ETHIOPIAN SOURCE MATERIAL AND COLONIAL RULE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY: THE LETTER TO MENILEK (1899) BY BLATTA GÄBRÄ EGZI'ABEHİR*

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This article proposes to consider some of the problems of interpretation of historical sources relating to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ethiopia. I will focus on one author, the Tegrean intellectual Blatta Gäbrä Egzi’abehër, and one document, his letter to Menilek. The analysis of author and text will permit me to examine the cultural milieu of Menilek’s Ethiopia during the crucial period of Italian colonial rule in Eritrea. The letter to Menilek, written in 1899, is of considerable importance in historical and intellectual terms, while Blatta Gäbrä Egzi’abehër’s own life is of interest given the unusual intellectual itinerary which he followed during the period of Italian colonialism and Ethiopian expansion. I have also provided a translation of the Ge’ez and Amharic text as well as a comment on its historical significance.

The context

The late nineteenth century was a decisive period for the creation of the modern state in Ethiopia. In 1889, Menilek became the emperor of an expanding Ethiopia.¹ During his reign (1889–1913), the Solomonic monarchy consolidated its expansion to the north and south. It also managed to extend its rule over the Tegrean area, a part of the north where the claims to the imperial throne by Ras Mängäsa, the son and heir of the ex-Tegrean Emperor Yohannes IV, had been particularly strong. This expansion, however, was accompanied by the loss of the area north of the Märab Mällas which fell to Italian domination.² The treaty of Weččalë of 1889 between Italy and Ethiopia, although contested in the famous article XVII of the Italian ‘protectorate’ in Ethiopia, laid down the new territorial borders with

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¹ Menilek’s period is much more researched than those of Tewodros and Yohannes. I will refer many times in the course of this article to the most interesting works dealing with nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ethiopian emperors.

² Among the few works on the Märab Mällas before Italian colonialism, see Haggai Erlich, Ethiopia and Eritrea During the Scramble for Africa: A Political Biography of Ras Alula, 1875–1897 (East Lansing, 1982).
Italy. The official creation in January 1890 of the colony of Eritrea was the result of negotiations that had taken place over a long period of time. The existence of the colony was not questioned after the Battle of Adwa in 1896, when the Italians suffered a clear defeat. Ethiopia, although wounded on its northern border, was able to retain its prestige, having managed to remain independent during the European colonisation of Africa.

The closing years of the nineteenth century were also significant in that they witnessed a new trend in the development of Ethiopian culture. This was manifested in the appearance of a new literature, no longer restricted to the usual court chronicles or religious works. Before the advent of these new forms of literary expression, Ethiopia seems to have produced very few documents of a private and informal nature. The chronicles, the classical literary sources, can be seen as an expression of imperial power and were commissioned specifically with the aim of supporting the monarchy and legitimizing the dynasty. Traditional historiography was an important aspect in preserving the ruling class and the hierarchical political order.

In the late nineteenth century, this religious and court literature underwent a transformation and took on a modern and secular form. As numerous scholars have pointed out, Ethiopia began a new period as regards the type of source material available to the historian today. The first intellectuals who could express their thought freely emerged in this period and their works were no longer written in an official form or commissioned by the authorities. Writing became more occasional, and a travel literature developed to describe curiosities and observations on the world both inside and outside Ethiopia. The bulk of this literature is written in Amharic, although there are some works in Tegreñña. Literature of a private, informal nature also appeared for the first time in Ethiopia in the form of diaries, letters and notebooks. Although these literary works are few in number, they are significant and mark a trend towards a new type of literacy. This new literature expressed personal opinions about imperial politics for the first time, and provided valuable information about Ethiopian history and society.

The emergence of this literature in Ethiopia coincides significantly with

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4 Colonial literature on the battle of Adwa is very vast, as we can see in G. Stella, Africa Orientale. Bibliografia (Ravenna, 1986), although we lack recent discussion on its historical significance.


8 This aspect is emphasized by Bairu Tafla, 'The historical notes of Liqä Ṭābbāt Abbībā Yerāfu', Bulletin of S.O.A.S. 1, 2 (1987), 267–300. Diaries and private notes are rare in Ethiopia. I have found in Asmara in 1987 a valuable example of a diary written in Amharic by Kāntiba Gilankiel and kept in a private collection. For this manuscript and the role of his author see I. Taddia, Un Intellettuale Tigrino nell’Etiopia di Menelik: Blatta Gābrā Egzi’abeher Gilay (1860–1914) (Milan, 1990).
the beginning of colonial rule in Eritrea and strong European influence in independent Ethiopia. This is another important factor affecting the change in culture and society during the Menilek period. The transformation of Ethiopian culture in the late nineteenth century—from formal works of literature to informal and private documents—must be considered within the new political framework of the struggle for independence. Colonialism forced a revision of all aspects of traditional society, including ways of writing and thinking. There is no doubt that Italian colonialism had a considerable influence both on the Ethiopian monarchy and on the intellectual milieu of Menilek’s court, and it brought about the reinterpretation of many aspects of traditional society. Intellectual thought and its literary expression were profoundly altered by the new political and cultural atmosphere at Menilek’s court, and they found their outlet in the dual themes of the construction of the state and the preservation of political independence. These themes can be found in the writings of several Eritrean observers of Italian colonialism.

I nevertheless do not believe that the new political and cultural atmosphere at the Ethiopian court can be explained entirely in terms of a reaction to the encounter with colonialism. It must also be linked with an increasingly clear perception of the world beyond Ethiopia in the late nineteenth century. The modernization of Japan in the first decade of this century, for example, may have had an important influence on the opening up of Ethiopia to the outside world. This is a recurrent literary theme of the time and demonstrates a new intellectual approach to history. This tendency towards modernization, along with the introduction of European modes of thought, made its mark on the secularization of Ethiopia in both cultural and political terms. Understanding European and foreign civilization was also a means of defending the independence of Ethiopia. This trend towards secularization would be more evident in a later period.

Two different reflections form the basis of my comments on the literary and political milieu of Menilek’s Ethiopia. First of all, this intellectual milieu remains relatively little known. There is ample space for the study of private papers, memoirs and letters containing important and revealing political and

9 Japan is an important myth for modern Ethiopian intelligentsia, as I have personally discovered in numerous interviews, and has been treated in various works. See A. Hiwet, Ethiopia: From Autocracy to Revolution (London, 1975); Bahru Zewde, ‘The concept of Japanisation in the intellectual history of modern Ethiopia’, in Proceedings of the Fifth Seminar of the Department of History (Addis Ababa, 1990).
11 Secularization also found expression in a new literary form created by the imperial authorities for administrative purposes. Political communication in traditional Ethiopia was largely oral. The few cases of edicts or registers being recorded under the reign of Emperor Tewodros (1855–1868), for example, were the exception to the rule. It was not until the reign of Haile Sellassie in this century that a degree of real political literacy emerged, as the imperial government began to use writing for political and administrative functions in response to the requirements of the developing modern Ethiopian state. This phenomenon must be related to the requirements of a centralizing power and its attempts to build a modern nation state. This emerges clearly in a period which is not, however, relevant to my argument here. See J. McCann, ‘Orality, state literacy, and political culture in Ethiopia: translating the Ras Kassa registers’, in Discussion Papers in the African Humanities (Boston, 1991).
historical material. Secondly, these informal documents have been more or less ignored by scholars and they have not yet been used in the reconstruction of Ethiopian history. The bulk of contemporary work has depended for many years on European sources such as foreign diplomatic archives, colonial papers, eye-witness accounts and missionary documents – all materials written from a European cultural perspective. Local sources, the collection of which has begun only recently, provide new insights for historians. The voices of Ethiopians must be analysed more carefully.

A crucial set of documents reflecting the new trend in Ethiopian culture and society consist of the writings of the Tegrean intellectual, Blatta Gäbrä Egzi’abéhër (1860–1914). These materials, mostly informal documents such as correspondence, poems and diaries, are found in the Italian archives. They are almost unknown as very few of them have been published. His correspondence, in particular, merits further attention.

The letters exchanged between Blatta Gäbrä Egzi’abéhër and his friends differ greatly from the official published correspondence between Ethiopian and European political and diplomatic figures in the early to mid-nineteenth century, because they are exchanged between Ethiopians themselves and express unofficial and personal feelings about the political situation. Furthermore, these letters constitute an unusual form of communication for Ethiopians, one which almost certainly emerged during the period of European influence. Traditional ways of writing were profoundly affected by colonialism. The use of letters for personal, private communication marks a significant evolution within the traditional milieu of literate Ethiopia.

The correspondence which I recently discovered in the Italian archives includes a letter from Blatta Gäbrä Egzi’abéhër to Menilek written in 1899. This letter, which I consider to be a unique source for the period, reveals the need for a debate on colonialism and its relation to Ethiopian society and

12 The main emphasis on this trend in Ethiopian literature is given by Tafla, ‘The historical’, 267–69.
13 For the Menilek period the best example is Rubenson, The Survival.
14 One of the first scholars to point out the importance of collecting Ethiopian sources has been Rubenson himself. See Rubenson (ed.), Acta Aethiopica, vol. 1, Correspondence and Treaties 1800–1854 (Evanston/Addis Ababa, 1987).
16 Only four poems were published in the 1920s, by J. I. Eadie, An Amharic Reader (Cambridge, 1924). Two of them were translated into Italian: L. Fusella, ‘Una Scaramuccia Poetica fra ’Afwawr Gabra ’Iyasus e il Blättä Gabra ’Egzi’abehër’, in S. Segert and A. J. E. Bodrogligeti (eds), Ethiopian Studies Dedicated to Wolf Leslau (Wiesbaden, 1983). An anonymous booklet undoubtedly attributable to this intellectual came out at the beginnings of this century. For a discussion of this book see Taddia, Un Intellettuale, 82–85.
17 A part of this correspondence had been published in Taddia, Un Intellettuale, 121–62.
18 See Rubenson, Correspondence, which provides 190 letters of the nineteenth century published both in the original and in the English translation.
19 Rubenson includes in his collection the correspondence between important political figures in Ethiopia, but also occasionally some private letters. See ibid., x.
culture. The rest of this article will be devoted to examining this letter and its personal and political context.

The author

From a historical point of view, Blatta Găbră Egzi’abeḥēr is one of the most outstanding writers of the late nineteenth century. Despite his particularly interesting and varied intellectual life and the fact that he produced numerous literary works, he remains a comparatively obscure figure.

Găbră Egzi’abeḥēr was born around 1860 at Şa’da Krestyan, in the Ḩamasēn (an area incorporated a few years later into Italian Eritrea), and he received his education at Dăbră Bizān. He had contact with Italians right from his youth. He was a civil servant in the colonial government of Eritrea and he fiercely defended the Italian cause during the revolt of Baḥtā Ḥagos in the highlands. Blatta Găbră Egzi’abeḥēr was a well-educated intellectual, who could write in Ge’ez, Arabic, Amharic and Italian as well as Tegreñā, his native tongue. He became an official interpreter of the Eritrean government in 1897. He distinguished himself militarily in numerous colonial battles, including the battle of Adwa in 1896. He had many friends among the Italians living in Asmara, who respected him and considered him a perfect example of a Tegrean integrated into colonial society.

Găbră Egzi’abeḥēr played an important role both in the negotiations between Italy and Ethiopia following the battle of Adwa and in the peace talks between Italy and Menilek. He frequently crossed the border as an official member of the Italian diplomatic corps commissioned to conduct relations with independent Ethiopia. He thus had access to a wealth of

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21 For a biography of Găbră Egzi’abeḥēr giving details of his life and importance in Italian Eritrea, see Taddia, *Un Intellittuale*.


27 Italian unpublished documents record extensively the official position of the interpreter and his role in colonial bureaucracy. See Archivio Eritrea (Rome), Pacco 293, Serie III, fasc. f: ‘Note personali sul servizio prestato dall’interprete’, and Pacco 404, fasc. 3: ‘Registro capi e ribelli, 1904–1905’.
secret information about diplomatic business, particularly after he became official government interpreter in 1897. He held this position for just two years, until he was accused by the Italians of political espionage, and summarily tried and convicted.\(^{28}\)

His arrest took place in somewhat curious circumstances. On 6 July 1899, Gábrä Egzi’abeḥēr received a letter from the private secretary of Ras Mākonnenn, governor of Harar and Tegray and an important political figure at the court of Menilek.\(^{29}\) Since the colonial authorities were already suspicious of Gábrä Egzi’abeḥēr, they secretly translated the letter before it reached him. Some sentences in the letter, written in a special code, contained serious accusations against the Italians. Unaware that it had already been translated, Gábrä Egzi’abeḥēr made alterations to the text and gave the Italian authorities an innocuous version. The colonial government discovered the falsification and immediately started an enquiry.\(^{30}\) Several papers were found in his lodgings, including letters written over the previous two years, many of which were in code. Amongst these documents was the letter to Menilek.\(^{31}\) Gábrä Egzi’abeḥēr was thus accused of passing to Menilek highly classified information, gathered in the course of his work as colonial interpreter.\(^{32}\)

The suspicious correspondence, confiscated when he was arrested by Italians in July 1899 (a few months after writing the letter to Menilek under discussion here), appeared to be irrefutable proof of his guilt. Gábrä Egzi’abeḥēr had corresponded with a number of friends, some of them interpreters for Italy, and also with more important political figures, such as Ras Mākonnenn himself, as well as Ras Māṅgāśa, the heir of Yohannes and Menilek’s rival to the imperial throne.\(^{33}\) The letter to Menilek was examined very carefully by the Italian administration and immediately translated.\(^{34}\)

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29 Ras Mākonnenn, governor of Harar, also ruled Tegray in 1899–1900 and was a key figure in Menilek’s politics at the end of the century. The best source for precise information during these years is Martini, *Il Diario*. Italian archives conserve important unpublished correspondence between Mākonnenn and the colonial government along with other relevant material dealing with the Ras himself. See Archivio Centrale dello Stato (Rome), *Fondo Martini*, Scat. 14, fasc. 47, ‘Il Tigrai sotto ras Maconnen, 1899–1900 (parte prima) and Scat. 14, fasc. 48. ‘Il Tigrai sotto ras Maconnen 1899–1900’ (parte seconda).
30 Italian colonial documents contain numerous letters exchanged between the interpreter and his friends in Asmara dealing with political matters. See: Archivio Eritrea, Pacco 293, Serie 1, fasc. 4: ‘Interprete indigeno Gareshgear Ghelemariam (attività sospette) 1899’. This file contains 56 documents mainly consisting of letters and notes of the intellectual and his friends in Asmara.
32 The activity of the interpreter was carefully controlled by the Italian Governor Martini, as we can see in the dossiers of colonial archives. See Archivio Centrale dello Stato (Rome), Fondo Martini, ‘Il Tigrai nel 1898,’ Fasc. 54: ‘Governo dell’Eritrea. Lettere e notizie di capi indigeni’, in which a file is entitled ‘Blatta Gareshgear Ghelemariam’.
34 See the colonial translation, Archivio Eritrea, Pacco 293. Serie 11. ‘Allegato 11’.
The political situation in Ethiopia worried the colonial government. In 1899 Menilek recalled the governor of Harar, Ras Mäkonnen, and gave him the command of Tegray in an attempt to challenge the authority of Ras Mángäša. The Italians feared that the new governor had been called north with the aim of occupying Eritrea, and rumours to this effect became increasingly frequent.\(^{35}\) As Menilek was particularly powerful at this time, the Italians saw in Găbră Egzi’ābehēr a potential ally of the emperor and a threat to political stability, and his correspondence was intercepted. The Italians viewed Ras Mäkonnen as an ambiguous figure in that he maintained official relations with them and asked them for help, while he was also in direct contact with critics in the Mărăb Măllaš who did not approve of Ethiopia’s cession of Eritrea. The latter group included Găbră Egzi’ābehēr himself, who sent his friends and confidants large epistolary reports written in code.

The main accusation against Găbră Egzi’ābehēr was spreading anti-Italian feelings and promoting a campaign of defamation against the colonial government. The case became very famous not only in Eritrea but also in Italy where his trial was widely followed. It was given extensive coverage in the Italian newspapers where he was depicted as an archetypical traitor,\(^{36}\) since he opposed the retention of Eritrea. The Italian government had difficulty in maintaining control in Eritrea and feared open revolt from its colonial subjects. The trial of Găbră Egzi’ābehēr lent support to the opinions of those who wished to renounce the African colonies. These opinions were shared by a large part of the public as well as by a section of the Italian Parliament.\(^{37}\)

The arrest of Găbră Egzi’ābehēr provoked a wave of fear in Eritrea. Kăntiba Gilankiel, head of the Godaif area close to Asmara and one of the principal addressees of the confiscated letters, fled from the colony to avoid being arrested. Găbră Egzi’ābehēr had corresponded frequently with Gilankiel in coded letters.\(^{38}\) The codes were justified by the highly important subject matter of the letters and the Italian administration deciphered these codes with great accuracy.\(^{39}\) Everyday matters and exchanges of greetings were interspersed with more important information based on the assumption of a strong, free and independent Ethiopia. The letters are evidence of the extremely close relationship Găbră Egzi’ābehēr had with influential political figures in independent Ethiopia.\(^{40}\) There is also a document in the Italian colonial archives that records his intellectual evolution in relation to Italian

\(^{35}\) See Archivio Centrale dello Stato (Rome), Fondo Martini, ‘Il Tigray sotto Ras Maconnen 1899–1900’, Parte 1, ‘Relazione Mozzetti al Governatore,’ 13 May 1899, in which serious feelings on Mäkonnen’s occupation of colonial Eritrea are expressed.

\(^{36}\) See II Secolo xix, 6–7 February 1900; 7–8 February 1900; 13–14 February 1900; 25–26 February 1900 and La Tribuna, 15 January 1900; 15 February 1900.


\(^{38}\) Archivio Eritrea, Pacco 293, fasc. 4.

\(^{39}\) At least three codes were used. For two examples of codes deciphered by the Italian administration see: Taddia, Un Intellutuale, 150; 160.

\(^{40}\) The familiarity of the interpreter with the main political figures and his influential role in Menilek’s Ethiopia is also documented by oral informants. This was confirmed in a number of interviews conducted in Addis Ababa, Asmara, and his native village Sa’da Krestyan during October–November 1987, July 1988 and September–October 1989.
colonialism.\textsuperscript{41} This evolution was evidently a gradual process going back to the battle of Adwa in 1896, a time when he was still on excellent terms with the colonial government.

The fact that Gābrē Egziʼabeḥēr carried out his correspondence in code shows that he was all too aware of the political sensitivity of his writings. Shortly after his imprisonment Gābrē Egziʼabeḥēr was sent, for security reasons, to an Italian prison in Naples for a few months. During this brief period he corresponded with some Italian friends (the Sanguineti family in Turin) and a Tegrean living in Rome (Giyorgis Fessehayā).\textsuperscript{42} For reasons that are not clear, he was transferred in November 1899 to the colonial penitentiary of Nokra where, together with about one hundred other prisoners, he managed to take part in a sensational escape, only a few days after his arrival. His escape and subsequent movements were carefully recorded in documents now kept in Italian archives.\textsuperscript{43} Many details are known about the escape. Some prisoners, while out with a permit to fetch water from the wells, killed a guard; after freeing some other companions, they took an Italian officer as hostage. They then seized various weapons and managed to open the gates of the prison and let several prisoners out. A small group of prisoners then travelled by sea from a port in northern Eritrea and reached Tegray. Among them was Blatta Gābrē Egziʼabeḥēr.

This case created a diplomatic incident between Italy and Ethiopia at a time when diplomatic relations between the two countries had been improving. Political relations were not broken off, however, in spite of the fact that the escaped prisoners had been welcomed to Tegray by Ras Mäkonnen himself. The latter was nonetheless careful to send conciliatory messages to the Italians and to assure them that he was giving hospitality to the prisoners only until he received orders from Menīlek. The Italian press followed the escape and flight of the prisoners to Tegray with great interest. Short biographies of Gābrē Egziʼabeḥēr were even published in Italy.

There are also some Ethiopian documents which add light to his brief stay in Tegray, from late 1899 to early 1900, and to his contacts with Ras Mäkonnen while he was in command of the northern region.\textsuperscript{44} It seems that Menīlek saw the presence of Mäkonnen in Tegray as a threat to the maintenance of good relations with the Italians.\textsuperscript{45} The Ras returned to the Harar region in June 1900. The political situation calmed down and a month later Italy and Ethiopia signed the ratification of the northern border, whose precise location had been unclear since the battle of Adwa. The diplomacy

\textsuperscript{41} See Archivio Centrale dello Stato (Rome), Fondo Martini, Scat. 14: ‘Ufficio di Gabinetto Governo dell’Eritrea. Informazioni’ (27 Agosto, 1899), a secret report by the Italian Government which asserted that Gābrē Egziʼabeḥēr was finally convinced by Menīlek to support his cause in March 1896.

\textsuperscript{42} See Archivio Eritrea (Rome), Pacco 313, Fasc. 1: ‘Carceri e penitenziari. Evasioni 1900’.

\textsuperscript{43} Archivio Eritrea (Rome), Pacco 337, ‘Relegati, 1900’, and Pacco 338, fasc. 11: ‘Evasi di Nocra’.

\textsuperscript{44} See: Gābrē Mikaʼēl Germu, ‘Blatta Gābrē Egziʼabeḥēr’ (unpublished Tegräňa document of five pages, kept by the author’s son in Asmara), as well as the one by the same author quoted in note 25.

\textsuperscript{45} According to the Italian Government, Mäkonnen was recalled because of his bad relations with Italy; see Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome, Fondo Martini, Scat. 14, ‘Il Tigrai sotto Ras Maconnen 1899–1900’, Parte II.
of compromise won out as the emperor, for political reasons, sanctioned the Italian presence in Mārāb Māllaš.

Shortly after Mākonnen’s departure, Gābrā Egzi’ābeḥer moved to Menilek’s court at Addis Ababa where he became a valuable political adviser to the Emperor and began the most significant intellectual phase of his life. In this period he became increasingly critical of the Ethiopian ruler and wrote numerous poems of protest.46 Some of these poems are available in a published volume,47 while others exist only in the memories of oral witnesses.48 The poems often include severe criticisms of the emperor for having surrendered Eritrea and for having negotiated with the Italians over the border. Many passages are markedly anti-Italian and gave rise to heated discussions with another intellectual of the period, Afāwār姜 Gābrā Iyāṣus, who supported the Italian cause and considered it to be progressive.49

During the period he spent living in the capital, Gābrā Egzi’ābeḥer wrote various works. One of the most important was a book written anonymously but certainly attributable to him,50 as well as a long unpublished text of memoirs containing historical and religious information about Ethiopia.51 According to some scholars52 and witnesses53 he wrote numerous brief critical poems on political matters; about fifty copies of these were secretly circulated every Sunday in Addis Ababa. I have found only one reliable piece of information from the colonial archives about this activity.54 His intellectual life was extremely intense, as we are told by several sources. Unfortunately, I have so far been unable to locate any of these writings in public or private archives.

In the role of adviser and influential figure at Menilek’s court, Gābrā Egzi’ābeḥer attracted the envy of the people from Shāwa who resented the fact that a Tegrean could have so much influence over the emperor. However

48 Among the interviews I have conducted in Ethiopia in recent years, those given by Ato Yoḥannes Rāddā Ṣadeq from Gābrā Egzi’ābeḥer’s homeland Ṣa’da Krestyan and Abba Gābrā Iyāṣus in Addis Ababa were particularly interesting.
50 The booklet published anonymously outside Ethiopia and circulated secretly in Addis Ababa was first attributed to the intellectual by Cohen, La Naissance, 349.
51 The unpublished manuscript is kept in Italian archives. See: Archivio Eritrea (Rome), Pacco 78, fasc. 3: ‘Blatta Garesghear: Sue Memorie, 1897’, Amharic text composed of 235 pages.
52 Eadie, An Amharic 193; Cohen, La Naissance, 348.
53 Abba Gābrā Iyāṣus, one of the main informants, testifies to having received some manuscript poems from Gābrā Egzi’ābeḥer while he was studying at the beginning of this century in Rome.
54 See: Archivio Centrale dello Stato (Rome), Fondo Martini, Scat. 15, Fasc. 52 ‘Governo dell’Eritrea. Interessi italiani in Ethiopia’, which includes a letter from Annaratone to Martini signed in Dessie, 21 July 1909: ‘Il famigerato Blata Garesghear stampa al Ghebbi segretamente un foglio o giornale (uscente a periodi non ben definiti) riservato solo a pochissimi capi’ [‘The notorious Blata Garesghear secretly prints a broadsheet or newspaper in Ghebbi (being issued at various moments not well specified) reserved for only a few leaders’].
his ideas gradually moved him further away from power. Moreover, he considered Menilek’s courtiers to be liars and parasites, and at public meetings he never missed an occasion to speak out against the cowardice of the rulers and the ignorance of the bureaucrats.55 Because of his criticism, he was eventually exiled from the capital by Menilek and sent to Harar where Ras Mäkonnen was in charge.56

The work of Dr Merab, the Armenian doctor at Menilek’s court and a friend of Gährä Egzi’abetic, tells us a great deal about the life of the interpreter in Harar. He mentions Gährä Egzi’abetic’s hostility to Mäkonnen’s court, where he was despised by the most powerful figures, including the clergy, for declaring that the earth revolved around the sun. This ‘second Galileo’, as he liked to call himself, was imprisoned for these ‘heretical’ views by Ras Mäkonnen, who was influenced in his decision by the church.57

After spending a lifetime spreading the ideals of a free and independent Ethiopia and after being removed from any position of influence, Gährä Egzi’abetic was at last called back to Menilek’s court. He spent the last years of his life in Addis Ababa where the emperor, by now very ill, no longer held power. According to some sources Gährä Egzi’abetic even managed to influence Legg Iyasu58 to consider forcing discussion over the Eritrean borders. He died of a heart attack at the peak of his intellectual strength in 1914. Today, he is still remembered in Addis Ababa and Asmara as an unusual Tegrean figure who was, at one and the same time, opposition leader, writer, interpreter, adviser and moralist.

Paradoxically, he is remembered equally well in Ethiopia and in Eritrea as an intellectual and as an opponent of Italian colonialism. Even in Asmara I have never heard anyone doubt the fact that he had been favourable towards the unification of the whole empire under one independent government. It is clear that Eritrea was not a cohesive political entity in the nineteenth century. The figure of Gährä Egzi’abetic is today still important in both regions.

The manuscript

The manuscript under discussion was written at the very turning point of Gährä Egzi’abetic’s life. The letter to Menilek was written in May 1899 when the author was still a colonial interpreter, only two months before his arrest.59


57 Merab, Impressions, iii, 359–60.


59 Archivio Eritrea, Pacco 293.
The manuscript is located in the Italian archives both in the original version and in the colonial translation, as are other letters written by the author. A published version is now available. The document is in good condition, although it is difficult to read and in a few passages almost illegible. It is composed of four handwritten pages which contain a number of corrections, revisions, notes and additions. It seems to have been rewritten and checked by others, and it was probably a draft confiscated from the author before he was able to write a final version.

According to the colonial administration the letter was inspired by Däbrä Bizän monks or at least corrected by them. It is likely, however, that it was written directly by Gäbrä Egzi’abeḥèr as he had a good knowledge of both Ge’ez and Amharic. The Italian colonial documents clearly confirm the authenticity of the letter as its existence is recorded in a number of archive files. While no Ethiopian documents cite this letter, it has been mentioned by many oral sources.

The letter was addressed to Ras Mäkonnen, governor of Tegray at the time, for him to pass on to Menilek, the main interlocutor. There is a very strong request to have the emperor read it, and there is also a request that it should be read out to the crowds and kept in Däbrä Libanos. It is significant that the letter was not written in code, unlike the other correspondence between the author and his friends. It was intended to be a public document. The letter had the precise political aim of conveying the message of freedom and independence to the Ethiopians and to win them over to the cause. There is no evidence to indicate whether the letter reached the emperor as it was written only two months before the author’s imprisonment. We have no information about the audience for the letter nor whether other intellectuals participated in its message. No other similar examples can be found in Ethiopian writings during Menilek’s period and we know of only a few works criticizing the government and power.

Blatta Gäbrä Egzi’abeḥèr’s letter to Menilek is significant in several ways. It is one of the first examples of writing not commissioned by the political authorities and indeed expresses personal feelings strongly in opposition to the ideology of colonialism. It is an important historical evidence of the times.

60 Archivio Eritrea, Pacco 293, Serie II, ‘Allegato 11’.
61 See my recent volume dealing with the role of the intellectual in Menilek’s Ethiopia: Taddia, Un Intellittale, 163–72.
62 I will discuss this point later.
63 See Martini, Il diario, ii, 58.
64 A complete list of colonial documents quoting the letter is found in Taddia, Blatta Gäbrä Egzi’abeḥèr’s Letter, 15–16.
65 I have been unable to find any Ethiopian source of the period quoting the letter presumably because it was written only two months before his imprisonment. Furthermore, the intellectual had had no time to circulate the text. Only Italian colonial documents mention it in addition to oral testimonies.
66 The letter, although addressed to Menilek, was sent to Ras Mäkonnen, no doubt because of the close personal relations between Gäbrä Egzi’abeḥèr and this important political figure in Menilek’s court, but also, perhaps, for his potential role in influencing Menilek’s policy on Eritrea. Another reason was that at the time, in 1899, Mäkonnen was in charge of Tegray.
68 I have discussed the nature of this document extensively both in the Boston paper and in my book on the intellectual quoted above.
document because it reveals fierce opposition to the decisions made by the ruling power and a critical consciousness.\textsuperscript{69} Moreover, it is clear evidence of the will of the author to initiate a public political debate on Eritrea.

The author has a clear awareness of the historical context and tries to provide a distinct moral incentive for the intellectuals of Ethiopia. Clear evidence of this is given in the request to the emperor to publicize the letter: to read it aloud to the public on a market-day, then to preserve it in Däbrä Libanos for future generations. It is precisely his awareness of the need to communicate to a wide audience that clearly demonstrates the intellectual and moral commitment of the writer. Gäbrä Egzi’abeḥēr openly displays his political beliefs and asks the emperor to make an official reply to it to all Ethiopians.\textsuperscript{70} Its message is forceful and self-assured right from the start. Menilek is seen as a ruler who showed great weakness.\textsuperscript{71} The emperor’s great sin was to have abolished the existing boundaries and to have negotiated with foreigners. The Wečṭalē treaty is much criticized.\textsuperscript{72} Gäbrä Egzi’abeḥēr was sending a clear message to Menilek: break the pacts and throw out the Italians.

A clear comparison between Menilek and his predecessors emerges in the letter. Both Tewodros and Yoḥannes are portrayed as responsible rulers of Ethiopia, who saved the borders of the motherland and were ready to die in their defence. Menilek on the other hand is called a ‘barbarous’ king, a second Judas Iscariot, a traitor who had sold Ethiopia for money. It was ridiculous to style himself ‘King of Kings of Ethiopia’: he should be called ‘King of Kings of the Galla and of half Ethiopia’\textsuperscript{73}. A vision of a bleak future is created and attributed to the emperor’s destruction of the country’s integrity by making pacts and selling Ethiopia to foreigners. Ethiopian independence is considered to be a question of religious as well as political importance.

In the margin of the Italian colonial translation we find the following notes: ‘This much is evident: (1) the letter was written under the guise of a Bizān monk; (2) it intends to combat the diplomatic action whose intention is to maintain the current border limits in the colony’.\textsuperscript{74} These notes in the margin indicate a number of important questions that can be posed. A crucial one regards the extent to which the letter to Menilek expressed widespread feeling in Ethiopia, or whether it was instead an isolated case of opposition to Menilek’s diplomacy. There are only a few documents available which can help us answer this question. One of these is the diary of Conte Salimbeni, a major figure at the court of Menilek.\textsuperscript{75} His papers make numerous references to the criticisms made by the Tegreans of the emperor for having sold part of his kingdom in exchange for arms, money and aid. Many thought Menilek was supported by the Italians.\textsuperscript{76} Still more explicit references to Tegrean hostility towards Menilek appear in

\textsuperscript{69} This seems to me the main issue raised by the document which has been analysed from this point of view by few scholars. See Negash, ‘Blatta Gebre Egzi’abeḥēr’, 1–21.

\textsuperscript{70} See the original manuscript in Archivio Eritrea, Pacco 293. Serie II, ‘Allegato 11’, 1.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid. 2.

\textsuperscript{72} The subject is treated in many passages: Ibid., 2,3.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid. 4.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid. 4. The Italian translation and the notes are published in Taddia, \textit{Un Intellettuale}, 172.

\textsuperscript{75} C. Zaghi (ed.), \textit{Crispi e Menelich nel Diario Inedito del Conte Augusto Salimbeni} (Turin, 1956).

\textsuperscript{76} Taddia, \textit{Ibid.}, 104.
Salimbeni's diaries: the emperor is called a 'coward' and a 'peasant'. Disapproval of the emperor even came from the royal family itself: the Empress Taytu criticized him for ceding territories to the Italians, contrary to the example of Emperor Yoḥannes who had died a heroic death before yielding an inch of his land. Criticism of the emperor for giving up a part of the empire also came from Gojjam as well as Tegray and seemed to cause Menilek some problems. Evidence of this is given in a letter he wrote to the King Umberto I of Italy dated 20 September 1889, in which he mentioned the hostility of his subjects and the regional chiefs.

Even the treaty of Weččalē was a subject for dispute. According to another intellectual of the period, Aśmā Giyorgis, Menilek received insulting letters from Ethiopians against the form of submission to the foreigners represented by the famous and controversial article XVII. Even Ašmā Giyorgis rebelled against the treaty, for which his possessions were confiscated as punishment. The evidence is fragmentary, and we still do not know enough to say whether this attitude of protest was widespread. On the other hand, it is clear that the emperor suppressed the criticism of these intellectuals at his court.

This document is unique as it reveals the beginnings of modern anti-colonial ideology in Ethiopia. Ethiopia had to learn to understand the modern world in order to maintain its independence; and to compete with European states. Not until the end of the nineteenth century did the concept of a modern secular state have any significance in Ethiopian politics.

Colonialism and the historical sources

Another colonial document testifies to the immediate reaction on the part of the Italian administration to Gābrā Egzi'abeḥēr's letter to Menilek. According to the colonial administration, the letter 'depicted the author in the new light of a fanatic supporter of the new idea of the great and free Abyssinian state [my emphasis] and as a fervent opponent of Europeans'. The new idea of a free and independent Abyssinian state was rightly emphasized as the main theme of the document. The colonial understanding of the historical period and of this new anti-colonial perception shows the importance which the Italians attributed to the document.

The Ethiopian state was traditionally referred to as Christian. The

77 Ibid. 12-3. On the Empress' repute to Menilek see ibid., 110, 131, and 150.
80 See: Archivio Eritrea, Pacco 293, Serie II, 8.
concept of the state originated in the medieval period and is documented in the chronicles. The Solomonic monarchy was defined by a Christian religious identity and a Semitic cultural heritage. The region under the control of the Ethiopian emperors suffered great losses during the sixteenth century; Islam also threatened Ethiopian Christianity. Medieval Ethiopian kingdoms were powerful before the Muslim conquest. The disintegration of the state was caused by the loss of many territorial districts in medieval times and the awareness of loss was deeply rooted in the past. Restoration of the monarchy by the emperors of the late sixteenth century gave new power to the Solomonic dynasty and opened the great period of the Gondärine kingdoms, which lasted until the new crisis at the end of eighteenth century, when the power of the monarchy declined.

The Ethiopian rulers from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries were concerned with restoring the ancient authority over former territories, but the modern geographic boundaries of Ethiopia were defined only during the rule of Yohannes, after a period of state decline. The reunification of the Ethiopian empire took place in the years 1868–1889, mostly during his reign, and the reconstruction of Ethiopia must be located in the late nineteenth century. Yohannes himself was aware of the decline of the country and of the need for restoration. The consciousness of great loss and the devastation of the state was very clear to the emperor, as is documented in numerous Ethiopian sources.

The territorial perception of the state is not an entirely new theme in Ethiopian history during the Menilek period. But certainly a new concept of state and society emerges in Blatta Gābrā Egzi‘abeḥehr’s letter to Menilek. This concept is rooted in anti-colonial feelings and the new historical perspective produced by colonialism. The idea of borders and territorial union against foreign domination is clear evidence of a secular perception of the state. The shift from the religious concept of power and authority to a new secular, modern ideology can be seen clearly in the document. It is evidence of one of the basic differences between local sources and European ones.

The intellectual dimension of Ethiopian society is an aspect which has

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86 An interesting article discusses this topic in the period before Menilek: Shiferaw Bekele, ‘Reflections on the power elite of the Wärä Séh Mäsfenate (1786–1853)’, Annales d’Ethiopie, xv (1990), 157–79.
been considerably undervalued by foreign observers of the nineteenth century and by European sources generally. Most nineteenth-century commentators saw the Solomonic monarchy in terms of the conflict between rival regional powers. They emphasized ethnicity, and local and regional differences. These observers shared the general European ignorance of the real historical dynamics of African societies.87

A number of nineteenth-century European observers did note the degree of autonomy of Tegray: they referred to northern Abyssinia as a totally separate area inside the empire. Family dynasties, regionalism and local elites certainly played an important role in the politics of the growing empire. There was a lively Shāwān society on the one hand and a Tegrean one on the other. Many European sources describe the real differences in language, culture, life style and the organization of power in Amhara and Tegray. These sources agree about the complex nature of power and politics in Abyssinia.88 They focus principally on the local struggles for power between the various noble families and the progressive loss of autonomy of the Tegrean area to the central state. They stress the regional struggle for survival, and the local political groups rather than the central authority.

Europeans paid more attention to facts and events rather than ideas and thoughts. No concept of state unity emerges from their accounts, but only descriptions of a 'primitive', regional milieu based on local competition for supremacy. Linguistic problems and differences in culture certainly contributed to the construction of this peculiar ethnic identity pattern. European eye-witness accounts paid no attention to the intellectual component of contemporary Ethiopian history, and preferred instead to focus on daily life. These documents reveal a society divided as a result of regional conflict; they stress personal rule by noble families competing for supremacy.89

My reading of the sources would suggest instead that these are not the main themes of late nineteenth-century Ethiopian society. The intellectual origin of the document under discussion testifies to a turning point in Ethiopian society and culture. The concept of the Ethiopian state that emerges in Blatta Gābrā Egzi‘abeḥer’s letter reflects a new ideology because it concerned colonial domination. It is of interest to examine the idea of state unity and to outline to what extent it was influenced by the historical conditions of Ethiopia at the end of the nineteenth century. The phenomenon of nationalism must be placed in a colonial context.

The experience of Italian colonialism in the occupation of Eritrea sparked

87 Terence Ranger recently developed this topic in many works; among them see: T. Ranger, The Invention of Tribalism in Zimbabwe (Gweru, 1985), and his 'The invention of tradition revisited: the case of colonial Africa' (Paper presented to the Conference on 'Popular Culture in Question', Essex, April 1991).

88 I have referred to these European sources in I. Taddia, 'In search of an identity: Amhara/Tegrean relations in the late 19th century' (Paper presented to the Xth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies Addis Ababa, 1991, proceedings forthcoming).

89 Italian colonial documents also mention the independence of the Tegrean nobility under Tewodros and Menilek and the control of central power over local hegemonies. Among these documents the most interesting is: L. Bellini, 'Cenni storici sul Tigrai e notizie biografiche sulle persone principali e più influenti di questo regno nonché degli altri paesi d’Ethiopia che possono avere ingerenza sulla parte futura dell’Eritrea e del Tigrai' (Asmara, 1892), unpublished paper, Archivio Eritrea, (Rome), Pacco 164.
a new attitude toward the Ethiopian state. The letter to Menilek raises important issues concerning the role of the state, the concept of the motherland and the definition of territorial unity. Furthermore, it expresses an ideology organized around a national Ethiopian state. Menilek embodied this secular state, which superseded ethnic identity. The Ethiopian intelligentsia established a strong link between tradition and independence. Colonialism signified the breakdown of historical traditions and gave rise to the concept of a national, secular Ethiopian state.

It is perhaps an anachronism to speak of nationalism in relation to this period. The integrity of Ethiopia was rooted in historical tradition and concerned the defence of a culture and of a religion expressed through the autonomy of the Solomonic monarchy. The letter to Menilek is clear evidence of how the author perceived Ethiopian integrity and the unity of a nation in which Tegreans and Amhara could live alongside each other in a larger state and have equal importance within it.

The loss of a part of Ethiopian territory in the late nineteenth century is considered to be a betrayal of historical tradition and of the faith which Menilek’s subjects had placed in him. The reassertion of the integrity of the Ethiopian state played an important role in guiding a nation which was undergoing both material and spiritual renewal. It is important to underline that Gābrā Egzi’ābeḥēr does not emphasize regional politics or local power, but rather unity against Italy in the name of historical tradition.

For the first time in Ethiopian culture the new concepts of unity and independence appear. Independence is the basic theme of the letter and it is not found in other late nineteenth-century writings. The opposition to Menilek’s decisions over Eritrea is expressed in very clear terms. Few intellectuals openly criticize power, and the historical consciousness that Gābrā Egzi’ābeḥēr reveals seems to me profoundly rooted in the perception of the past. The sense of historical tradition and religious unity played an important role, but they were not the only components of the letter. For the writer, Ethiopia had to face up to European countries and compete with them in order to demonstrate its power. This constituted the beginning of a new political ideology which used the concepts of unity, state power, integrity and independence – important secular themes in modern history. Further research should clarify to what extent these ideas were widespread in nineteenth-century Ethiopia.

The colonial occupation of Eritrea, the northern border area of Ethiopia, thus constituted an important stimulus to political change. Italian colonialism had a considerable impact on the intellectual circles of Menilek’s Ethiopia. Indeed the main themes of Ethiopian history during this period are the construction of the state and the maintenance of political independence. Both themes are reflected in the document under discussion.

The Text (1899)

The text of the letter to Menilek is directly translated into English from the original unpublished manuscript kept in the Italian archives. However, in presenting this version, I thought it useful also to quote the Italian translation provided by the colonial government in July 1899, when the author was arrested and the letter confiscated. This translation is conserved
in the ‘Archivio Eritrea’ file along with the original. A comparison of the two versions is included in the footnotes. In some cases the Italian translation is inaccurate and superficial, while in some passages it is also misleading. For full references to the contents of the letter see notes 94–129 at the end.

The letter is mainly written in Amharic, although some passages are in Ge’ez, the traditional liturgical language of Ethiopia. This style is common to much Ethiopian literature of the nineteenth century when Ge’ez was being replaced by Amharic as the written language, but was retained in quotations from the Holy Scriptures or in the introductions to documents. This is the usual type of Ethiopian documentation known to scholars. The transition from Ge’ez to Amharic as the standard written language in all the provinces of the empire (Tegray included) occurred very rapidly in the late nineteenth century and was remarkably homogeneous. Amharic became the language of power and was also utilized in correspondence by Tegrean intellectuals. What little Tegreñña literature exists for the Menilek’s period is virtually unknown to scholars.

In writing Amharic, Gãbrã Egzi’abêhêr follows the literary tradition of his country and reveals a literary knowledge rooted in the cultural milieu of this time. The letter was written in Amharic not only because it was addressed to Menilek, but also because Amharic had become the accepted literary language of Ethiopian power.

From a linguistic point of view, therefore the letter belongs to the historical tradition of nineteenth-century Ethiopia and reveals a deep literary and cultural knowledge of the period. What I would like to stress, however, is the originality of the letter’s message and the political consciousness which it reveals.

The Amharic and Ge’ez parts in the English translation have been identified and references to biblical quotations have been placed within square parentheses. The note ‘obscure text’ means the text itself is illegible.

**THE TEXT**


92 In the course of my research I found only four letters written in Tegreñña in the late nineteenth century. They are published and translated into Italian in Taddia, *Un Intelleuttale*, 132–3, 134–5, 143–7, and 148–9. One letter in the collection is a mixture of Amharic and Tegreñña, *op. cit.*, 136–42. According to Kevin O’Mahoney, Yoĥannes decreed that ‘Tegreñña should be the official language of the empire’, but no sources for this statement were quoted. See his *The Ebullient Phoenix. A History of the Vicariate of Abyssinia* (Asmara, 1987), 174. I have not found this reference in any other documents of the period.

93 See a recent volume on late nineteenth-century Ethiopian history published in Italy and translated from Tegreñña: Fessehà Giyorgis, *Storia d’Etiopia* (Naples, 1987), edited by Yaqob Beyene. The manuscript collection of Mikãel Germu conserved in the Institute of Ethiopian Studies of the University of Addis Ababa contains a few other works in Tegreñña which are interesting from an historical point of view, but have been ignored by scholars up to now.

94 I indicate the differences between the translation presented here and the Italian translation recorded in the archives. Thus ‘CT’ indicates the colonial translation, ‘om.’ the omissions and ‘ill.’ the illegible text. The transliteration of Amharic follows the
Addressed to the honourable Ras Mákwannen, true son of the holy country, of the land of the free, of Ethiopia, mother to all of us, lord of Harär, with its lands and half of Tegré.

May Our Lord Jesus Christ not let you see the ruin of Ethiopia, Amen.

[Amharic] I beg you so that you send this letter to His Majesty the King of Kings of Ethiopia, for the living Lord, for the Crucified God, Our Lord, who freed Adam from the bond of death, who struck the head of the snake with the staff of the cross, who vanquished the shield of Satan without fighting.

Your Majesty, this letter, these few lines of a poor Ethiopian, when you have read it well, I beg You, for the merciful mind of the Mother of God, that You have it read on Sundays after the miracles of Mary or before the mass, or rather on the day of the big market. And then that you leave it at Dábër Libanos, monastery of Abunä Täklä Haymanot.

Oh King of Kings, it is true that the Scriptures say: [Geʼez] ‘May no ruler be named except the Lord’ [Romans, 13, 1]. [Amharic] But the Lord makes those reign who are for life and makes those reign also who are for punishment, and because of this it is true the word that says: [Geʼez] ‘Fear the Lord and honour the King’ [1 Peter, 2, 17]: [Amharic] honour the good and hamper the evil. Because of this, it is well known that the King is allowed to do what he wants and to give orders, [obscure text] so that everyone in his own house may believe that the King is his witness.

You, Your Majesty, since God has had You to reign so that You do whatever You wish for all Ethiopia, to will the death of Your Mother, but, as I said before, thinking Your brothers are children of Ethiopia, after having investigated, that You do not reign for punishment, I doubt that it be not suitable for You, King of punishment, the book that says: ‘Do not humiliate yourself in front of the fool’ [The Book of Proverbs, 11, 29], following foreign kings to the point of destroying the flag and the king. [obscure text] Their king, who did this, is not a good model.

But now, I shall write to You very briefly and a part of the whole, that because of You, Majesty, all this calamity has fallen on Your Mother Ethiopia, and after You have listened, make all Your governors listen too.

original text exactly and sometimes differs from the conventional orthography for well-known names. The English translation is literal rather than literary. Alessandro Bausi translated the text.

95 CT: ‘all’ intelletto del suo paese, al vero figlio della santa regione dell’Etiopia Madre di tutti noi’ ['to the intellect of his country, to the true son of the holy region of Ethiopia Mother of us all'].

96 It must be emphasized that ‘half of Tegré’ refers to the loss of Eritrea occupied by the Italians, a definition which I have never found in other Ethiopian documents of the period. For the significance of addressing the letter to Ras Mákonnen see note 66 above.

97 CT: ‘E poi’ ['And then'].

98 CT: ‘Non essere alcuno investito di un’altra carica se non da Dio’ ['Be no one elected for a high office but by God'].

99 CT: ‘Ciò stante ogni uomo deve tenere il Re come unico testimone (della potenza di Dio) e tale che può ordinare e disporre come gli pare e piace’ ['Thus, every man must consider his King as his only witness (of the power of God) and so he can order and dispose as he likes'].

100 CT om. ‘Your brothers’.

101 CT om. ‘Their king, who did this, is not a good model’.
Well then, I have manifested it to you all: communicate the answer to all of us Ethiopians with a public announcement.

I. The words that Solomon said: ‘The industrious child makes his father happy, but the lazy child, hurts his mother’ [The Book of Proverbs, 10, 1], do not seem to have reached your rulers or even Your Majesty, but, indeed, You did not return it [Ethiopia] the favour that it gave to You, after only one man, [that is] the crown of David, having blessed Ethiopia, the holy country Your Mother, may God prolong its life... [ill.]

Furthermore, You are making it disappear from the boundaries where it was. You are doing all this because you listen to the advice of the wicked men, and, as I said before, the Ethiopia that King Têwodros and King Yohannes had protected making it prosper, may God have mercy on their souls, You Majesty, Your Mother Ethiopia, You completely cut off half of its limbs; and, what is even worse, like Nero, King of Rome, who killed Saint Peter and Saint Paul, who killed his mother and struck his mother’s womb, tearing it into small pieces in order to examine and see the place where he stayed before being born, You too, Majesty, on the womb of Your Mother Ethiopia, like him, while You have discovered that it is able to generate many kings, just and learned men, cutting it into pieces by indolence or foolishness. You are making it shorter like man’s urine.

It is not from today that You started, but before King Yohannes died, making friends with these white foreigners, it is You who let them enter and occupy our country. After King Yohannes had heard this, he was mortally offended, but death preceded him, I heard it said by men who know. But now, Majesty, ‘You will be imprisoned by the judge you welcomed’, as the proverb says, and again, as Solomon said: ‘He who dug a well for someone else, will fall in it himself’ [The Book of Proverbs, 26, 27], disgrace befell You and much blood of Christians, because of You, Majesty, flowed in vain. Most of the country, too, has become a desert, and if, because of this, one notices at the market or at funerals that men are fewer than women, in our country prophecy came true, that says, in the words of the prophet Isaiah: [Ge’ez] ‘Then seven women will say to one man: may your name be invoked over us’ [Isaiah, 4, 1]. [Amharic] Therefore, for the future, Your Majesty, if You sleep without applying any remedy, inevitably every year there will be a war and the male line will come to an end. Then seven women will say to You, to one man alone: ‘We beg you, be our husband’.

102 CT: ‘(seguono alcune preposizioni [sic] indecifrabili)’ [‘some indecipherable prepositions [sic] follow’].
103 CT: ‘Invece di conservare fino alla morte la loro porzione di suolo essi (delle frasi indecifrabili, sembra si tratti del soggetto... ossia dignitari o grandi capi) vanno diminuendo il territorio’ [‘Instead of keeping their portion of land until death they (some indecipherable sentences, it seems to be the subject...that is dignitaries or great chiefs) are decreasing the land’].
104 The comparison between Menilek and the Emperors Têwodros (1855–1868) and Yohannes (1871–1879), who died for their country, is a recurrent theme of the letter as well as the question of the borders. Both themes emphasize the historical consciousness of the author.
105 CT: ‘Ella aveva potestà di spezzare (questo male)’ [‘You had the power to break (this evil)’].
106 CT om. ‘kings’.
107 CT: ‘è incominciato’ [‘it has started’].
108 CT: ‘poi un uomo sarà chiesto per marito da sette donne’ [‘then a man will be asked for his hand by seven women’].
And even worse than this... [obscure text] pursuing Your guilt, stipulating a treaty with the white foreigners at Weçalè, saying: ‘Take this and this’, having sold Ethiopia Your Mother, You delimited boundaries for them, I think though excluding the rest and the gult of the monasteries. And after this, since the snake is very wily, if it finds a place, though very narrow, penetrating because of his wiliness like oil, it surely enters; they, too, like it, after a few years, proceeding slowly like a tortoise along the path You had showed them, violating the treaty, they took and voluntarily occupied the gult and the rim of the monasteries and the most important part of Ethiopia. Also to Your Majesty: ‘Since I offered a morsel I had my hand bitten’, as the proverb says, they even went so far as to say: ‘Your protectorate is ours; but You, what do You want, barbarous King?’ They were right to say barbarous, they, having seen You while You were striking the womb of Your Mother Ethiopia cruelly, tearing it into small pieces.

II. Listen! As it is said: [Ge’ez] ‘The Lord will not abandon his country without a ruler’, [Amharic] up to now, God is the caretaker of Ethiopia, may He prolong their life, but beside You, every man [obscure text] there are many men who like to obtain freedom for their Mother Ethiopia and who observe faith and prayer at all times, and because of this, during the time of chastisement, the Lord, thanks to the aid of their prayers, was over them. And therefore? It is said: [Ge’ez] ‘The Lord is near those who invoke his name’ [Romans, 10, 13], [Amharic] and again, as it is said: [Ge’ez] ‘The eyes of the Lord are turned to his just men’ [The Book of Psalms, 34(33), 16; 1 Peter, 3, 12], [Amharic] thanks to the prayer of those men, as I said before, at Alaga, Mäqalè, Alaqwa, and more on the 23 Yäkkätit 1888, He showed you his miracles.

But, as I said before, Your Majesty, You being for the chastisement of Ethiopia, You reign in order to shorten and destroy it, and rather, while You gave lands to the white foreigners at Weçalè limiting the boundaries, saying:

109 The famous and controversial treaty between Italy and Ethiopia signed in May 1889. See note 79.
110 Hereditary rights to land (rest) and grant of land (or revenues of land) assigned in return for service commonly translated as ‘fief’ (gult) widespread in all Ethiopia with regional differences. For the Amhara area see D. Crummey, ‘Abyssinian Feudalism’, Past and Present, LXXXIX (1980), 115–38; for Eritrea: A. Carbone, Termini più in uso nel diritto terriero dell’Eritrea (Asmara, 1949), 42–4; 45–6. CT ‘i campi dei monasteri’ [‘the fields of the monasteries’].
111 Rim can be defined as a right to land in favour of the church: Carbone Termini, 44, or as ‘ecclesiastical land [which] fell juridically under the church’: D. Crummey, ‘Gondarine Rim land sales: an introductory description and analysis’, in R. H. Hess (ed.), Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference on Ethiopian Studies (Chicago, 1979), 472. CT ‘i fondi dei monasteri’ [‘the lands of the monasteries’].
112 CT: ‘le tue ricchezze’ [‘your riches’]. The text clearly states tegennät, that means ‘protezione’; see I. Guidi, Vocabolario amarico-italiano (Rome, 1901), 831. The word also has the technical meaning of ‘protectorate’, very important in this context: T. Kane, Amharic–English Dictionary (Wiesbaden, 1990), 2180 (tagga. CT wrongly reads taggenät, deriving it from the homophonous root: op. cit. 2181, ‘wealth, riches, fortune’.
113 CT: ‘Nel tempo del flagello gli è per la loro preghiera che Iddio ha aiutato V.M.’ [‘In the time of the scourge it is thanks to their prayer that God helped Your Majesty’].
114 Various colonial battles favourable to Ethiopia in 1895–1896, among them the last one is the battle of Adwa (1 March 1896).
‘Because, staying together with the white foreigners, while I am your King, you fought against me’, cutting and cutting, with unjust laws You condemned the children of Ethiopia; [obscure text] but, for the other foreign nations, it is all Our Lord and they who love You, and made You be well. And this that is made by them, Your Majesty, having already come to Ethiopia once… [obscure text], but as it seems to me only a true King would restore freedom to his Mother Ethiopia, while it is of no importance he who would tear them to pieces [the lands] unfairly;115 furthermore, [obscure text: since their king has fought] wanting you as, may the name of the Lord be thanked, one who grieves for his Mother Ethiopia, who stays within the limits agreed upon, who restores the kingdom and the ruined country, a second Zorobabel [Ezdra, 2,2–5, 2 passim],116 endowed with an intelligence superior to everybody’s, with his eye open in his head; interceding and, as foolish as our supplication, telling us the King of Kings of Ethiopia, having consulted his governors, wishing to obtain freedom for Ethiopia his Mother: ‘Give back, as the law establishes, all the white prisoners in order to delimit the boundaries with the white foreigners’, to us insane, thinking it to be true, it gave us much pleasure.

But now, as it is said: [Ge’ez] ‘They dreamt a dream and there is nothing they found’ [Jeremiah, 23, 25–32], [Amharic] asking and investigating considerably, we knew for sure that the news is a dream, being Your Majesty, too, like maize. What is maize like? It is like an adult with downy cheeks and like a child who is carried on the shoulders. And You, Your Majesty, for not taking with determination what You negotiated for, You have completely made of Ethiopia a crumbling building.117

And this, too, is true, Your Majesty [obscure text above the line]: [Ge’ez] ‘Love for gold… attracted them away from us’, like the Holy Gospel said, gift of their fathers], the man who loves money, all the more reason You loving to sell their Mother; Judas Iscariot like You, loving money, sold [Ge’ez] the Son of the Lord, of the Father, [Amharic] the Lord, salvation of all the world, for thirty coins. For that reason, too, his name, written in the book from generation to generation, is mentioned as an evil action.

And as for You, too, like him, Your Majesty, if You sell Mother Ethiopia for money or because of Your laziness, we will know that You reduced it to ruin. If You made it thus, though it being said: ‘What a lazy King there is in Ethiopia this year, not eating the bread that is served to him, ready from the basket, in his hand’, Your name will be written from generation to generation and will be in every history book. But half of us, writing it, will curse You, saying: ‘Second Judas Iscariot, King fond of money, selling his

115 From ‘saying: ‘Because, staying together…’ to ‘would tear them to pieces unfairly’; CT: ‘e poi (segue un periodo intraducibile) Essi dissero: mentre noi siamo i vostri re, voi ci ferite a mezzo degli altri Europei ed essendo degli altri Europei molto amici li trattate bene. Questo Ella ha fatto per la rovina dei rimanenti Etiopi’ [‘and then (the following passage is not translatable) They said: while we are your kings, you wound us by means of the other Europeans, and your being good friends of the other Europeans, you treat them well. You did this for the ruin of the remaining Ethiopians’].

116 Zorobabel, of the tribe of David, who brought the Jews back home from Babylonia in 537 B.C.

117 CT: ‘ed ha costruito l’edificio dei fanciulli’ [‘and You have built the house of the children’].
Mother Ethiopia for gold, he ruined it for nothing: [obscure text] as for Ayzur,118 may the days of the reign be halved'.

The reason we say this, Satan, envying our mother Eve for her kingdom, assuming the appearance of a snake, spoke to her, and she hearing his words, because of her indolence,118 she ate the fig, and therefore, to this day, we are weak, suffering towards death and sin.120 As for the words she heard, the astute Satan, assuming the appearance of a snake, did not seem to come to her with deceit; he really did seem a snake to her. You Majesty, too, being a second Eve, forgetting the words that say: ‘The advice of sinners is astuteness’ [The Book of Proverbs, 12, 5], Satan speaking to You, who entered the heart of man, listening to the advice of the astute, from the moment You stipulated the agreement up to now, three years have passed in vain,121 and the hope we had has been destroyed. Even for the time to come, we know that for Ethiopia of Your time, You have not thought of prosperity, and furthermore it is sure that receiving money from everybody, You did it in order to sell Ethiopia.

For this, as the book says: [Ge’ez] ‘Blessed are those who do his will’ [Matthew, 21, 9], [Amharic] Nabot who died for his inheritance [1 The Books of Kings, 21, 1–16], the Holy David who fought together with the children of Israel against Goliath the Arab, Esther and Judith, who, though women, skilfully saved their people and their country, Joshua [The Books of Judith, Esther, Joshua], son of Nawē, who fighting against many kings, having defeated them, yielded the inherited land to the children of Israel;122 Most High Majesty, even though it is harassing for me to write, one by one, about the others, even the best who are dead and who suffered for their country even more than this, nevertheless there are many of them. Leaving aside the other Kings of Ethiopia, King Tewodros, who reigned before King Yohannes, was the son of a poor man, but after he ascended the throne, in addition to Ethiopia, he made [the country] tremble as far as Jerusalem. Even Ate Yohannes, who used to say: [obscure text] ‘Give my land away? Not even a knapsack full of dust will be given’, fighting against the pagans, died like a second GIalawdēwos.123 Your Majesty, however, belonging to David’s family since ancient times, why, day after day, do You ruin Your Mother Ethiopia? Then, Your Majesty, You did not think about what is said: [Ge’ez] ‘Honour your father and your mother, so that you may have the reputation of being just for a long time’ [Deuteronomy, 5, 16; Siracide, 3, 1–16], [Amharic] did You not think one good thing? ‘One head two tongues, one

118 The author refers to the King Ayzur who reigned half a day (A.D. 775): Sellassie, Ancient and Medieval, 203; The Dictionary of Ethiopian Biography (Addis Ababa, 1975), 31; C. Conti Rossini, ‘Les listes des Rois d’Aksum’, in Journal Asiatique, xiv (1909), 320, while CT renders ‘il suo regno come quello degli Assiri’ [Your kingdom like that one of the Assyrians].
119 CT: ‘per cupidigia’ [‘because of greed’].
120 CT om. ‘towards death and sin’.
121 The peace Treaty between Italy and Ethiopia signed in Addis Ababa in October 1896, a few months after the battle of Adwa.
122 The frequent references to biblical figures emphasize the importance of historical times for the country and seem to be a further example for Menilek to change his vision of Ethiopia.
123 Emperor Gıalawdēwos (1540–1559), who reorganized the kingdom and died in a battle against the Muslims.
throne two Kings'.

[obscure text] Obtaining freedom for our brothers with what You stipulated, will You not implore the Lord even in the country that is left? Or even being useless, it is much better, instead of reigning and destroying Ethiopia, if You give Your kingdom to someone else who is competent. Otherwise, if this year, too, with Your usual behaviour, You sell the country, You will be named: 'Menilek the Second, King of Kings of the Galla and of half Ethiopia', but, if You said: 'King of Kings of Ethiopia', it would be enormous impudence. After all, it would be ridiculous for any man, to name a country where You did not reign.

But since You did not suffer for Ethiopia at all, what Saint Paul said: [Ge'ez] 'He who does not think of his country and abandons his relatives, has denied his faith, and is worse than an unbeliever', [Amharic] applies to Your Majesty and to Your Governors, and it does not seem to me that You will escape from judgement. For the future, too, instead of making the Christians' blood flow again in vain, having stipulated an agreement, if You said: 'Submit yourselves, obey him, I have given you to a foreign kingdom, someone's friend', it would be a help for You during the time of judgement. Otherwise, You, his master, giving the country and the monastery...

Oh King of Kings, I did not write this letter to You to humiliate and offend the Lord's Most High Anointed, but, grief stricken at seeing the people of my country, children of Ethiopia, occupied by other populations, seeing them in a condition worse than that of slavery in Israel, I thought, if I said these words, I would pierce Your heart like a sword, Your Majesty; but, above all, since the white foreigners entered and spread over Ethiopia, if we waited for them saying: 'May the help of the Lord, the intercession of our Mother be with us', being children of Ethiopia, our only Mother, being determined, being numerous, it is certain that Our Creator would surely judge in our favour.

[Ge'ez] A servant of Your Reverence, son of the free land, with his heart in pain for his Mother, [and] inconsolable.

[Amharic] Written on the 16th Genbot 1891, in the region of Ba<...> [ill.] city <...> [ill.]

SUMMARY

Despite his important political and literary activities, Blatta Gàbrà Egzi'-abéhër is almost unknown to scholars of Menilek's Ethiopia. This historical period is not particularly well researched, and the author stands out as one of the few Ethiopian intellectuals to have written such an important number of literary works focused on nationalistic and anti-Italian feelings. The
Amharic/Ge’ez text under discussion, his letter to Menilek written in 1899, is a remarkable document from this point of view because it reveals a strong opposition to colonialism and the Italian occupation of Eritrea. This document is one of the first Ethiopian sources to testify to the growing nationalism and the growth of concepts of unity and independence. It allows us to consider more carefully the beginning of an Ethiopian secular ideology of the modern state. And such an ideology must be placed in the colonial context. The letter to Menilek raises some important questions regarding the new source material in the late nineteenth century available to historians of modern Ethiopia. A translation of the text is given as well as a comment on its historical significance.