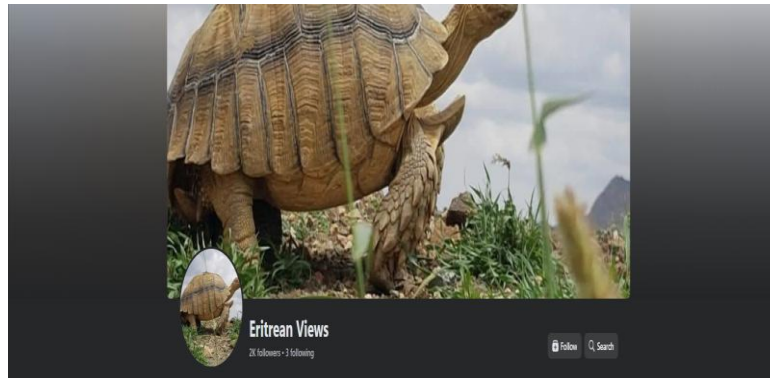


The Midas and Lycaon Curses: A Fatal Ambition



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In ancient Greek mythology, King Midas's foolish desire for everything he touched to turn to gold became his undoing. This obsession with a singular, glittering form of wealth led him to lose the things that truly mattered: food, water, and the embrace of his own daughter, who turned into a lifeless statue in his arms. It's a timeless cautionary tale about the perils of greed. But Midas is not alone in the pantheon of foolish kings. The myth of King Lycaon of Arcadia offers an even more chilling parallel. Lycaon was a king whose cruelty and arrogance knew no bounds. He sought to test Zeus, the most powerful of the Greek gods, by presenting him with a meal made of human flesh. In his hubris, Lycaon believed he was above the law, a sentiment many modern-day leaders foolishly echo when they think their power is absolute. In response to Lycaon's ultimate transgression, Zeus punished him by turning him into a wolf—a savage beast forever condemned to roam the wilderness—and cleansed the world with a great flood.

The myth of King Lycaon is rooted in the ancient region of Arcadia, which corresponds to the modern-day prefecture of Arcadia in the central part of the Peloponnese peninsula in Greece. This mountainous and rugged region was considered a place of wild, untamed nature in ancient times, making it a fitting setting for a story about a king who descended into savage behavior.

Today, these two ancient curses find a modern echo in Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's rhetoric regarding the Eritrean port of Assab. His fixation on acquiring this port, whether by force or negotiation, reveals a dangerous and myopic worldview that, much like Midas's and Lycaon's, threatens to turn life-giving relationships and peace into a hard, cold, and worthless state. Abiy's

pursuit of a port “at any cost” is not just about a misguided economic ambition; it is an act of hubris that risks tearing apart the fabric of regional stability and inviting a devastating reckoning.

The Flawed Claim of “Historical Right” and International Law

Abiy Ahmed’s government has attempted to legitimize its claim to Assab by citing a historical right to the sea. This narrative, however, ignores the clear and inconvenient facts of history and international law. The principle of “*uti possidetis juris*”, which underpins the sovereignty of most post-colonial nations, dictates that new states inherit the colonial administrative boundaries. Eritrea, much like most African nations, has a sovereignty defined by these colonial borders—a principle that the African Union, headquartered in Ethiopia, was founded upon. Ethiopia itself has repeatedly acknowledged this reality. The same Eritrea that has delineated its borders through the 1900, 1902 and 1908 treaties had become a sovereign UN member state in 1993 when its people overwhelmingly voted for independence in a UN observed referendum. Ethiopia like all UN member states has recognised Eritrea’s referendum and its sovereign right as an independent state. The 2000 Algiers Agreement, which ended the border war between our two countries, and the subsequent 2018 peace deal signed in Saudi Arabia and Asmara, also affirmed Eritrea’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The claim of “ownership” of the Assab port is particularly egregious and historically flawed. Ethiopia’s control over the port was a brief and violent aberration. It lasted a mere 39 years, from 1952 to 1991, during which time it was a forced annexation of Eritrea. Prior to this, Ethiopia was a landlocked empire. To claim ownership based on a period of illegal occupation is a slap in the face to international law and the very principle of national sovereignty. It’s a golden fantasy built on the sands of historical revisionism.

A Tale of Two Ports: From Cooperation to Conflict

The most frustrating aspect of this manufactured crisis is that a pragmatic and peaceful solution already existed. From 1991 to 1998, after Eritrea gained its independence, Ethiopian trade flowed freely through Eritrean ports, including

Assab, for a nominal fee. This arrangement was a model of regional cooperation, proving that a landlocked nation does not need to own a port to thrive.

However, in 1998, when war erupted between our nations, Ethiopia unilaterally boycotted the use of Eritrean ports. This decision, driven by conflict, was an act of self-harm. Now, nearly two decades later, Abiy Ahmed speaks of a golden key to prosperity through ownership, conveniently forgetting the years when access was readily available through peaceful means. This is the heart of the Midas curse: the inability to see the value in what is already there—peaceful partnership and mutually beneficial relationships—in a blinding quest for more.

Eritrea has never refused Ethiopia access to its ports. In fact, despite the countries being at war in 1999, Eritrea offered to help transport international food aid for Ethiopia through the port of Massawa to assist with a severe drought. This gesture of goodwill, a testament to the fact that even in conflict, humanity can prevail, was rejected by Ethiopia. This act of rejection demonstrates that the issue is not about access, but about a dangerous and unfounded sense of entitlement.

The Peril of Pandora's Box

Ethiopia is not the only landlocked country in the world; there are 44 others, including some that are double landlocked, like Uzbekistan. These nations thrive through mutual agreements and cooperation with their coastal neighbors. They rely on diplomatic engagement and international agreements to secure transit rights, not threats of force. The dangerous ambitions of Ethiopia's leadership have made it a pariah in the region. Under normal circumstances, the littoral states of the Red Sea would be racing to invite Ethiopia to use their ports and deepen economic ties. Instead, they are all deeply distrustful because of the dangerous ambitions that Ethiopia expresses.

Ethiopia can also learn from the experience of Bolivia and Chile. For over a century, Bolivia has claimed a sovereign right to access the Pacific Ocean, a territory that Chile owned after the 19th-century War of the Pacific. Bolivia took its case to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), arguing that Chile had a legal obligation to negotiate a sovereign corridor for it. In a landmark 2018 verdict, the ICJ ruled overwhelmingly in favor of Chile, finding that Chile was under no legal

obligation to grant Bolivia a sovereign sea access. This decision was a powerful affirmation of the sanctity of treaties and international law.

Abiy Ahmed's rhetoric, if acted upon, would open a Pandora's Box across Africa. It seeks to overturn the very foundation of African statehood: the colonial-era boundaries that were accepted and upheld by all African nations to prevent endless conflicts. If Ethiopia can unilaterally redraw borders based on a claim of "historical right," then what stops other nations from doing the same? The entire continent, already struggling with internal conflicts, would be plunged into chaos.

A Strategic Silence and a Cautious Resolve

Eritrea's strategic silence and commitment to diplomacy in the face of such provocations should not be mistaken for weakness. On the contrary, it is a sign of our leadership's maturity and its respect for international law. As President Isaias Afwerki has noted in his recent interviews in July 2025, Eritrea does not have an appetite for war. The nation's focus is on respecting international law and fostering regional stability. However, if provoked, Eritrea is more than capable of defending its sovereignty. Ethiopia has much to learn from the sacrifices of the past and the lessons of the present.

Just as Midas's golden touch brought him not wealth but starvation, and Lycaon's hubris led to a savage existence, this pursuit of a golden port could bring not prosperity but regional instability and human suffering. It is a foolish and dangerous ambition that our region simply cannot afford. By disregarding the merits of international law (including ICJ experiences) and threatening the very principle of *uti possidetis juris*, Ethiopia's leadership would live to regret its actions, just like the foolish kings of old.

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