

Ethiopia: Can We Leave the Past Where It Belongs and Claim the 21st Century?

by

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" Ethiopia saw the rise and fall of the Pharaohs. She saw the empires of Cambyses, Darius, Cyrus and Alexander the Great melt into nothingness. She saw the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome become heaps of stone. This most ancient of the nations saw the rising and the setting of the Caesars of the West and the East. She saw the birth of Islam, witnessed its sweep across the entire Old World, and aided in its check. She saw the rise and decline of the Holy Roman Empire and the discovery of the New World. She saw black men become slaves in the New World and again win their freedom. She beheld the rise and fall of Portugal, Spain, Holland, Sweden; was present at Napoleon's rise to power and his eclipse; as also that of the German Kaiser. She played the leading role in the down-fall of two previous Mussolinis--Depretis and Crispi-- and by the aid of her strong right arm and dauntless spirit she will also see the discomfiture and disgrace of this latest menace to world peace and brotherhood--Mussolini." [J.A.Rogers, "The Real Facts About Ethiopia", Special Collection of the Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff library, 1936]

Ethiopia is an ancient African country and one of the oldest states in the world. As Abyssinia its culture and traditions date back over 3,000 years and as the Kingdom of Cush beyond time immemorial. Throughout the centuries, Ethiopia had always been the symbol of ancient African civilization and statehood--one that can boast the most remarkable achievement and glorious past from long bygone times. Some seven decades and seven years ago, a Ghanaian historian, Dr. Joseph B. Danguah, in his introduction to the book, United West Africa at the Bar of the Family of Nations, by Ladipo Solanke, published in 1927, wrote:

" By the time Alexander the Great was sweeping the civilized world with conquest after conquest from Chaeronia to Gaza, from Babylon to Cabul; By the time the first Aryan conquerors were learning the rudiments of war and government at the feet of the philosopher Aristotle; and by the time Athens was laying down the foundations of modern European civilization, the earliest and greatest Ethiopian culture had already flourished and dominated the civilized world for over four centuries and a half. Imperial Ethiopia had conquered Egypt and founded the XXVth Dynasty, and for

a century and half the central seat of civilization in the known world was held by the ancestors of the modern Negro, maintaining and defending it against the Assyrian and Persian Empires of the East. Thus, at the time when Ethiopia was leading the civilized world in culture and conquest, East was East, but West was not, and the first European (Graecian) Olympiad was yet to be held. Rome was nowhere to be seen on the map, and sixteen centuries were to pass before Charlemagne would rule in Europe and Egbert became the first King of England. Even then, history was to drag on for another seven hundred weary years, before Roman Catholic Europe could see fit to end the Great Schism, soon to be followed by the disturbing news of the discovery of America and the fateful rebirth of the youngest of world civilizations."

Writing during the first century of our era Greek historians, notably Diodorus, Herodotus and Homer, had already noted that:

" Ethiopia is the only country in the world which never experienced a foreign yoke."

During the Middle Ages, Western (especially Portuguese) as well as Arab historians had witnessed Ethiopia's power, grandeur and size [S. Pierre Petrides 1983]

A cerebral French travel writer_who was in Ethiopia in the 1980s on government-sponsored study travel _confessed his frustration, writing back in France, by saying:

" Ethiopia is simply a slap to the face and a smack to the senses."

This is meant in two ways: for one, it is the highest tribute to the overwhelming impact the country makes on those who behold it. On the other hand, it is testifying to what a hot potato it is when it comes to trying to coping with and digesting it_ especially when it comes to talking or putting pen to paper regarding it. Writing in the 1950s, another writer puts it thus:

" Even today there is a sense of distinctiveness to Ethiopia that is intoxicating as it is elusive. Practically every tangible facet of Ethiopia's culture is unique."

In addressing its incredible longevity as one of several ancient civilizations in evolutionary progress, another French writer, Arnaud d' Abbadie had this to witness in the 18th century: " One after another, dynasties have risen and passed away, some of them, the greatest the world has ever known while Ethiopia has continued to control the destinies of numberless peoples in East Africa, and Arabia." Usually referred to as the greatest of Ethiopicians, the Italian historian C. Conti-Rossini writing in a crucial period (1925) contemplated the country's tumultuous history and the incalculable price paid for its legacy of indomitable independence with these words:

"What role does fate intend, in the course of future moves within the Dark Continent, for the one African community which has succeeded in remaining free? More than two thousand years of history, of independence, defended with determination, of wars

against everything and everybody are assuredly a great responsibility for a race of human beings to carry."

David Lamb in his book, *The Africans* (1970), noted:

"Long before the rest of East Africa had discovered the wheel, Ethiopians were recording their history in a written language, first in Ge'ez and second in Amharic. Ethiopia is the only country where Christianity (Coptic) is indigenous and not imported by European missionaries" [David Lamb: 1970]

For Nelson Mandela the Former President of the Republic of South Africa:

"Ethiopia always has a special place in my imagination and the prospect of visiting Ethiopia attracted me more strongly than a trip to France, England and America combined. I felt I would be visiting my own genesis, unearthing the roots of what made me an African." [Nelson Mandela, A Long Walk to Freedom, 1994]

Ethiopia also is known as a museum of peoples as it represents a mosaic of national/linguistic communities or nations, speaking more than 83 different languages, with about 200 dialects, and professing different religions. It is a land of contrast and diversity boasting numerous interesting and wonderful tourist attractions. The natural beauty of Ethiopia amazes the first time visitor as the country is a land of rugged mountains (some 25 are over 4,000 meters high), broad savannah lakes and rivers. The great and unique Rift Valley is a remarkable region of volcanic lakes with their famous collections of flora and fauna, and bird life, great escarpments and stunning vistas.

The diversity of history, culture and geography, which so overwhelms the visitor to Ethiopia, is no accident of place: It is indicative of quite an extra-ordinary past. This is a past which has left its mark on the land, the people and their monuments, which begins not with the origin of a nation or a state, but with the origin of mankind itself, as Ethiopia has yielded the oldest evidence of human origins yet discovered-- the fossilized skeleton of a female hominid older than 3.5 million years. Many people visit Ethiopia-- or hope to do so one day-- because of the remarkable manner in which ancient historical traditions have been preserved. And, indeed, the ceremonies and rituals of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church open a window on the authentic world of the Old Testament. In no other country in Africa is it possible to find yourself so dramatically transported back in time or to participate with such freedom in the sacred rituals of an ancient and archaic faith.

Much has been said about Ethiopia's physical and cultural resources but more powerful, although elusive when it comes to talking and writing about it, is its spiritual heritage. As the Englishman Philip Briggs writes in his Guide to Ethiopia:

" Over a period of time, Ethiopia's recognized tourist attractions become incidental to the thrill of just being in the most extraordinary country. The people of the highlands have assimilated a variety of African, Judaic and even Egyptian influences to form one of the most unusual and self-contained cultures on the planet."

All along the 19th century, Ethiopia had been the sole African state not to succumb to Europe's seizure of the continent. When she was invaded by a European (Italian) army in 1896, the heroic people of Ethiopia utterly defeated and humiliated the Italians at the Battle of Adowa, thus destroying the then prevailing myth of the White Man's invincibility, and consequently effecting far-reaching consequences throughout the world.

An eminent Frenchman, H.C. des Fosses, describing about the Battle of Adowa, wrote in 1897:

"Africa has ceased to be a prey: the time is over when a small detachment of men equipped with a few cannons were enough to seize a big country---Everywhere now the Africans know that the White Men have been utterly defeated by the Ethiopians-- The news of the Battle of Adowa spread throughout the continent with astonishing speed. The White Man is no more invincible. The Africans have stopped fearing him. One cannot overemphasize the importance of the Ethiopian victory: It marks the beginning of a new era for Africa."

Many Europeans were shocked at the outcome of the Battle of Adowa:

- A British Army General, General Berkeley, who visited the battlefield a few weeks later, wrote:

"To the best of my belief, there is no parallel case in modern history."

- An eminent German W.Langer wrote:

" The battle of Adowa was one of world importance."

- Another European, P.H. Oberle, Commented:

" The Ethiopian victory had an immense resounding throughout the whole world. An African country with almost medieval structures gained a decisive victory over a powerful European state and against an army equipped with the most modern weapons of military technique."

For over hundred years, between 1835 and 1935, Ethiopia had to fight and repulse an extraordinary number of encroachments, attacks, invasions and wars, and keeping herself free from foreign yoke. Attacked, invaded, plundered, and burned, Ethiopia had to experience and overcome an ordeal of one hundred tormented years, unparalleled in African history. Four great powers (Italy, Great Britain, France, the Ottoman Empire) and four African sisterly countries (Egypt, the Sudan, Somalia and lately Eritrea) waged wars against her in the past. Always the victim of aggression, Ethiopia had to fight--sometimes simultaneously-- two mighty forces: African expansionism and European colonialism and imperialism.

In 1923, Ethiopia became the member of the League of Nations and as such deserved to merit, in 1936, the honour of becoming the "conscience of the world" (in Dag Hammarsjold's words) by proclaiming **urbi et orbi** that "there are not two justices in the world, one for Europe and the other for Africa," that "peace is indivisible and if you let injustice prevail in Africa, then prepare yourself to be tomorrow's Africa." These prophetic

words were stated by the then Emperor of Ethiopia, Emperor Haile Selassie I, at the League of Nations in 1936 when Fascist Italy invaded and occupied Ethiopia, though temporarily (1936-1941), and the League of Nations not only condoned the Italian occupation but also sanctioned arms embargo both on the aggressed and the aggressor, to the dismay of many peace loving nations the world over. However, the prophecy of Emperor Haile Selassie I did not remain for long to be fulfilled as Europe was engulfed in one of the most destructive and ferocious wars it had ever seen, when World War II erupted in 1941.

Yet in 1945, Ethiopia was among the first to join the United Nations Organization (UN) and to spearhead the anti-colonial struggle against European colonialism, espousing the cause of liberation movements in Africa and elsewhere, and assisting materially and morally all the liberation movements in Africa until the last vestiges of colonialism and apartheid were dismantled in Namibia and South Africa some ten or so years ago.

Is that evidence too much history? Surely not. History is not like a medicine, which comes with a label on the bottle advising, "Caution: dangerous to exceed the stated dose." History is what makes nations what they are. It gives them their character, their institutions, their identity. We can misread it or misuse it, but we cannot have too much of it. On the contrary, it is nations and countries that have too little that may fall prey to the temptation to invent it. If we are lucky enough, and we indeed are, to have the stuff, then, we need to get stuck into it.

Thus the uncommon combination of historical, cultural, and natural attractions that mark Ethiopia as a unique tourist destination in Africa is indeed an exciting and unexpected surprise for many a tourist. From the bubbling, rumbling and subterranean molten fireworks of Ertale in the Danakil Depression of the Afar Region in north-eastern Ethiopia, where you also come across the hottest and the lowest places on earth (average daily temperature reaching more than 54°C and elevation going as far down to 150 meters below sea level), the snow-capped peaks of the Semien Mountains which are about 4620 meters high, physically Ethiopia is admittedly the African continent's anomaly. Ethiopia is also acknowledged as a Pavlov center for its genetic resources and one of the earth's six important habitats for biodiversity. Among eight of Ethiopia's tourist attractions the following can be cited to have been declared as World Heritage by UNESCO:

- **Lalibela**, the eighth wonder of the world, as many travelers and travel writers say, is Ethiopia's prime tourist attraction. It is the site of eleven remarkable rock-hewn monolithic churches, believed to have been built by King Lalibela, in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century.
- **Axum**, Ethiopia's most ancient city and the site of many remarkable monolithic stone stelae or obelisks standing as high as 23-33 metres is also a spectacular attraction. The three most important are decorated to represent multi-storeyed buildings complete with doors and windows.

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- **Gondar**, which is referred by many as the Camelot of Africa, is so impressive that charms visitors by its setting. It is the site of numerous medieval castle-like palaces.
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- **The ancient Walled City of Harrar**, which was from many centuries a major commercial center, is said to be one of the most scenic sites in the world. The city's unique housing, the colorful dress of its inhabitants, and its stout old walls have always fascinated visitors. Apart from historical sites, Ethiopia has also immense wealth of natural attractions.
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- **The Simen Mountains National Park**, is one of those marvelous sites found in northern Ethiopia. Within this spectacular splendour live Walia Ibex, Simien Red Fox, and Gelada Baboon- all endemic to Ethiopia-and a lot of other animals and birds.
- **The Bale Mountains National Park**, With their vast moorlands, extensive heath virgin woodlands, pristine mountain streams, alpine climate and endemic animals, the Bale Mountains remain an untouched and beautiful world.
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- **The Blue Nile Falls**, which is known locally as Tis Isat-'smoke of fire'- is the most dramatic spectacle on either the White or the Blue Nile rivers and is also an attraction that charms many tourists. The ceremonies and rituals of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which open a window on the authentic world of the Old Testament, are also dramatic attractions. Timket- a feast of epiphany, and Meskal - the finding of the true cross, are the greatest festivals of the year which are celebrated colorfully with huge, dramatic processions.

Such fascinating range of experiences make Ethiopia truly a land of discovery - brilliant and beautiful, secretive, mysterious, and extraordinary.

As mentioned earlier, Ethiopia was one of the oldest states in the world practicing sedentary agriculture and conducting extensive trade throughout the civilized world when most peoples in Europe were hunters and gatherers. It accepted Christianity (Coptic), Judaism, and Islam (Sunni) at a time when most of Europe's inhabitants were pagans. It was and it still is a country where national pride and respect for sovereignty are given the highest regard. Our forefathers and foremothers have bequeathed us this proud heritage.

"We are proud that we are a people that never succumbed to colonialism and the only nation in Africa to have remained independent. Rightly so, we also deservedly take pride in our historical heritage whose creativity has been much appreciated. The heritage, however, belongs to past generations of Ethiopians, their hard work, sweat and blood. The

source of the pride of the present generation is the achievements of past generations. We are proud of real attainments, most of which are not produced by the labours of the current generation, but of the preceding ones, or the forebears.

In so much as there are the aforementioned values and assets that the present generation should take pride in, or be proud of, protect and preserve, there are also aspects of the country which are embarrassing sources of painful national disgrace. At this juncture, our country is heavily dependent on foreign aid. We are not yet able to even feed ourselves and hence have to beg annually for food aid. Nothing has as much humiliating effect on the pride of a nation as having to beg. Our development activities would also get nowhere without significant foreign aid and the provision of loans. To obtain the requisite aid and loans requires the good will and meeting the conditions of our donors and leaders. Under such circumstances, we cannot proclaim that we are free and sovereign in real terms. This is a major source of our national humiliation and shame" [MOI, Foreign Affairs and National Security Policy and Strategy Document].

Ranked at 170th out of a total of 177 countries in its human development index (HDI), by the most recent Human Development Report [UNDP HD Report 2004], Ethiopia is, by any measure, one of the poorest countries on earth. *"The miserable condition of the Ethiopian economy is reflected in every sector and by all standard social and economic indicators one chooses to use. Ethiopia's per capita GNP calculated in dollar terms for 1997 was \$110, which surpasses only Mozambique with a GNP per capita of \$90. The average figure for low-income countries for the same year was \$350 while the average for sub-Saharan Africa was \$500. If we use purchasing power parity (PPP) which is more indicative of people's buying power in their own countries, Ethiopia's real GDP per capita for 1995 was \$455 which is the second lowest figure only better than the Democratic Republic of Congo with a value of \$355. This is a very low figure even compared with other developing countries. The average for LDCs was \$1008 while the average for all developing countries was \$3068. Our close neighbour Kenya has a value over three times more than Ethiopia with a purchasing power parity of \$1438.*

The level of poverty in the country is rather staggering. As of 1998, over 46% of the population lived under the dollar a day measure of poverty with a 12.4% poverty gap. The adult literacy rate for Ethiopia stood at 35.5% compared with 49.2% for least developed countries and 77.6% for the rest of the world. Kenya's stood over twice that of Ethiopia at 78.1. The gross enrollment ratio for 1st, 2nd and 3rd levels stood at 20 in 1995 compared with 36.4 for LDCs, 52 for Kenya and 61.6 for the rest of the world. Life expectancy at birth stood at 48.7 for Ethiopia compared to 62.2 for all developing countries and 53.8 for Kenya. Only 27% of the population had access to safe water and 10% to sanitation while the infant mortality rate stood at 109 deaths per 1000 live births. These figures stood at 71 for safe water, 30 for sanitation and 80 for infant mortality rate for low-income countries. For Kenya the figures stood at 53 for access to safe water, 77 for sanitation and 57 for infant mortality

rate." [Berhanu Nega and Seid Nuru, Performance of the Ethiopian economy 1991-1998, AAU, 1999, p. 19-20]

"In sum, although Ethiopia is the only African country to have successfully resisted colonialism and despite having an ancient and proud civilization, it now trails far behind in the long list of countries when it comes to development. As mentioned here above, only a very few countries find themselves in a lower position than that of Ethiopia. As a result of the desperate circumstances, the dream of many of our youth has become living in exile by immigrating to Europe or America. Many who have failed to make it to these continents have resorted, even illegally, to crossing to the Middle East to work as maidservants and daily labourers__ a situation which they consider to be an "opportunity". Today, many of our youth are also fleeing in large numbers to Kenya, Uganda, South Africa, etc. in search of greener pastures. It is indeed difficult to understand what national pride or patriotism means to persons who see their compatriots gratefully toil abroad as domestic workers, and yet who dwell upon the past glories of their country." [MOI, FANSPSD]

"So, while we are proud of our heritage, we are also ashamed of the current state of our country. To the degree that we cherish the achievements of previous generations, we observe with bitter regret and remorse the state of national humiliation in which the present generation finds itself. While we certainly deserve to take pride in our heritage and work for its conservation, we nevertheless need to address, as a matter of greatest priority, the source of our national embarrassment if we are to hold our heads high. We deserve no peace of mind until and unless we decisively deal with the source of our disgrace and shame." [Ibid]

The real source of our national humiliation in our time is abject poverty and backwardness. It is the lack of a well-functioning and stable democracy, lack of a robust rule of law and good governance. It is falling short on fully and effectively tackling the vexing questions of corruption, rule of law, independent and efficient judicial system, economic management and respect for human rights. It is simply the inability to institutionalise yet a well-functioning and capable, democratic state with strong institutions promoting the public interest, and fully implementing the rule of law. Still another source of our national shame is our inability to work together in a spirit of trust, tolerance and cooperation forged by a common belief in our collective national destiny. Historic grievances keep festering; ethnic, religious and similar other prejudices, contempt, mistrust and hatred based on our differences still linger on resulting in resentments and antagonisms amongst ourselves. We have no viable alternative but to right the wrongs of the past to the full satisfaction of all groups concerned and move on to build one strong political and economic community for ourselves and the future generations. After all, one should never forget those factors which are common to all the peoples of Ethiopia: The intermingling and integration between the various ethnic groups and peoples which took place through the ages, the sacrifices paid in common in defense of the country, the oppressions and subjugations by the successive monarchical regimes

endured in common and the resources and aspirations shared in common by the peoples of Ethiopia are strong factors of unity, too strong, indeed, to be ignored. The motto "unity in diversity" should, in the Ethiopian context, guide our future actions and policies. Ethiopia is indeed a country built on shared history and worth struggling to preserve. We have no better choice but to live together in peace, and this imperative must guide us towards a form of integration which will, at the same time, allow for the full development of each constituent ethnic group, language community, nation or people based on equality, mutual benefits and interdependence. To put it in short, our only solution is to effect a rapid socio-economic transformation and democratization which will have a direct benefit to all the peoples at large in a united federal state called Ethiopia. This naked truth should guide us to leave the past where it belongs and to claim the 21st century through hard work and brotherly/ sisterly cooperation and tolerance as well as full trust amongst ourselves, thereby putting an end to the sources of our national shame and embarrassment which are the prevalence of abject poverty and backwardness, and the absence of meaningful and sustainable development and democracy. It is only when we are able to do this that Ethiopia will be able to be at peace with itself and to realize its immense human and natural resource potential for the benefit of her peoples.

Therefore, all Ethiopians who love their country and seek to herald a better future for our people should rise above hate politics, political extremism, sectarianism and cynicism, and genuinely and actively participate in the struggle for achieving two fundamental freedoms our people have longed for for a very long time: political freedom , economic development guided by social justice.

The age-long quest and struggle of the Ethiopian people for democratic governance is aimed not only at doing away with repressive and autocratic governance but also at improving their socio-economic conditions in a way that will lead to a qualitative improvement in their material conditions. Hence, democracy and development should not be conceived only in terms of a struggle over power-sharing and the distribution of wealth and private accumulation but also the creation of commonwealth, as citizens will be able to exercise real choice after they have overcome poverty, squalor or ignorance which constitute major constraints on freedom and equality. This requires forging cooperative work, collaborative effort and deliberative traditions by bringing people together across party lines, ethnic backgrounds, class divides and other differences for the common good. As one close observer of Ethiopia succinctly put it:

"Ethiopia must liberate itself from the stifling past and enter into a new era with an interweaving of separate ethnic strands into a new national design. To secure the public good and private rights against the danger of ethnic factions, and at the same time to create a truly democratic government, is the great object to which freedom-loving Ethiopians should direct their thoughts and their individual actions"[Theodore M. Vestal]

Let us stop living in the past and finding solace in the achievements of past generations but work for the future and the commonwealth and claim the 21st century through hard work and dedication. Let us put a full stop to hostility and hateful and divisive politics amongst ourselves and stand together as patriotic Ethiopians to extricate our people and our motherland from the scourges of poverty and underdevelopment. Let us all be cognizant of the fact that Ethiopia is a country built on shared history and worth struggling to preserve as one country of diverse ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic groups. Our prime enemies today are poverty and backwardness, no one and nothing else. Let us make an unflinching resolve to rally around this formidable challenge. By way of conclusion, let me cite the inspiring words of Emperor Haile Sellassie I:

"That until the philosophy which holds one race superior and another inferior is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned; That until there are no longer first-class and second-class citizens of any nation; That until the colour of a man's skin is of no more significance than the colour of his eyes; That until the basic human rights are equally guaranteed to all without regard to race; That until that day, the dream of lasting peace and world citizenship and the rule of international morality will remain but a fleeting illusion, to be pursued but never attained." [Emperor Haile Sellassie I's Speech to the United Nations General Assembly in 1968]