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The "Independence" of Ethiopia and Liberia

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Abstract: This essay will examine the independence of Ethiopia and Liberia, two states frequently upheld as the only remaining independent African states during the colonial era. These two countries remained independent primarily because of the diplomatic regard that European nations held them, not because of military or geographic factors. The European view that these countries were legitimate players on the world stage was essential to avoiding outright conquest. However, these countries failed to achieve “real” independence. They had to sacrifice territory, succumb to European economic intrusion, and be placed in spheres of influence in order to remain “independent.” In fact, Liberia was a colony itself in many respects. This essay concludes by questioning why many African researchers refuse to acknowledge the questionable sovereignty of Ethiopia and Liberia.

The “Independence” of Ethiopia and Liberia

While the buildup took centuries, the European conquest of Africa was over in a lightning fast 15 years. At its end, there were only two African states remaining: Ethiopia and Liberia. The question of why these two countries survived while so many failed has intrigued historians since the 19th century. Ethiopia and Liberia are very different nations on opposite sides of the continent, but there are a number of commonalities between the two. This paper will analyze the geographical, political, and economic causes behind Ethiopia and Liberia’s independence as well as examine to what extent these countries were actually independent.

Ethiopia secured its independence at the Battle of Adwa in 1896. Emperor Menelik II led his troops to victory over a powerful Italian expeditionary force. One of the traditionally popular

explanations for Ethiopian independence is geography.¹ Ethiopia, while prosperous, is a rough country for foreigners. The deserts of the Somali and Afar borders and the swamps of the Sobat River protect the highlands from all sides, and Ethiopia proper is among the most mountainous regions in Africa. The land gives defending armies a significant advantage, making it difficult for foreign armies to submit the country. Geography played an important role in the Battle of Adwa itself, where the rough terrain limited the Italy's ability to deploy its troops and use its superior technology.² Menelik's army held the high ground, giving them the edge to win. The geographical thesis has been highly criticized in recent decades. Many Africana researchers posit that the geography thesis reinforces colonial racism.³ It makes it seem that it would be impossible for Black Africans to defeat White Europeans without the "savage" landscape of Africa to protect them. Tibebu points out that "Lord Napier's British expeditionary force reached Maqdala, the heartland of the geographically 'inaccessible' plateau, fought Tewodros II, defeated him, and pulled out. The Sudanese Mahdists set fire to Gondar. The Italians crossed the merciless heat of the Ogaden and the "impenetrable plateau of Tigray in their march."⁴ Geography was not much of a barrier to many invaders, including the Italians that eventually defeated them. Thus, it could not be the primary reason why the Ethiopians were able to remain independent.

Tibebu instead places Ethiopia's independence with its political structure.⁵ Ethiopia possessed a very hierarchical political structure, advanced by European standards. It was headed by a single leader, the Emperor, with a variety of provincial and feudal rulers underneath him.

¹ Teshale Tibebu, "The 'Anomaly' and 'Paradox' of Africa," *Journal of Black Studies* 26, no. 4 (1996): 414.

² Vincent B Khapoya, *The African Experience* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Education Limited, 2013): 95.

³ Tibebu 417.

⁴ Tibebu 415.

⁵ Tibebu 422.

Falola agrees with this, saying that “Menelik engaged the Italian threat by cultivating a united political front in the provinces.”⁶ This structure allowed Menelik II to field a large, united army under his direct command. The unitary structure allowed the Ethiopians to resist foreign influence. This was supplemented by the Ethiopian acceptance of Christianity. The Ethiopian Christian Church had been the state religion for 1600 years. It was ingrained in Ethiopian society. While initially a competitor to the authority of the Ethiopian state, “the Church, many local chiefs, and the peasantry finally rallied and became a positive influence for national solidarity.”⁷ The unity of the Ethiopians stopped Europeans from using their divide and conquer strategies. It was a form of early African nationalism. The “advanced” political structure gave the Ethiopians a degree of legitimacy on the world stage. In addition, sharing the same general religion (Christianity) made the Europeans more sympathetic towards the Ethiopians. The Europeans’ view of Ethiopia as a legitimate country was essential in the country’s independence.⁸ The influence of Ethiopia allowed it to purchase a huge number of modern rifles and artillery pieces from Russia and Britain. These weapons set them above other African states in terms of military capacity. Ethiopia could not have resisted the Italians without these weapons. After the Ethiopian victory at Adwa, Britain and Russia immediately sent envoys to recognize Ethiopia. They would not have done this if Ethiopia would not have been seen as a recognized state by the European community. This was something that other African states did not have. The political unity, Christian religion, and diplomatic legitimacy helped Ethiopia survive as a political unit.

⁶ Toyin Falola, *Africa: Volume 3, Colonial Africa 1885-1939* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2002) 401.

⁷ Falola 401.

⁸ Falola 403.

The Liberians were in a very different situation than the Ethiopians. Its origins began across the sea in the United States. Freed slaves and early abolitionists led the “Back to Africa” movement, which sought to end slavery by bringing American slaves back to Africa. This movement resulted in the state of Liberia, founded in 1822 and declared independent in 1847. Despite being independent of the US, it enjoyed the protection of its mother country.⁹ According to Akingbade, the US played an instrumental role in the success of the state. Not only did the US deter European states from invading the country, the US assisted by aiding the Liberians in subjugating the native Africans. For example, the Liberians had extensive conflict with the Grebo people. Early in the colony’s history, a rebellion and embargo from the Grebo was settled by a US Navy expedition:

In the crisis of 1843, the aid of the United States cruisers was sought in quelling the rebellion of the Half-Cavalla people, a section of the people, against the Maryland colony. In 1843, Commodore C. Perry suppressed the resistance of the Grebo and forced the terms of the settlers upon them. On December 8, 1843, he called a conference of the settlers and the disgruntled Grebo in order to bring about an amicable and peaceable settlement of the crisis...He asked the Africans to remove the embargo because it was injurious and unjust; and that the Grebo chief should promise never again to enter any combination against the settlers, and should stop hindering any of his people who wished to hire themselves to the settlers.¹⁰

This process was repeated whenever the native Africans would rebel against Liberia. Whenever tensions would flare, the US would send aid in the form of diplomatic assistance, providing

⁹ Harrison Akingbade, “U.S. Liberian Relations During World War II,” *Phylon* (1960-) 46, no. 1 (1985): 25.

¹⁰ Harrison O. Abingbade, “The Settler-African Conflicts: The Case of the Maryland Colonists and the Grebo 1840-1900,” *The Journal of Negro History* 66, no. 2 (1981): 94.

arms, or direct military confrontation with native Africans. Without this assistance, the native Africans would have overwhelmed or starved out the Americo-Liberians. They simply did not have the resources or expertise to survive on their own. In addition, sponsorship by the US was helpful in securing Liberia's status as a "proper" country. Like Ethiopia, legitimacy on the world stage was essential in avoiding outright conquest. The fact that Liberia had a US-style constitution gave the Europeans less justification in attacking them. Besides being run by Blacks, it had all the markings of a "civilized" nation.

But in the face of the Great Powers fighting for their influence, what did independence look like for these countries? Davidson questions the very idea that Ethiopia and Liberia were independent African states. He called Ethiopia and Liberia "countries which were not colonies, but which nonetheless failed to win real independence."¹¹ Firstly, both of them had to make extensive territorial concessions to surrounding colonies in order to maintain independence. Ethiopia ceded its entire coastline to Italy, and Liberia lost 40% of its internal claims to Britain and France.¹² Sometimes the territory was given up by treaty; other times, it was taken by force. These concessions were a huge challenge to their sovereignty. The treaties that the European powers forced on Liberia and Ethiopia were not always about territory. Many of them established imperialism in more subtle ways. According to Robertson, in 1906 "Britain, France, and Italy signed a three-power treaty which defined British and French interests in Ethiopia respectively as the Blue Nile waters and the Jibuti-Addis Ababa railway...Eastern, northern, and southern Ethiopia became a sphere of Italian economic influence."¹³ These three countries each

¹¹ Basil Davidson, *Modern Africa A Social and Political History* (London: Pearson Education Limited, 1994) 103.

¹² *Liberia: A Country Study*, Global Security, Accessed December 19, 2017, https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/1985/liberia_contents.htm.

¹³ James C. Robertson, "British Policy in East Africa, March 1891 to May 1935," *The English Historical Review* 93, no. 369 (1978): 835.

had their own interests in controlling Ethiopia, but none could overtly conquer it after it was internationally recognized. So, the Great Powers split it up into their spheres of influence, jockeying for power in this buffer state. Even though Britain had armed Ethiopia against the Italians and recognized it shortly after the Battle of Adwa, it conspired to control the critical Lake Tawa.¹⁴ Ethiopia was looked at enviously by all of the countries surrounding it. Liberia underwent similar experiences in its relationship with the United States. The Americans were willing to help the Liberians, but it came with a price, which Rosenberg famously called the “invisible protectorate.”¹⁵ The Liberians became dependent on American aid and trade. Liberia was rich in natural rubber, much of which was exported to the US. In 1916, the Liberian government was forced to surrender control of its budget to a coalition of America, Germany, France, and Britain. This was only the start of America’s direct control of Liberia; the American tire manufacturer Firestone was given extensive land for the world’s largest rubber plantation in 1926. Firestone was among the few foreign governments given access to own Liberian land, and the company initially only had a 1% tax on its exports.¹⁶ It allowed the US to obtain affordable rubber on their own terms. Before this, the US had to rely on British and Dutch monopolies on Asian sourced rubber. When Liberia was hit by the Great Depression in the 1930s, the US helped bail out the government.¹⁷ The US would later use its influence in Liberia to fight the Cold War. America took advantage of the civil wars in order to create an African bulwark against communism.¹⁸ Both Ethiopia and Liberia were well inside the spheres of influence of Western nations. Was near submission to foreign powers true independence?

¹⁴ Robertson 840.

¹⁵ Emily S. Rosenberg, “The Invisible Protectorate: The United States, Liberia, and the Evolution of Neocolonialism, 1909-40,” *Diplomatic History* 9, no. 3 (1985): 191.

¹⁶ *Liberia: A Country Study*.

¹⁷ Davidson 105.

¹⁸ Akingbade 33.

For Ethiopia, appeasing the colonial powers also meant adapting to them. After the Battle of Adwa, Menelik II and his successors launched extensive modernization projects for the country. In the decades following, a menagerie of foreign advisors was invited into Ethiopia's new capital of Addis Ababa in order to bring the country into the 20th century. Railroads, telegraph lines, and even some power plants sprung up across Ethiopia. This was not only to aid in the defense of the county—the push for modernization came from one of the prevailing justifications for imperialism. Tibebe says it best: “Because Ethiopia was way behind in economic development, it had to ‘open up’ its mountain fastness for modern civilization. If it could not do so of its own volition, force must be applied. Hence the need for direct colonial occupation.”¹⁹ One of the prevailing thoughts of the time during the 19th century was a strong belief in the inevitable progress of mankind. Europeans believed that technology and economics would bring all peoples of the Earth into prosperity. One aspect of this school of thought was that the African peoples were incapable of becoming a part of this prosperity on their own. Thus, it was the “White Man’s Burden” to bring these savages into civilization. This was done by taking over Africans and showing them how to use their extensive resources. If the Ethiopians did not modernize, the Europeans would have used their “primitive” nature as a cause for war. This was not popular among all Ethiopians. Many strongly opposed it. But to survive, the Ethiopians had to Westernize. That is the great irony of imperialism; it forces states to become that which they oppose in order to survive.

Some historians maintain that Liberia was not an independent African state at all, but a colony in itself. The comparison is clear: settlers from a Western nation come to Africa to set up a Western government and impose it on Africans. To a considerable extent, Liberia was a US

¹⁹ Tibebe 420.

colony of sorts. The Americo-Liberians, as they liked to call themselves, were strangers in a strange land. When they founded the colony, they had little in common with their distant African relatives. The Americo-Liberians brought with them a US-style constitution and US culture. While they may have been viewed as Africans in the US, they were essentially Americans in Africa. They sought domination over the native Africans through trade and treaties. They often had difficulties with controlling the interior.²⁰ The Americo-Liberians frequently turned to the US for assistance in dealing with these concerns, such as with the Grebo people. Even though it was “independent,” it failed to develop an economy which benefitted its people. It closely resembled the economically underdeveloped economies of surrounding colonies. Just like the colonies, the infrastructure in Liberia primarily served to extract and export resources, primarily rubber. According to Davidson, “the World Bank had estimated 1973 that out of every dollar earned, 16 cents stayed in the country.”²¹ Davidson blames this on “the continued ambition of the Americo-Liberian group to keep all power and privilege in their own hands at the cost of the majority of Liberians.”²² In Liberia, the Americo-Liberians took the same role as White settlers in South Africa or Kenya. They were the elite of society, and their grip on power would eventually turn to bloody internal unrest. Like many African colonies, Liberia was rocked by civil wars in the last quarter of the 20th century. First, the Americo-Liberians fought against the native African population, then the Africans began endless fighting against each other. Throughout the wars, the Americo-Liberians retained control over the wealth of the country. Rosenberg compares the status of Liberia to Latin American states like “Cuba, Panama, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and Haiti” at the same time, “somewhere between formal

²⁰ *Liberia: A Country Study*.

²¹ Davidson 106.

²² Davidson 104.

colonies and full independence.”²³ The US became adept at this form of soft imperialism, especially after the American Civil War. The influence was economically focused rather than political, which is shown by the American economic dominance in the country. Liberia was not a survivor of the Scramble for Africa, it was an early victim of it.

The survival of Ethiopia and Liberia was important in the development of Pan-African identity. It showed that the Europeans were invincible; they could be defeated by Africans. When Ethiopia was conquered before the Second World War, the heroic resistance of the Ethiopians and the outpouring of support from the other colonies helped nurture national identities across the continent of Africa. This is one possible explanation for the persistence of the idea of Ethiopian and Liberian full independence. Questioning the validity of the theory would question the foundations of Pan-Africanism. In reality, the status of these two countries was much more complicated. They had to make huge sacrifices to retain their independence, often compromising with colonial powers. While nominally independent, the state of Ethiopia and Liberia needs to be looked at in the context of the time.

²³ Rosenberg 191.

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