

## **Appendix 11- James Bruce's report on slavery in Ethiopia.**

Perhaps the most striking observation made by James Bruce who arrived in Ethiopia in 1769 will help us examine our forebears more astutely. James Bruce visited Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Saudi Arabia before coming to Ethiopia. He reported that he ate lion's meat and was beaten and turned naked by the natives while passing through North Africa. However, it was his arrival to Ethiopia that jolted and shocked him as he for the first time observed what he called an "extraordinary trade" on the plateau of Tigrey.

On September 19, 1769, James Bruce landed at the island of Massawa, which was administered by a Naybe. He had presented to the Naybe letters requesting safe passage from the Seignior of Constantinople and the Pashalis of Cairo and Jeddah for the Naybe was answerable to the remnants of the Ottoman Empire. The Naybe was also answerable to Ras Michael, Governor of Tigrey, for the latter could starve him and his soldiers.

On November 10, Bruce departed Massawa and arrived at Arkiko. On November 15, he departed from Arkiko, crossed the coastal region (Samhar), climbed the eastern escarpment of the Tigrey-Bahrenegash region, and reached the town of Dixan on the Tigrey Plateau on November 22.

Bruce reported that at Dixan many Christians and Moors (Moslems) lived and had only one trade "a very extraordinary one, that of selling children." The Christians

bring children stolen from Abyssinia to the Moors at Dixan, and the Moors sell the children at Massawa, from whence they will be shipped to Arabia and India. "The priests of province of Tigre .. are openly concerned in this infamous practice; and some of these have been licensed by Michael to carry it on as fair trade, upon paying so many firelocks for each dozen or score of slaves" (p.140).

Bruce continued that he "was told by Ras Michael, during a feast at his granddaughter's marriage", of a priest who sold the wife and two children of his friend, another priest, only for both priests to visit Dixan later at which they were overpowered and sold in Massawa. When the Naybe wished to return the priest to Michael, the "Ras returned for answer, that the Naybe should keep them to be his chaplains.. If not, ..[he might] send them to Arabia with the rest; they would serve to be carriers of wood, and drawers of water; there still remained at Damo enough of their kind to carry on the trade with Dixan and Massaowah " (142). The priests and the children sold were from rock Damo in Tigrey.

Later as viceroy to the emperor of Ethiopia at Gondar, Ras Michael went on military expeditions to subjugate rebels who refused to pay tributes. The rebels would rule over peasants of a region. Ras Michael would march to that region and burn the hats of peasants as retribution for their presumed support to the rebels. However, the agony of the vanquished may not end there. The victors march in groups of three or four seeking to find the vanquished that might have been stranded from crossing rivers on their flight from danger or that might have been hidden in the bushes. Bruce (p.242) describes: "In this dreadful occupation many [group

of victors] had been successful. Some of them had three, some four women and children, boys, and girls, whom, though Christians like themselves, they were hurrying along, to sell them to the Turks for a very small price."

It is not my purpose to blame Ras Michael and his soldiers. Rather my intention here is to show that some our forebears were slave traders, slaves and while the majority were neither of the above and free. No doubt the free outnumbered the slave traders and the slaves. However, the free had not succeeded in creating a government for and by themselves. The great hindrance to that effort is likely because they had not engaged in an analysis of the mentality of the slave trader ("bareya fengaye") and the slave ("bareya"), which has no respect for the dignity and humanity of the Ethiopian as a human being. The dangers of this mentality should be exposed by continued and relentless discussions.

The father of ethical morality, Zere Yacob had started the discussion a century before Ras Michael became viceroy of Ethiopia (Chapter 1). Yet the Ras had not availed himself of the truth revealed by the Ethiopian philosopher. Nor had Ras Michael comprehended that, though he had gained firelocks in exchange for the slave trade he spawned by his military campaigns and the trade centers he licensed, he had demeaned himself and his dignity as an Ethiopian when he allowed an Ethiopian to be traded like any item of trade. Certainly, Ras Michael was not the beacon of freedom for Ethiopians to emulate. It was the priest philosopher, Zere Yacob, who lived a century before him that we revere.

Do not forget that the mentality of the slave trader or the slave is not specific to any linguistic group. Also do not forget that just because several people are gathered at one place that act by itself does not ensure that they have the same goals strategies or interests. Those with the slave trade mentality will treat the rest as slaves. At each political discussion and determination that Ethiopians might hold it might be worthwhile for some one among them to point out to all if they may not be trampling on the dignity and humanity of another Ethiopian.

Bertu

HG