of the struggle revealed the continuation of the major war in the northern and southern fronts and it took a conventional character. It was led by mainly by the upper nobility. This phase lasted until February 1937. The Italian atrocities of 1937 escalated the patriotic struggle and marked the beginning of the second phase which was characterized by a guerrilla warfare in the course of which the Ethiopian women did play a significant role not only as fighters but also in multi-dimensional underground works (*Ibid*).

The correspondent of the *Daily Herald* reported that following the massacre of February 1937, Ethiopian women of "the more intellectual type" began to plot against Grazziani, for which more than 1000 women have been exiled after being made 'the playthings' of the Italian soldiery." Others were shot in the capital (*Ibid*). Consequently, the Fascist regime became intolerable to every Ethiopian. Women were no exception.

Of course, it was only a handful of women who led their own army in the guerrilla wars, like *Woizero* Lekyelesh Beyan, whose career as a guerrilla fighter ended only in January 1941, when she was captured after an Italian air bombardment. The fascists were becoming very harsh in their air attack of the countryside for harbouring resistance fighters. Since August 1940, the patriots were suffering very much and some were dispersed to inaccessible regions while many others were beginning to surrender. *Woizero* Lekyelesh was captured in a small hut where she resided following a very serious illness. Remembering the event, she is quoted to have said "the attackers threw grenades, opened the door and entered. One of the men hit me with the butt of his gun on my shoulder because he thought I was feigning sleep" (Quoted in Tsehay 1980, 80). She was taken prisoner with her child and stayed in jail until the Liberation.

The second woman worthy of mention for her immense military achievements was *Woizero* Kebedech Seyoum. She belonged to the royal house of Tigre. She was a daughter of *Ras* Seyum Mengesha and a great granddaughter of Emperor Yohannis IV (1872 - 89). She was the wife of *Dejazmach* Abera Kassa, who was killed by the Italians for having unsuccessfully attempted to liberate the capital with the help of his own brother *Dejazmach* Wondwosen and the renowned patriots of Shoa in July 1936. *Woizero* Kebedech started her patriotic activity already before the fall of the capital to the Italians. Thus when her husband was fighting in the northern fronts she maintained

peace and order in the province of Selale representing the governorship of her husband. In this region, Kebedech also did a propaganda work of inspiring her men to die for their country and not to allow Italian disarmament and subversive activities (*New Times and Ethiopian News*, 10 July 1937; Ministry of Information 1958 E.C., 49; Tintawit Ethiopia Jegnoch Mahber, her archive, 1-2).

After the return of her husband from the northern front, she was engaged in taking care of the wounded and reinforcing his army with provisions and supplies. She accompanied her husband in the campaign of July 1936 to liberate the capital. The attempt earned her husband frequent harassment and a call for him to surrender to the Italians. Before he discussed the issue with his brother and surrendered himself, *Dejazmach* Abera sent his wife to Adisge, where she shortly afterwards received his letter and arms. The letter contained his justification for surrendering. He wrote his wife that he did not want to save his life at the expense of his innocent men whom, he feared, the Italians would massacre on failure to get his hands (Tintawit Ethiopia Jegnoch Mahber, Kebedech's Archive, 5-6).

This must have had a lasting impact on the later career of *Woizero* Kebedech. She received the news of the execution of her husband and his brother as soon as they surrendered to the Italians. The news caused much grief to Kebedech, who since then decided to avenge the death of her husband despite repeated Italian warnings and unsuccessful attempts to capture her. As a member of a royal family, she was able to mobilize a large number of fighters within a short time. The army of her deceased husband, her two sons and servants made up the core of her retainers (*New Times and Ethiopian News*, 1 September 1937).

Woizero Kebedech fought many battles in the districts of Menz, Tegulet, Ifat, Selale and Merhabete. She made frequent contacts and often led joint attacks with prominent Shoaan patriotic leaders such as *Ras* Abebe Aregay, *Djazmach* Zewde Asfaw and *Shaleqa* Mesfin Sileshi (Salome 1958, 70; Tintawit Ityopia Jegnoch Mahbar 1983 E.C., 39). Throughout the battles, she wore men's uniform and fought gallantly and commanded ably, at times finding herself in the midst of battles (Salome 1958, 70). Surprisingly enough, she was already pregnant when she took over the command of her husband's army. She delivered in a desert a baby-son whom she named Tariku (to mean historic). She could not stay in bed to be fed well for delivery, and left Shoa for Wellega very soon along with her soldiers. The army had to fight all the way until she led it to southern Gojam, from where she went in exile to Sudan in 1939. Eventually she went via Cairo to Jerusalem. She said in an interview that the presence of her elder son strengthened her determination to avenge the death of his father. She reported that her contingent used to respect her as equally as any male war leader, and their alliance with other liberation fighters always enabled them to score many victories and collect booties and captives (Tintawit Ityopia 1983 E.C., 40). She stayed in the Holy Land until the liberation of Ethiopia in 1941 when she returned to her country and led a lonely career caring for orphan children and churches (*Ibid*).

The third woman with great patriotic achievement was *Woizero* Shewareged Gedle, whose heroic deeds earned her the epithets "the lion-hearted woman" and "the Ethiopian Joan of Arc" (Ministry of Information 1958 E.C., 49). She was daughter of a

commander. She is said to have learned “to fight with a sword and often practiced mock duels with trained and tough soldiers (*Ibid*).

When the Italo-Ethiopian war broke out, Shewareged was very busy raising funds, collecting first aid medication and mobilizing a league of women patriots who, according to some sources, took an oath to fight the enemy till death (*The Ethiopian Herald* 3 November 1967; Greenfield 1965, 247). She took the command of these women herself and is said to have fought in Shoa. As a dedicated guerrilla fighter, she sold the land she inherited from her father and used the money to buy clothes, medicine, bullets and rifles for her soldiers and other patriots operating near Addis Ababa. She also gave financial support to the Red Cross. To her credit, she is also reported to have assisted poor villagers deprived of their living by the Italians (Ministry of Information 1958 E.C., 50).

Her extensive patriotic activities brought *Woizero* Shewareged to frequent court trials by Italian officials. However, she was dauntless and used to declare her unreserved commitment to die for her country’s independence. At one time she was brought to the Italian court for having wept on seeing the Italian flag hoisted and was asked why she did that. Her response was surprising even to the fascist officials:

Women of your country who were envious of others’ country have given their rings to the bandits (soldiers) who came to invade Ethiopia. Is my weeping alone a crime when I see my country invaded by alien people, my state collapsed, my county’s flag replaced by another? [Weeping is not enough] (*Ibid*).

She was released, but she kept up her struggle. Different sources agree that *Woizero* Shewareged also rendered multi-dimensional service in underground patriotic activities in the capital from where she used to instil patriotic zeal, organize and send foods, medicines, arms and clothes to the guerrilla fighters. Using her relation with an Ethiopian in the service of the Fascist political office, she gathered valuable information on contemporary political and military affairs. Her intelligence report was systematically sent to renowned war leaders such as *Ras* Abebe Aregay (Tadesse 1960 E.C., 506).

Following the attempt on the life of Grazziani, she was suspected of treason and captured to be deported with many Ethiopians to the Italian prison near the island of Sardinia where she stayed for two years. She was tortured and flogged in prison to force her to disclose secrets many times. At one instance, she lost her patience and struck an Italian officer in the face and shouted “You are entitled to imprison me, but not to insult me”(Quoted in Tsehay 1980, 81).

Having promised not to engage in subversive activities, she was allowed to return home. However, Shewareged did not fulfil her promise and kept up her patriotic struggle. She joined an underground organization known as *Wust Arbegnoch* (inner patriots). The main duty of this organization was to gather intelligence information, raise funds, collect ammunition, food, clothes and medication to be sent to the guerrilla fighters. She gave extensive service in this regard (*The Ethiopian Herald*, 3 November 1967).

In the summer of 1940 *Woizero* Shewareged was engaged in a grand plan to attack an Italian ammunition depot in Addis Alem, where she had a house. She investigated the condition of the depot and of the Ethiopian prisoners in the same compound. Meanwhile,

she corresponded with prominent Showan patriots such as Jagema Kello (later General), Colonel Zewde Tilahun, Captain Tengesse Kello and other officers, asking them to coordinate their efforts to attack the Italian prison and loot the depot at Addis Alem. She also won to her side the Ethiopians responsible for running the prison. In November 1940, an organized attack by her group overrun the prison, set free the prisoners and the looted the depot. In his account of the underground patriotic activities *Kegnazmach* Tadesse Zewelde wrote of the fact that about 70 enemy soldiers were killed during the attack and that the Ethiopians collected about 2700 rifles and many grenades (1960 E.C., 71; Tabor 1987 E.C., 72-73).

Woizero Shewareged fled to Becho in Shoa, where she met guerrilla fighters and continued her propaganda work at different camps by informing fighters about international developments and the emperor's expected return in the near future. To some notable war leaders, she is reported to have written letters informing them of foreign aid accompanying the emperor, and fortunately for her, the letters of the emperor began to reach the patriots shortly afterwards (Tsehay 1980, 81). She continued her activity until she was captured by the Italians at Kussay in the Gurage region in December 1940. She went there to coordinate her efforts with a famous war leader in Gurage known as *Dejazmach* Gerresu Duki (Tabor 1987 E.C., 73; *The Ethiopian Herald*, 3 November 1967).

She was tied to a tree and mercilessly beaten, and later detained at the prison of Akaki near the capital. She was sentenced to death, but fortunately her life was saved by the triumphant entry of the joint Anglo-Ethiopian army into the capital (Tsehay 1980, 80).

Another valiant woman fighter who deserves mention was the anonymous wife of *Dejazmach* Habte Mikael, who was in charge of the Ethiopian army at Dollo. His army was waiting for the Italians from its fortified position. Meanwhile, his wife climbed to a hilltop and saw the coming of the Italian troops. Having failed to persuade her husband to take the offensive, she went ahead herself wearing his uniform, mounting on a mule and taking with 150 soldiers. She engaged the Italians in a fierce fight that lasted for a short duration. Her army killed many Italians and returned with captured rifles and munitions. This was indeed one of the few instances in which a wife replaced her hesitant husband under crucial circumstances (*Ibid*).

Further investigation of the achievements of women guerrilla fighters brings us to *Woizero* Shewanesh Abreha of Lasta. She belonged to an important local family and took leadership position by representing an underage son following the death of her husband during a fight with the Italians in 1937. She married her daughter to Lij Yohannis Iyassu (the great grand son of Emperor Menelik II). This had enabled her to rally a large number of soldiers (*Ibid*).

Likewise, *Woizero* Qeleme Worq Tiruneh derived her leading position from her husband but her patriotic activity in Bale and Arsi, commanding a guerrilla band that she eventually took to exile in Kenya, was performed due to the defection of her husband to the Italians. Informants cited examples of many similar experiences of splits within a family as a result of Italian pressure (Tadesse 1960 E.C., 39; Ministry of Information 1958 E.C., 50).

Apart from the above-mentioned patriots, there are also other women who have distinguished themselves with their contributions in the anti-Fascist occupation force. Some of these women include *Woizero* Belaynesh of Bulga, *Woizero* Kebedech Dessie of Begemidir, Birhane Gezahgn and Yidenequ Tessema of Bechena in Gojam, Manalebish Debalqe and Ayelech Yosef of Northern Shoa, and *Woizero* Belaynesh of Goba.

An official document produced by the Ministry of Defence contains the names of about 277 women incorporated in the list of the patriots that earned medals from Emperor Haile Selassie I on 20 January 1945. Obviously the list does not mean that only these women played a pivotal role. An innumerable number of women did not receive medals and of course they could not have done so for various reasons (1937 E.C., 4-6). This list only gives the type of medals they were awarded and their service as fighters, inner patriots and in exile. That their contribution to the war effort was recognized and that they were awarded medals was, however, a development of paramount importance not only in promoting the status of women in war but also in their subsequent social and political emancipation.

Both written and oral sources agree that the major contribution of women to the struggle against the Fascist occupation was in the underground works performed mainly in the towns but also in the countryside as well. Their service to the patriots was by no means inferior to that of the combatant soldiers. The underground work was organized by the central committee of *Wust Arbegnoch* (Inner patriots). Since they could arouse less suspicion by the enemy, women members of the *Wust Arbegnoch* have given quite an extensive service, especially in terms of providing the fighters with food, clothing, medicine, arms and munitions, and above all intelligence information (Gerima 1960 E.C. 46; Bahru 1991, 171; Steer 1936, 61).

In general, women collected different types of supplies for the guerrilla fighters. Most of them such as food, clothing, and traditional medicine were produced by the women themselves. Items not available on the market such as rifles, bullets, and grenades were obtained either from the *bandas* (traitors) or from some Italian soldiers as a business transaction most often effected by women. Not uncommonly, women used to steal the arms of Italian soldiers, including the high-ranking ones, by socialising with them as lovers. Oral informants report that there were very courageous women who killed their Italian lovers to collect their arms. Women also used to collect information about depots of arms and munitions, and organize raids by their menfolk (Gerima 1949 E.C. 41).

The supply of arms to guerrilla fighters was as difficult and risky a venture as its collection. Yet both men and women used to distribute it to fighters in the bushes or smuggle them into towns despite the presence of rigid search posts at the entry points of Addis Ababa. Different devices were used to smuggle firearms: First; it used to be carried on a stretcher as if it was a dead body being taken for burial, accompanied by men's and women's lamentations and crying. Second, women hid bullets in their water pots to smuggle them under the pretext of fetching water from rivers in the outskirts of towns. Thirdly, women used to hide bullets in dried animal dung that was used for fuel (*Ibid* 174; Meleselign 1947 E.C., 76; Salome 1958, 65).

Women's success in intelligence gathering of those days was due not only to their capacity to rouse less suspicion of the Italians but also to their feminine relation with Italian soldiers, officers and high-ranking officials (Bahru 1991, 172; Sbacci 1985, 171).

Contemporary eyewitness accounts and oral sources attested to the fact that the Italians had great affection for the Ethiopian women and they used to marry or keep concubines. The practice was widespread despite the Fascist government's repeated attempts to stop it. The first reason for this was the fact that from the outset Italian soldiers bound for the Ethiopian campaign were persuaded to believe that victory would reward them with the hands of beautiful Ethiopian ladies. Postcards bearing the latter's picture were issued and attained a considerable sale in Italy on the eve of the war. The popular Italian soldiers' song of the day, *Facceta Nera* (Little Black Face) must have built up their dream of enjoying the beauty of their colony (Pankhurst 1987, 32). Secondly, more than 90% of the Italian soldiers in Ethiopia had no families, and the shortage of Italian women had in turn led to uncontrolled sexual relations with Ethiopian women in the form of concubinage, rape and prostitution (Sbacci 1985, 171-72).

One outcome of such a relationship was its facilitating intelligence gathering by Ethiopian women. This was clear from the fact that even high-ranking officials working in the political and governorate-general offices were reported to have had Ethiopian concubines (*Ibid*, 170; Pankhurst 1987, 32-33). Though it does not mean all Italians who established such a relation disclosed military secrets, bits and pieces of information collected from some of them were quite valuable to the patriots. Yet, this was not the only device employed by the Ethiopian women to engage in espionage; they also carried out this task by securing employment as domestic servants of the Italians or by getting access into military camps and residences under the pretext of selling eggs, chicken, milk, butter, etc. Eyewitness accounts also mention some women who did intelligence work by disguising themselves as beggars and mad women. Still others deceived the Italians by supplying false information by pretending to be defectors and declaring their allegiance the Fascist regime. The other category of women engaged in intelligence gathering were those who run drinking houses in towns (Makin 1935, 215).

Another women's underground activity was in the field of propaganda works like instilling patriotism, denouncing cowardice and defection, and disinformation of the Italians. There were quite numerous women engaged in this role both in the towns and countryside. The most notable women propagandists were, however, the above mentioned, i.e., Shewareged Gedle, Kebedech Seyoum and Senedu Gebru as well as Tsehaynesh Abebe of Gondar, Tafesech Difabachew of Menz, Banchiyigezu Kidane of Begemidir, to mention just a few of them. Some of them composed songs for patriots. Tadesse Zewelde, member of the patriots, claimed to have been assigned with *Woizero* Tafesech to Menz, where they distributed forged letters, bearing imperial seals, and medals to notable guerrilla war leaders and brave soldiers (1960 E.C., 42). Likewise the role of older women and nuns who claimed to have possessed spiritual powers should not be glossed over, for they used to build up the morale of fighters by telling their good dreams or prophesising the downfall of the Fascist regime (Gerima 1949 E.C., 23).

It should also be born in mind that Ethiopian women carried the burden of caring for the older people, the children, the disabled fighters and civilians, besides the more difficult

task of undertaking production and trade. By replacing their husbands at the home front they did not only keep up households alive but also ensured continuous supply provisions to the fighters.

To sum up the Ethiopian women of the fascist period did play a magnificent role that clearly demonstrated that “war is not the monopoly of men.”

4. THE IMPACT OF WAR ON THE LIFE OF ETHIOPIAN WOMEN

It goes without saying that wars of all sorts bring destruction to human and material wealth. Of course, the degree of devastation varies depending on the nature of the wars, areas of fighting, arms used, duration of fighting, etc. The internal wars and defensive wars against successive foreign aggressors have left their multi-dimensional impact on the social, cultural, economic and political life of the Ethiopian society. Even though they did not take a vanguard position in major combats, the Ethiopian women had their share of the burden of wars.

To start with, the human loss did not only consist of the casualties of battlefields, but also of epidemics of cholera, typhoid and dysentery at camps and during the long march. These were in the main results of poor sanitation, lack of proper food and clean water. The large size of the population involved during military expeditions made the overcrowded marches and camping sites fertile grounds for the spread of epidemics. Human loss at times of military expeditions can also result from fire, explosion, accidents when crossing big rivers, danger of ferocious animals and rinderpest (Caulk 1976, 14; Pankhurst 1966, 56-57).

No statistical data is available for women casualties of war even for the modern period of Ethiopian history. One is often not sure of the total loss on the Ethiopian side let alone that of the women, for there was no tradition of registering participants in the military expeditions. At any rate the human loss because of wars has a direct effect on the life of women, including those who did not even take part in military engagements. They had to suffer from loss of husbands, brothers, fathers and relatives. Women camp-followers often had to witness the fall of their own husbands and brothers, and were obliged to carry away corpses from the battlefields for burial. This was particularly common during the Fascist invasion that caused an immense human loss Ethiopia had never seen before (some sources claim a total loss of 275,000 lives). The existing literature and eye-witness accounts of informants confirm the fact that the Italians did follow a policy of genocide both in the conventional war of 1935/36 and after their triumphant control of the capital. The Italians carried out air raids with planes that dropped bombs and sprayed poison gas against troops and civilians despite its prohibition at the Geneva Convention of 1925 (Mockler 1985, 86-87; *New Times and Ethiopian News* July 1936; Paulos 1980 E.C., 121; Greenfield 1965, 209).

The air raids caused indiscriminate deaths and suffering. Thus a British officer working in the Red Cross says, “most of my patients were women and girls wounded in their back, stomach, thighs, breasts, arms and ankles...” (Mockler 1985, 87). Likewise a British transport officer named Captain Brophil reports:

...I saw masses of women and children bombed and gassed. The army could get into rocks for refuge, but the women and children in the villages were absolutely unprotected and suffered far more terribly (Quoted in *New Times and Ethiopian News*, 9 May 1936).

It was not only women and children. All sorts of villagers and animals were choked, blistered and burnt by the sprayed mustard gas. The Italian air attacks were so brutal that another member of the Red Cross, Dr. John Melley, reports:

This is not a war, it is not even a slaughter - it is the torture of tens of thousands of defenceless men, women and children with bombs and poison gas... We have treated hundreds of cases including infants in arms" (Quoted in Greenfield 1965, 209).

Besides the physical devastation, the air raid also caused intensive pollution of food and rivers and burnt down houses, animals, plants and even the soil.

The wholesale massacre was not confined to of both the conventional and guerrilla wars as it can be clearly seen from the general massacre of the innocent people of Debre Libanos Monastery in May 1936 and that of Addis Ababa following the abortive attempt on the life of Grazziani. The two incidents were only major examples of civilian atrocities committed throughout the Fascist Occupation (Gerima 1949 E.C. 152; Ministry of Information 1958 E.C., 44; *New times and Ethiopian News*, 18 September 1937). The human loss, particularly of the husbands and brothers, affected the women in many ways. Their family was broken and they became widows. Most of them could not support their family and became destitute. The poverty-stricken women fled to cities to become beggars or maid servants, either taking their children or leaving them behind. Quite a significant number of widows became prostitutes in the towns. The social and economic impact of wars was therefore felt at the grassroots level, knocking at each household (Gerima 1949 E.C., 8).

By and large, successive wars fought in the country left a lasting negative impact on the economic development of the country by eliminating the most productive elements of the country, causing physical destruction of property, moral deterioration and social insecurity, as well as encouraging banditry (Caulk 1976, 2). On the one hand, the traditional Ethiopian army used to loot the peasants living along the routes of military expeditions or in the nearby villages that became battlefields. There was no organized system of supplies to the army and in the event of scarcities of food, soldiers were allowed to loot the villagers. Villagers found hiding their property used to be flogged and harassed. The unfortunate peasants did suffer the insecurity not only of their lives and property but also of the honour of their wives and daughters. The latter were also victims of the ravages of the soldiers (Plowden 1868, 226-28; Parkyns 1853, 150; Gizaw 1956 E.C. 182; Pankhurst 1976, 5 and 1966, 67).

On the other hand, the feudal wars fought for territorial expansion particularly in the second half of the 19th century resulted not only in human and material destruction, but also in multi-dimensional cultural, economic and political domination of the subjugated peoples. The latter were forced to pay heavy tribute and suffer from cultural and religious oppression. Resistance to the rule of the conquerors and failure to pay tribute often resulted in the enslavement of the accused. Slave-hunting expeditions were also

launched under the pretext of suppressing rebellious regions. In all cases life became miserable for the subject people. One manifestation of peasant response to the oppression, other than protest, was to flee his village, leaving his family helpless, in search of a relatively better master or to become a vagrant in towns. The unfortunate women did not only lose their husbands, but their holdings as well (Bahru 1991, 88; Afework 1901 E.C., 182; Pankhurst 1976, 5 and 1966, 67). Their fate was no better than their husbands. Therefore women suffered the poverty resulting from the feudal mode of surplus appropriation, and the harassment due to slave hunting expeditions.

The Italo-Ethiopian wars fought between 1935 - 41 did not result in the deportation of slaves for obvious reasons. Indeed, slave trade was eradicated during their occupation. Nonetheless, women used to be deported as prisoners or were compelled to become exiles by the fascist invaders. The impact of this on family life was equally disastrous to many of them (Tsehay 1980, 81; Gerima 1949 E.C., 192-93; Gander 1949, 43). It led to divorces, health problems, poverty and the increase in the number of street children that consisted of orphans and those who did not know the whereabouts of their parents.

The Fascist occupation has left further impact on social life and health of the Ethiopian women. The cohabitation of the Fascist soldiers with Ethiopian women was so widespread that some felt "the Italian conquerors were conquered by the weaker sex" (Sbacci 1985, 171). The first immediate result was the birth of a great number of mixed-race children. The Fascist regime could not tolerate this development and issued successive laws forbidding relations between the Italian soldiers and Ethiopian women. Soldiers were encouraged to take Italian wives. Ethiopian women were prohibited to visit Italian camps or become their servants. All these measures were, however, unsuccessful (Pankhurst 1987, 33). Thus when the Italians gave up their colony in East Africa, thousands of Ethiopian mothers were left with their mixed-race children.

Secondly, the Fascist Occupation encouraged the expansion of prostitution in major urban centres. Not only widows but also married women were persuaded to join the new occupation, tempted by Italian gifts and pays to prostitutes. At any rate the expansion of prostitution had many negative consequences. It broke many families. Some Ethiopian prostitutes were used by the Italians as intelligence workers like the *bandas*. Prostitution also created a fertile ground for the spread of different venereal diseases. It contributed to unwanted pregnancies which often encouraged abortion. Those who either failed to abort or feared to do it gave birth to thousands of fatherless children (*New Times and Ethiopian News*, 14 November 1936; Gerima 1949 E.C., 121). Many women lost their lives in the process of abortion by taking traditional medicine. Still many women were physically crippled or became barren. Prostitutes learnt taking drugs, smoking cigarettes and consuming alcohol brought by their Italian lovers.

Viewed from a positive perspective the successive wars in general and the Italo-Ethiopian wars of 1935-41 in particular left a lasting impact on the life of women by promoting their status in military affairs, improving the traditional division of labour, enhancing their political role and giving many women access to new business occupations such as bars and restaurants. Likewise, by encouraging the employment of women in their small-scale industries, the Italians did not only teach different skills to women but also began a new trend in the composition of the industrial labour force. The

post-War training of women in different occupations must have been enhanced partly by the Italian occupation that awakened the women to demand further economic and political roles (Andu Ityopiawi 1936 E.C., 9; Salome 1958, 78). The first nursing school attached to the Haile Selassie I Hospital was opened in 1949 and its first eight graduates were all female (Pankhurst 1957a, 100; Ali 1955 E.C., 55). The Ethiopian Women's Welfare Work Association was reinstated at the dawn of the Liberation. It opened a school for the orphans of war (1941). The Princess Tsehay Memorial Infant and Maternity Clinic and Women's Vocational School were also established by it. The latter afforded general education and training in domestic works, dress-making, clerical work, etc.

The war enhanced the political participation of women. *Woizero* Senedu Gebru became the first woman MP in Ethiopia in the 1957 parliamentary election. *Woizero* Ayelech Meshasha and *Woizero* Rabia Abdul Kadir followed her example. Yodit Imiru became Ethiopia's first woman minister (Pankhurst 1957a, 100). Though their number is very insignificant, these people pioneered the political emancipation of women.

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