



JUAN GONZÁLEZ NÚÑEZ

The process of knowing a people implies approaching, with utmost respect, its customs, traditions and the events with which the tapestry of its history is weaved. This book presents the main landmarks in Ethiopia's history; from her mythical and remote origins to the present days.

The author has spent much of his life as a missionary in Ethiopia, he has worked in the historic capital of Addis Ababa and in the remote Gomúz región. He describes, with singular taste, the myths, the beliefs and the historical events which are part of the regions and the people of this great country in the horn of Africa.

Ethiopia

HISTORY AND LEGEND

Ethiopia

JUAN GONZÁLEZ NÚÑEZ



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HISTORY AND LEGEND

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Ethiopia

History and Legend

JUAN GONZÁLEZ NÚÑEZ

Father **Juan González Núñez** was born in Chandreja de Queija (Orense). After finishing his theological studies, he entered the Institute of the Comboni Missionaries. Ordained a priest in 1968, he spent a few years in Spain as a teacher. In 1974, he was assigned to Ethiopia, where he worked first in the mission of Dilla, in southern Ethiopia, and later as rector in the diocesan seminary of Addis Abeba.

In 1988, he returned to Spain, where he worked as editor of the magazine *Mundo Negro* until 1993, when he was appointed provincial superior. At the General Chapter of 1997, he was elected General Councillor. This service gave him the opportunity to visit the different missions in the African countries.

In 2004, he returned to Ethiopia and was assigned to work among the Gumuz, one of the most marginalized tribes of that country. Currently, Fr. Juan is the formator of the Comboni postulants and teaches in the center of studies of philosophy and theology of Addis Abeba.

The fruits of his nine years of insertion among the Gumuz are his two books: *North of the Blue Nile* and *Pequeñas Exploraciones* (Small Explorations), wherein he describes their history, culture and daily life.



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Church and religion

Catholics:	815.080 (0,80%)
Orthodox:	45.848.250 (45%)
Protestants:	17.320.450 (17%)
Muslims:	35.252.210 (34,60%)
Traditional and Other Religions:	2.649.010 (2,60%)

HIV/AIDS Infected: 1.2% of the population between ages of 15-49.	
Adult Literacy Rate (2005-2010):	39%
Student Enrollment Rate:	55%
Primary School:	100 (M), 97 (F)
Secondary School:	39 (M), 32 (F)
Tertiary:	8 (M), 3 (F)
Human Development Index:	0,442

Economy and development

Currency: Birr (ETB) (\$1 = 27,367 birr, September 2018)	
GDP (\$ million): 111,800	
GDP Per capita: \$1,218	
GDP by Sectors:Agriculture (41%), Industry (15%) and Services (43%)	
GDP Growth (2000-2010): 10.5%	
Basic Resources:	
Agriculture: ..Coffee, wheat, cotton, corn, tobacco, and cattle.	
Mining:	Gold, limestone, and pumice stone.
Industry:	Agri-food and textile.
Tourism:	681.649 visits in 2013 (\$522 million)
Foreign Debt (million dollars):	15.500
Exports (\$ million):	3.761
Imports (\$ million):	10.690
Official Development Assistance received (\$ Per capita): ...	8,1
Foreign Direct Investment (million dollars):	953
Roads:	44.359 km (13.77% paved)
Railways:	660 km.
Main Airports:	Addis Abeba, Bahir Dar, Dire Dawa.
Mobile Phones:	30.490.000
Internet Users:	1.528.275
Press:	20 (daily 3, periodical 17)
Radios:	5
Televisions:	1

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APPENDIX II

ETHIOPIA BASIC COUNTRY DATA¹

Official Name:Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.
Demonym:Ethiopian
Land Area:1,133,380 km²
Population:101.885.000 (population growth: 2.5%)
Population Density:89.89 inhabitants per km²
Population Distribution:urban (17.5%) rural (82.5%)
Population aged under 15:41%
Population aged 65 and older:4%
Capital:Addis Abeba.
Main Languages: Amharic (official) and English (Lingua Franca).
 Other languages from ethnic groups such as Tigrinya, Oromo, Gurage, and Sidamo.
Independence: Always, except for the Italian occupation (1936-1941).

Social data

Life Expectancy:63.6 years
Fertility Rate:4.5
Infant Mortality Rate:46/1.000
Malnutrition Rate:25.2%
No access to drinking water:52%
Proper Sanitation:24%
Doctors (per 100,000 inhabitants):3
Malaria (deceased 100,000 inhabitants):10
Tuberculosis (deceased in 2011):15,000

1. Source: Mundo Negro, May 2016

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Map of Ethiopia and Eritrea
with the most important historical places

- 2015:** Fifth general elections. EPRDF wins all seats in Parliament.
- 2016:** October. Serious riots in many parts of the nation, above all in Oromia and Amara (Gonder). State of emergency imposed for several months.
- 2017:** October. Fresh riots. Serious clashes between the Oromo and Somali ethnic groups in the eastern part of the nation.
- 2018.** February. Prime Minister Hailemariam Desaleñ resigns
- 2018.** April 2th. Abiy Ahmed is elected Prime Minister. Reconciliation with political parties in exile and with Eritrea

- 1991:** May 21st. Mengistu flees Ethiopia and seeks refuge in Zimbabwe. Chaos threatens the nation.
 May 23rd: EPLF comes to power in Asmara. Eritrea becomes virtually independent.
 May 28th: TPLF/EPRDF takes power in Addis Abeba. Marxist regime liquidated.
- 1993:** After a referendum, Eritrea proclaims itself officially independent.
- 1995:** General elections in Ethiopia. New constitution and new parliament.
- 1998:** War between Eritrea and Ethiopia breaks out.
- 2000:** Final Ethiopian offensive. War ends but the reason that triggered it remains unresolved.
 UNMEE occupies the interposition strip between both nations.
 Second general election in Ethiopia. “Neither free nor transparent.”
- 2005:** Third general election, again protested against. Riots in June and November.
- 2007:** September 11th. Beginning of the third millennium according to the Ethiopian calendar.
- 2008:** UNMEE leaves the interposition strip.
 Conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea remains unresolved.
- 2010:** Fourth general elections. Opposition parties wins one seat out of 548.
- 2012:** August 20th: Death of the first Prime Minister: Meles Zenawi.
 Hailemariam Desalegn succeeds him.
- 2013:** May 23rd. 50th anniversary of the OAU foundation (today AU) in Addis Abeba.

FOREWORD

“Lords, emperors, kings ... and all people who wish to know about the different generations of men and the diversities of the different regions and lands of the world: take then this book and have it read”.

These lines from the Book of Wonders, and its remarkable account of Marco Polo’s journeys, conjure the same experience and symbolism that permeates the book about Ethiopia that you are holding in your hands.

Before being translated into English, it was published in Spanish for the first time in 1991 and re-edited and updated several times. Juan González Núñez, better known as Abba (Father) Juan, shares his historical knowledge on Ethiopia, -a country of pain and a country of love-, but he also provides notes and personal insights rich in sense and sensibility into objects, events or historical figures, through his experience, both practical and spiritual. His book is neither a scientific nor an anecdotal account of the historical events that have marked the country. It is rather a description of life, from both sides and through his own lenses. Father Juan is a missionary by calling. One day, a long time ago, he started his journey and since has never

looked back. He is not a writer by calling, but words have always been important and special in his life.

I had the privilege of meeting Father Juan shortly after I arrived in Ethiopia. From the beginning, he struck me as a modest and reserved, yet extremely cordial person. Someone who always observes and analyzes calmly, as a prior step to action, in deeds or in words. Such is his method: combining the virtues of speech and the virtues of silence to interpret the world, never being indifferent. With his particular Occam's razor, he dissects the contexts, in search of harmony, applying his profound sense of justice, peace and love. In the words of the author: "... I am a priest and priests have the habit of making a pious interpretation of about anything."

Spain and Spanish Cooperation are in debt to people like Father Juan, who are major figures in the day-to-day reality supporting "Marca España", Spain's branding drive, and an important part of our soft power on the international scene. Father Juan's knowledge of Ethiopia is deep and thorough. To use Gomez de Liaño's words, this wealth of knowledge can be described as "grounded work" as "it resists, remains, stands still and does not fall apart". Any Spanish-speaking traveler to Ethiopia - aid worker, scholar or simple tourist - should read this book as it provides a thorough, yet pleasant, overview of the country's diverse wealth.

To expand such readership, the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation, AECID, is pleased to sponsor its translation into English, and to offer

- 1896:** Italians defeated at Adwa.
- 1913:** Death of Menelik. He is succeeded by his grandson, Lij Iyasu.
- 1916:** Iyasu deposed. Zewditu, daughter of Menelik, takes the throne.
Ras Tafari Makonnen, future emperor Haile Selassie I, serves as regent.
- 1930:** Death of Zewditu. Haile Selassie crowned emperor.
- 1935:** Italian troops invade Ethiopia.
- 1936:** Haile Selassie exiled.
- 1941:** Defeat of Italy and Haile Selassie's triumphant return.
- 1952:** Eritrea federated to Ethiopia according to UN decision.
- 1962:** Eritrea is converted into a mere province of Ethiopia.
Eritrean guerrilla war starts.
- 1972:** Severe drought in Tigray and Wollo provinces.
- 1974:** Revolution takes a group of Marxist militia to power.
Haile Selassie deposed.
- 1977:** Mengistu Hailemariam reaches the upper echelons of power.
- 1977:** Ogaden is occupied by Somalia. Ethiopia-Somalia War.
- 1977-1978:** "Red Terror" campaign. Thousands of people executed.
- 1984-1985:** Drought devastates Ethiopia again.
- 1987:** Ethiopia proclaims itself a People's Republic, governed by the communist party.
- 1990:** Images of Marx, Engels and Lenin withdrawn from public spaces.
Implicit rejection of Marxism?

- 1270:** End of the Zagwe dynasty and reestablishment of the Solomon dynasty of Semitic origin.
- 1520:** Portuguese Embassy and Priest Francisco Alvares arrive to Ethiopia.
- 1541:** Arrival of Cristovao da Gama and 400 Portuguese to fight against the Muslim general Ahmed Grañ.
- 1543:** Grañ's death and end of the Muslim danger.
- 1557:** Arrival of Andrea de Ovidio and the first Jesuit group.
- 1603:** Arrival of Pedro Paez.
- 1622:** Emperor Susenyos converts to Catholicism. Death of Pedro Paez.
- 1632:** Death of Susenyos. Beginning of his son Fasil's kingdom. Expulsion of missionaries and prohibition of Catholicism.
For two centuries Ethiopia remains cut off from the West.
- 1750-1850:** Period of profound decay and disintegration of the Empire, known as "Era of the Judges."
- 1839:** Justin de Jacobis arrives in Ethiopia.
- 1846:** Arrival of Cardinal Massaia.
- 1855:** Tewodros proclaims himself Emperor. First attempt to reunify the Empire.
- 1860:** Death of Justin de Jacobis.
- 1865:** Menelik flees Tewodros and proclaims himself King of Shoa.
- 1868:** English punitive expedition and death of Tewodros.
- 1872:** Yohannes IV crowned Emperor of Ethiopia.
- 1879:** Cardinal Massaia expelled from Ethiopia.
- 1887:** Menelik II founds Addis Abeba.
- 1889:** Death of Yohannes IV. Menelik II proclaimed Emperor.

English speaking readers a broad, refreshing and original vision of Ethiopian history.

At the same time, we want to pay tribute to this Spanish Combonian Missionary who devoted most of his life to the country where the Blue Nile springs and gives life: Quoting Joyce, "love loves to love love".

Francisco de Asis Lopez Sanz
AECID-Ethiopia Head of Cooperation.
Spanish Embassy to Ethiopia

APPENDIX I

IMPORTANT DATES IN ETHIOPIAN HISTORY

- 10th century B.C.** (according to legend): Queen Makeda (or Queen of Sheba) visits Solomon in Jerusalem. Kingdom of Menelik I, their son.
- 7th century B.C.:** First Semitic migrations from the Arabian peninsula to the Ethiopian plateau.
- 6th century B.C.:** Existence of the colonial cities: Yeha, Cohaito, etc.
Aksum emerges as main city at an unknown time.
- 4th century A.D. (first half):** Kingdom of Aksum at its height.
- Around 335 A.D.,** Emperor Ezana converts to Christianity.
- 6th century A.D. (first half):** Second highest peak of the Kingdom of Aksum.
Kaleb's Kingdom and Nine Saints' apostolic mission.
- 7th century A.D.:** Fall of the Aksum Empire starts.
- 10th century A.D.:** Fall of Aksum Empire. Zagwe dynasty takes over power and moves the capital towards the south, to Roha (future Lalibela).
- 13th century A.D. (first half):** Zagwe dynasty is at its height. Lalibela Kingdom.
Construction of rock-hewn churches.

will resolve itself. More deplorable is the fact that parks are not being created and there are very few open spaces left. Land speculation is devouring everything and this is a heavy debt for the future. It would be a pity if, out of greed and lack of long-term planning, the city were to be spoiled: a city that, by location, climate, eucalyptus scent, and romantic origins possesses all the necessary ingredients to become the deserving capital of Africa.

CHAPTER I

IT ALL STARTED IN AKSUM

At one time, Aksum was the cradle of an Empire which existed for a whole millennium. Ezana, one of Aksum's most powerful kings, converted to Christianity, thereby making it the State religion in the fourth century, shortly after the Emperor Constantine had granted religious freedom to the Roman Empire. In the sixth century, King Kaleb and "The Nine Saints" continued the evangelizing mission, turning Ethiopia into a "Christian island" in the heart of Africa, surrounded by Muslims to the north, east, south and west.

It all started in Aksum. If we want to say something about Ethiopian history, we should begin with this name. It is not that before Aksum there was only emptiness or primordial chaos. When the Semites started migrating from southern Arabia, which must have been around the 6th century BC, the Agaw, a tribe of Cushite or Hamite origin, were already living in the Ethiopian highlands. It was only with the arrival of the Semites that Ethiopia set forth to be a Great Empire.

Aksum was neither the sole, nor the oldest of the cities that were the fruit of the settlement of those from beyond the Red Sea. The excavations conducted up until now give precedence to the city of Yeha, about 45 kilometres east of

Aksum. Located in a beautiful and fertile valley, Yeha, as part of its heritage, can still boast that it contains the ruins of a relatively well-preserved pagan temple dating from the 6th century BC. The temple was built with rectangular stone blocks following the style of contemporary structures in South Arabia. There is no proof that Yeha or any other city that marked the way between the port of Adulis and Aksum ever had any political power over the others. History, however, confirms that at a time not long before the 1st century BC, Aksum emerged as the city of cities and its king as “King of Kings” or *Neguse Neguest*.

It was a strange coincidence to be visiting Aksum for the first time in 1987, when the TPLF (Tigray People’s Liberation Front) guerrillas were occupying almost the entire region and only the main cities, Aksum included, were in hands of the Derg government. I had a stroke of good luck, in being able to travel on a Red Cross aircraft which was departing from Mekelle to distribute food to drought-stricken areas. This plane would stop in Aksum for two hours. Two hours in Aksum! What should I do with them or where should I go first? The answer was clear for me: to the obelisks, the absolute must-see treasures in Aksum.

What today remains of them is nothing compared to what they originally were, yet they continue to be the most impressive sight in the city. In the past, they extended for more than a kilometre along the landscape at the foot of the mountain that protects the plain of Aksum to the north. The original obelisks numbered at least seven, and the stelae, many more. Over the course of time, they have progressively fallen to the ground, crumbled into pieces, and become part of other building’s walls. There were only

EPRDF plans

EPRDF, the regime which since 1991 has ruled over Ethiopia, has the desire and the resources not only to improve the image of this idyllic-born yet chaotic city, but to deeply restructure it. And that is what they are trying to do. Addis Abeba is tangible proof of a country immersed in fast transformation. Whoever in the last ten years has been away from the city for a bit longer than a year, upon returning, will have noticed spectacular changes: new streets, new wide avenues, new and pretentious skyscrapers, new residential areas. And every new building, every new avenue, sweeps away from the urban map, dozens of small shacks, whose inhabitants are to be relocated to the distant outskirts.

The main transformation takes place above all in central areas. Neighbourhoods are completely razed to the ground to start constructing from scratch. Government focuses on efficiency without taking very much into account the human cost. Examples along those lines were the ones carried out in Lideta, in Arat Kilo, in Churchill Road, or Sanga Tara. After a two or three-year notice, during which people must move somewhere else and take with them anything which could be of further use, bulldozers come to destroy the houses. Then, concrete mixers and cranes replace them.

Addis Abeba is nowadays a unique scene of frenetic construction. It also represents a city with an unfinished look. Nothing is properly concluded. If a spectacular building is completed, the pavement in front of it is left unfinished. If the pavement is finished off, there will always be a hole on it, or some paving stones sticking up, or a heap of gravel no one cared to take away. But this

renamed the monument as the “Park of the Ethio-Cuban friendship”. Other Derg buildings are the Congress Centre, completely prefabricated in Finland, and the headquarters of the national television.

Despite the lack of a clear initial plan, Addis Abeba is assembled around a central nucleus consisting of two parallel streets of unequal length that go from north to south: one is Churchill Road, which starts beneath the church of Saint Georg and *Piazza* and ends at *Legehar* old train station. Along this road, we can find the new Post Office, the Tikur Anbessa Hospital, the Monument to the Revolution, the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia and the National Theatre. The other street is much longer. We can say that it starts off on top of Entoto Mountain, next to Entoto Maryam church. It is an intellectual, religious and political street. On its way down, it leaves behind the University, the Sidist Kilo roundabout, a monument erected to the Italian massacre in 1937, and the Orthodox Church Patriarchate. It continues on to the Arat Kilo roundabout, or monument to the *arbegnoch* or heroes of anti-Italian resistance, the Orthodox Holy Trinity Cathedral, the Parliament, the Congress Centre and the Gebbi or Menelik’s palace. From here, the street turns into a wide avenue. On each side there are the Hilton and the Jubilee Palace (called today National Palace), and the Africa Hall. The avenue ends up in the great square baptized by the Derg as Revolution Square; however, it had always been known, and still is, as Meskel Square, which means “Holy Cross Square.”

two obelisks left to be seen at the time of my visit in 1987. One of them, once the tallest of all, lay broken on the ground. It measures 33 meters in length and most likely cracked while being erected. The other one remains erect, withstanding the test of time; this is the one shown in photos, brochures, and small sculptural replicas depicting Aksum. It is a solid 27-meter-high block. The front and two sides bear chiselled reliefs such that it resembles an impressive nine-story building, complete with windows and an entrance door, while the back of it is plain. The obelisk ends in a semi-circular top part.

A third one, that had also collapsed, was not in place at the time of my 1987 visit. Benito Mussolini had taken it to Rome during the Italian Occupation (1937), and it was erected next to the Circus Maximus, where it could be seen until recently. Its return to Ethiopia was fruit of complicated negotiations which went on for years and years under various governments. In 2007, a final agreement was reached with Berlusconi’s government and the obelisk was returned to Aksum. The inauguration of its re-erection, although it was still then surrounded by scaffolding, took place on April 4th, 2008, a few days before the end of the first year of the second millennium in the Ethiopian calendar. Then Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi was eager to increase the visibility of the event by including it as part of the Ethiopian Millennium celebrations. The return of the obelisk to Aksum was an extremely costly operation and it received both enthusiastic approval and harsh criticism inside and outside the two nations directly involved: Italy and Ethiopia. Wouldn’t it have been better—the critics demanded—to invest that money in development projects so badly needed by the nation? But that is now history.

The obelisk was returned. Undoubtedly, this fact sets an important precedent in favour of the return of many of the artistic and cultural artefacts displayed today in other countries' museums and public squares that "were simply looted" during past invasions.

The self-appointed tour guide found wandering around the vicinity in search of customers gave credit for the construction of the fallen obelisk to King Ramhay of the 6th century BC, and for the erection of the one standing to Ezana, who reigned during the 4th century AD. Tour guides from around the globe seem to tell us with absolute confidence what the most diligent scholars cannot find an explanation for. In fact, little is known about the obelisks. Since there are no carvings on them, it is believed they served as burial stelae. They date back to different periods of time, beginning not long before the 1st century BC. An artistic evolution is noticeable in their style, as they range from rudimentary, unornamented stelae to the most sophisticated obelisks.

If Aksum's obelisks are of extraordinary importance for their greatness and perfection, Aksum's palaces and temples do not fall short by comparison. For instance, one of its smaller palaces, faithfully reconstructed by archaeologists, is a massive three-story rectangular structure with turrets on each corner. It is made of granite blocks carved at right angles. Time and consecutive destructions were responsible for eroding its original shape and figure.

There was much more to visit in Aksum: the presumed Tomb of Menelik I; Mai Shum Pool, where Queen Sheba allegedly used to bathe; the Tomb of the Kings Kaleb and Gebre Meskel; the Church of St. Mary of Zion, the Chapel reputedly containing the "Ark of the Covenant." However,



Panoramic view of Addis Abeba.

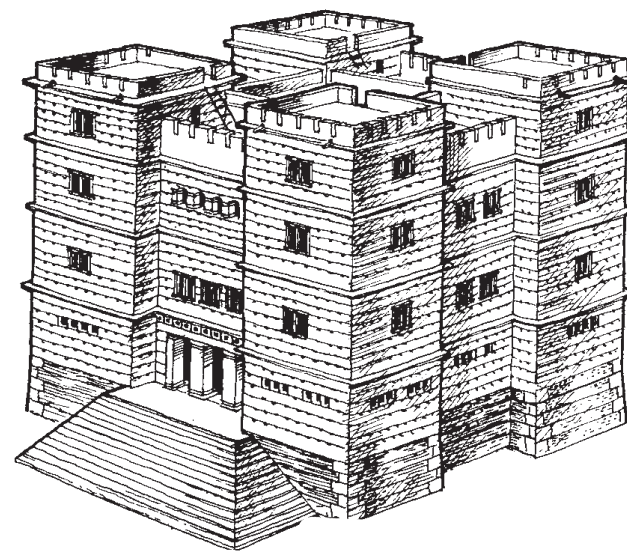
Of course, the Derg also wanted to leave their seal on the city. They had plenty of plans and wishes, but permanent war and economic hardship hindered them from leaving a significant mark. The celebration in 1984 of the 10th anniversary of the 1974 revolution was marked by the inauguration of ten new buildings of diverse architectural value. The monument to the Revolution, situated in front of the Tikur Anbessa hospital and built by North Korea, is the one that stands out. The Derg Government called it *Dilachen* or "our victory", referring to the war with Somalia, but mainly to the victory against poverty. The new regime of the EPRDF was tolerant enough to allow the low-reliefs that portray Mengistu Hailemariam raising his fist and leading the masses towards an imaginary future that, by the way, never materialized. They simply

Italians and afterwards

Urban development under Haile Selassie was abruptly interrupted by Addis Abeba's occupation by the fascist Government of Mussolini on May 5th, 1936. Italians were in Ethiopia only for five years, but they left an indelible mark on the capital's structure. After resolving their doubting whether or not to change its location, they embarked on a deep restructuring; they drew up new streets, constructed new buildings and created new neighbourhoods still known by the names Italians gave them. The structure designed by Mussolini government was unquestionably segregationist; it had designated areas for Europeans and for natives. Thus, the traditional market located beneath the church of Saint George became a white people's social centre and was called *Piazza*. For natives, another market towards the west was set up and was called *Merkato*. East of the *gebbi*, a residential area for Italian civil-servants under the acronym INCIS was built. Nowadays it is called *Kazanichis* (from Casa Incis.) In the south of the city a working class neighbourhood was established, providing low-cost popular housing, also for Italians, still called *Popolare*.

After the Italian defeat, Emperor Haile Selassie returned on May 6th, 1941 and continued with his well-known efforts towards urban development. From the fifties onwards, impressive buildings were erected like the City Hall, the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia, the Africa Hall, which harbours the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, the new Post Office, the *Tikur Anbessa* hospital or "Black Lion," the Hilton and Ghion hotels, and so on.

most of the places I would have liked to see in my visit of 1987 were out of reach even if I had had more than those two hours. One step outside the heart of the city and you were bumping into a soldier's boot firmly blocking your way.



Palace of Enda-Mikael in Axum
(facsimile sketch of D. Krencker)

Apart from the above-mentioned monuments, there is little evidence that can shed a glimmer of light on the thousand years of Aksumite history prior to the 4th century of our era. There are, indeed, lists of kings beginning with Menelik, the son of Solomon and Queen of Sheba, extending up to the rulers of more recent times. However, the historical value of such lists is as questionable as the existence of Menelik himself, who tops those lists. In the middle of the 1st century AD, a Greco-Egyptian merchant

visited the coast of Ethiopia. In his book, *The Periplus Maris Erythraei*, he mentions the name of King Zoskales, whom he describes as being “miserly in his ways and always striving for more, but otherwise, upright and acquainted with Greek literature.” Zoskales is, therefore, the first king of Aksum whose name we know with a degree of certainty. A stone inscription discovered in Dekemhare made a name for Sembrouthes, another sovereign, who defined himself as “Aksumite King of Kings, Sembrouthes the Great”. He most likely ruled in the 2nd century AD. A second inscription, found in southern Arabia, tells us about another Aksumite king called Gadar. He played an active role in the affairs of that peninsula. Thanks to a third inscription, we know that a 3rd-century Aksumite king extended his land up to the border with Egypt. Although his name is not given, we may assume it was Aphilas, whose sphinx can be found on several coins of that period of time.

I Ezana

"Ezana, son of Ella Amida, a native of Halen, king of Aksum and of Hemer, and of Raydan, and of Saba, and of Sahem, and of Seyamo, and of Beja, and of Kasu..." Each of the five stone inscriptions that commemorate the many victories of one of the greatest emperors in Aksum, Ezana, begins with this or a similar preamble. Thanks to these inscriptions, we know a great deal about the person who had the prestigious honour of writing his heroic deeds on them. Based on them, we know that the territories of Ezana stretched from Nubia, in central Sudan, to the old

Addis Abeba was no more than a conglomerate of small villages separated by deep ravines, rivers and streams, some of which it was impossible to cross during the rainy season. Upon the death of a Russian attempting to cross one of them, his compatriots built the first stone-bridge in 1902.

The victory of Adwa over Italy in 1896 brought to Addis a good number of Italian prisoners, who became part of the projects towards the development of the city. One Italian engineer, Castagna, built the church of Saint George, which was the first cathedral and the place where emperors Zewditu (1916) and Haile Selassie I (1930) were crowned. The first years of the 20th century were a deluge of “firsts”. In 1898 the first cinema, known by the people as “the devil’s house”, was opened; in 1903 the first racetrack; in 1906 the first bank; in 1907 the first brick factory and the first hotel, opened by Queen Taytu, which is still bears her name. In 1908 the first school, called after Menelik; in 1910 the first hospital, also called after Menelik; in 1911 the first printing house. Going back in time, we cannot forget to mention the first corrugated sheets of zinc, which since then have become ubiquitous. They arrived in 1902.

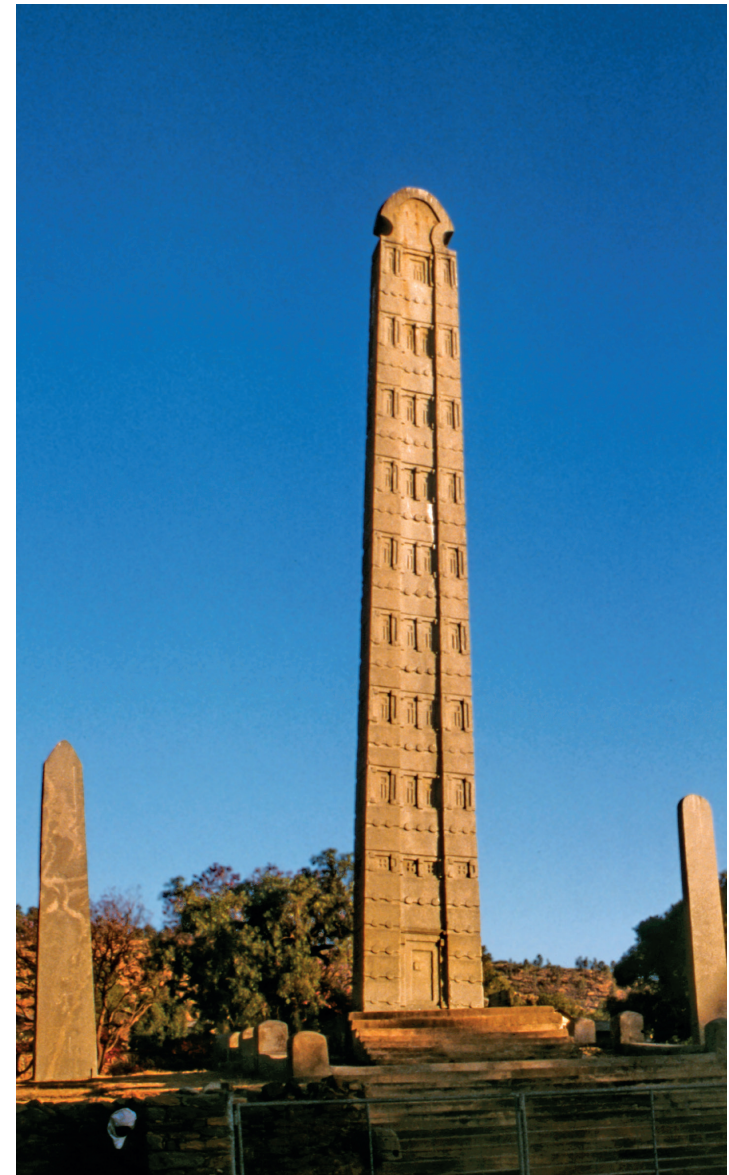
While Menelik was enthusiastic about modernization, Haile Selassie was obsessed with it. Urbanization continued, forcing a nation as poor as Ethiopia to its economic limits. Emblematic from his period as Regent (1916-1930) were the railway station, known as *Legehar* (1929), Menelik’s mausoleum in the *Gebbi* (1930), the Parliament, and the first of his imperial palaces, known as *Gennete Leul* (1934). The palace was later donated to the University and nowadays it also houses the Ethnological Museum.

a city that encompassed countless small villages, despite the never-ending attempts at transforming it, starting from Menelik himself, into compact unity.

Menelik was, undoubtedly, a great Emperor. He combined the traditional concept of imperial greatness with curiosity and open-mindedness towards the innovations of his time. Close to him, there were engineers like the Swiss Alfred Ilg, who had a great deal of freedom to experiment with the most surprising inventions. One of these was the piping of water to the *Gebbi* from a nearby hill. People could not believe that water, once brought down to the valley, could go up again. When they saw it with their very own eyes, they were astonished. Menelik also introduced the telegraph, the most modern of the time, which, paradoxically, was installed in a straw-roofed house. Electric light also made its way to the imperial palace early on. Despite all this, at the end of the century,



The new African Union headquarters in Addis Abeba.



Obelisk of Axum, 27 metrer high

kingdoms of Saba, Hadramount and Himyar in southern Arabia. The sons of the settlers, who ten centuries earlier had crossed the Red Sea to get to Ethiopia, now ploughed through the sea in the opposite direction with the aim of subjugating their former homeland.

From the inscriptions, we also know that Aksum had close trade relations with the Greek world, and that it was open to the influence of Hellenic culture. A number of those inscriptions are written in Greek; one in particular is triangular and each side features a text written in one of the three languages used back then: Greek, Sabean and Ge`ez, the language of Aksum still present in today's Liturgy. These inscriptions finally reveal that Ezana, contemporary of Constantine, converted to Christianity at some point in his life. Whereas in the first three inscriptions he proclaimed himself to be "son of the God Mahrem, invincible to the enemy..," placing himself under the protection of the gods Astar, Beher, and Meder, in the last two he entrusted himself to the protection of the "Lord of Heaven," more specifically to the power of Christ, "in whom I believe" and "Who is a guide for me."

These recently-found inscriptions have confirmed the long-held tradition according to which Ethiopia converted to Christianity in the second third of the 4th century, shortly after Constantine. Rufinus, the historian, narrates it as follows:

"Meropius, a philosopher from Tyre, hoping to discover India, set out to travel accompanied by two young relatives: Aedesius, the youngest, and Frumentius, the oldest. When their souls and eyes were quenched with all they saw, and they had already commenced their homeward journey, their

as the eye could see, not a tree to make fire or build a house could be seen. This was an endemic calamity, which explains why, throughout the centuries, Ethiopia did not have a permanent capital. Whenever they ran out of firewood, they would gather the royalty and would settle down somewhere else. Menelik seriously thought about leaving the new capital, and he in fact started founding another one, called Addis Alem or "New World," located 50 kilometers to the west. But the construction did not go on for two main reasons: the first being that those who had started building their beautiful and costly houses were not keen on leaving; the second was that someone thought of planting Australian eucalyptus seeds. That someone was, apparently, a French journalist named Mondon Vidailhet. In Amharic eucalyptus tree is called *bahir zaf* or "sea tree," because it came from beyond the sea. It grew so rapidly in Addis, that it was seen as the solution to the firewood problem. And so it is today. Addis is the city of the eucalyptus. It provides firewood to burn, wood to build houses and scaffolding for the building of ultra-modern skyscrapers. Besides that, the eucalyptus adorns the city with a majestic flair and a soothing resinous perfume.

Progressive development

Something that distinguishes Addis Abeba from conventional cities is the lack of a clear city-center. Addis was born out of a mix of disjointed centers around which popular neighbourhoods consisting of straw-huts were built. The huts progressively became zinc-covered houses built of eucalyptus wood and mud. It could be described as

on Entonto Mountain, around 1885. He would become Emperor in 1889, upon his predecessor, Yohannes IV's, death, and he would be crowned in the Entoto Maryam church, which his wife Taytu ordered to be built. At the time, the territories of the Ethiopian empire towards the south ended in Entonto. Menelik, though, had plans to expand the Empire and to regain the comprised territories prior to the 16th century Oromo invasions. Menelik was aware that Emperor Lebne Dengel, who ruled between 1520 and 1540, had established a camp in Entoto and was keen on building his own capital there. Militarily speaking, the place was strategic. Being at that time on the Southern border of the Empire, it became, thanks to Menelik's conquests, its geographic centre.

However, in Entoto there was no water, no firewood and no possibility of agriculture. Rising more than 3,000 meters, the mountain was cold, uninhabitable and exposed to stormy weather. The logical step was to move down to the foothills below. They did so in 1886, following the Queen's suggestion. The imperial couple set up camp next to the thermal waters, known as "Filwuha" or "boiling waters." From tents they moved into solid houses and later a palace was built on a nearby hill called "Gebbi," which is still nowadays the government's official seat. The different Rases or dignitaries established themselves along the rough land, maintaining a safe distance between them. Diplomatic delegations present in the country, such as the French, Italian, German, English, Russian, where also assigned a plot of land, quite large, where they were able to settle. Addis Abeba was born.

An unexpected setback threatened to stop the construction of the emerging city. Around 1900, as far



Inscription of Ezana, documenting his conversion to Christianity

vessel was attacked 'at a certain port' and the crew slain with the sword. Only the two boys, who at that moment were studying under a tree, survived and were taken to the King, who soon grew fond of them. He made Aedesius his cup-bearer, while the sharp and prudent Frumentius became his treasurer and secretary.

After some time, the King died, while his successor son was still an infant. With tears in her eyes, the Queen begged the two brothers to stay with her through the hardship and to help her administer the Kingdom. Then, Frumentius took the reins of the government. God touched his heart, giving him the strength to support the Christian Roman merchants and to encourage them to establish the worship of God. Frumentius himself provided them with land to build places of worship, and he did everything in his power to spread the seed of Christianity.

When the Prince reached maturity, the two loyal brothers handed over the Kingdom's administration, planning to return to their homeland. Although the Prince and the Queen pleaded with them to stay, they insisted on leaving. Aedesius went back to his family in Tyre, while Frumentius went to Alexandria to inform the Patriarch Athanasius about the existence of the many Christians and to beg him to send them a bishop. After considering carefully this request, Athanasius told the gathered priests: 'who better than you could we find, you in whom God's spirit dwells, you the one able to carry out such a religious work?' After being ordained as Priest and consecrated as Bishop, Frumentius was sent back to where he had come from. Back in Ethiopia, countless were the miracles he performed, and countless the barbarians he converted to the Christian Faith."

up in the Blue Nile and, as their final destination, in the Mediterranean Sea. If, on the contrary, the wind blows towards the south, the drops will go to the Awash River and their fate will be to die, vanishing into the boiling sands of the Somali Desert in a frustrated attempt to reach the Indian Ocean. Entoto is the alma mater of the city, its protector spirit.

There is a clear image in my mind of the first tour guide who told me the mountain's and city's history. It happened in 1976 and I felt I was living the day after things had happened. We were near Entoto Mariam church. The old guide was wearing the typical Ethiopian white cotton shawl. His bony, wrinkly face reminded me of the manuscripts on which old Ethiopian history had been written. He was himself the icon of a nation of nobles and ancient traditions. He gazes at the flatland below us and solemnly, quasi liturgically, narrates what he has heard from someone else older than him. He recalls—it even seems he is still sees it—how Queen Taytu, Menelik's consort, used to gaze from that same place, contemplating the steam from the hot springs located down there in the middle of the plain. He would go on explaining how the queen insisted with her husband that they should move down from the mountain to establish their permanent residence around those hot springs. He tells how, honouring the acacia trees of the surroundings, Taytu decided that the future city should be called "Addis Abeba" which in Amharic means "New Flower."

Everything, as a matter of fact, happened as the guide was telling us. It has been attested to by royal chronicles and by curious visitors of that time. Menelik was only King of Shewa when, for the first time, he set up his camp

OAU (Organisation of African Unity). However, at that time it was a city in fieri, tacked together but not properly sewn up.

Let's suppose that I go for a stroll in any of the streets of *Merkato* or *Piazza*, something that is almost compulsory every time one needs to purchase one thing or another. We pedestrians are an army. Some come; others go; some in a hurry; others slow. We completely occupy the sideways. But still we have to share this space with the street sellers who open up blankets where the most unbelievable things can be found. Here there are the shoe-polishers; over there the beggars lying in the very middle so as not to be ignored; there are pulled-up pavement stones, holes, and lamp posts. And do not even dare to step down off the sideway and walk on the asphalt, because a second after, a car will sneak up behind you. So, rather than taking a stroll, you are in an obstacle race. This is one of the many ugly sides of a city that otherwise has its own charms, because, since its birth, it possesses all the ingredients of a golden legend: an emperor following in another emperor's steps, an empress who gives the city its name, historians who from its very cradle lavish on it curious and romantic details...And the present does not undo the past when it comes to ambitious projects or facts.

Once upon a time there was an emperor

Addis Abeba stretches out from the foot of Entoto, a large mountain that gives the city its shielding shadow. Entoto's summit is flat but very narrow. Should the wind divert the drops of rain towards the north, they will end

There is an air of legend, and some details might be such, but the bare bones are based on history. Ethiopian sources and even St. Athanasius' records prove this. Ezana was the young Prince raised under Christian influence by Aedesius and Frumentius. He was the Ethiopian Constantine who made Christianity the religion of the Empire. Christianity remained the official religion up until 1974, when a Marxist revolution overthrew the Emperor Haile Selassie and proclaimed freedom of worship.

Kaleb and "The Famous Nine"

Following Ezana, Ethiopian history plunges again into uncertainty for a time, only to emerge a century later thanks to the advent of nine monks known in Ethiopia as "the Nine Roman Saints." However, the term "Roman" does not shed much light on their origin. Indeed, Rome, in that day, could refer to the city of Rome, to Constantinople (the Second Rome), or to anywhere across the Roman Empire. Most probably, we should go by the last of these references. Two of these monks, Pentelewon and Licanos, have Greek names. The names of the remaining seven saints could be either Syrian or Aramean. It is not out of idle curiosity that the origin of their names intrigues us, since it could be the key to knowing the faith they professed. If they were Greeks, most surely they were Catholic, followers of the doctrine as defined in the Council of Chalcedon; if they were Syrians, they probably were Non-Chalcedonians. This would imply that the doctrine professed by the current Ethiopian Church goes back to their time. At the end of the 5th century, King Ella Amida II welcomed the

nine monks. At first, they all gathered in Aksum, but later they left the capital and spread around the region in order to disseminate the Christian Faith.

Their longstanding mission coincided with one of the most glorious periods in the history of the Aksumite Empire, above all owing to the personality of King Kaleb (493-534). The control that Ezana had over southern Arabia a century-and-a-half earlier was growing weaker and weaker. The Jewish settlements in this area had joined the pagans in their opposition to the Christians, whom they identified with the rulers from beyond the sea. Dhu Nuwas, a Jewish kinglet, started a bloody persecution in the cities of Zafar and Nagram, killing hundreds of Christians. This shocked the Christian world of that time, and the Emperor of Constantinople, Justin, hurried to send a message to the King of Aksum urging him not to leave such slaughterers unpunished. The message was hardly needed, since Kaleb was already preparing a great expedition in Arabia. Despite the significant material and human cost, the campaign was a success. Dhu Nuwas, defeated, spurred his horse on towards the sea and submersed himself beneath the waves. Aksum authority was restored in the peninsula and the Christian community was left in peace.

According to tradition, Kaleb, in an expression of gratitude, continued to Jerusalem and laid his crown at the tomb of the Lord. Back in Ethiopia, he abdicated in favour of his son Gebre Meskel, so as to spend his final years living as a hermit with his beloved teacher and spiritual father, Pentelewon, one of the nine monks. Kaleb is venerated as a Saint by both the Ethiopian and the Catholic Church.

Aksum's surroundings are full of nostalgic reminders of its early history. A picturesque mountain, Debre Pentelewon (Pentelewon's Mountain), rises up five kilometres east of

CHAPTER 16

ADDIS ABEBA: THE YOUNG CAPITAL'S IMPERIAL ORIGINS

Addis Abeba, capital of Ethiopia, literally means "new flower." It is not a very old city, having been created in 1887 at the desire of Menelik and his consort Queen Taytu. Since then, consecutive regimes have tried to render the city deserving of such a name. It was the birthplace of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1963 and nowadays it is the permanent seat of the AU (African Union); it holds more than one title by which it may be considered the capital of Africa.

It is May 23rd, 2013, the 50th anniversary of the founding of the OAU. Seventy-five presidents or high commissioners coming from the 54 countries that make up the AU are meeting in Addis Abeba. The big city avenues are empty, awaiting, intermittently, for the police motorbikes with their sirens at full-blast to disperse the few pedestrians that attempt to cross them. Luxurious cars will drive at full speed carrying a precious load from their hotels to the AU seat and vice versa. In the meantime, total traffic chaos reigns in the periphery streets. All Addis Abeba dwellers pay a price for the fact that our capital is AU's permanent seat. It has always been like this, since its establishment in 1963 under the name

aware of their strength, dream of turning Ethiopia into an Islamic state. If religious coexistence between Christians and Muslims was peaceful during the last hundred years, today it is threatened by the fundamentalism coming from bordering countries like Sudan or Saudi Arabia.

The lack of democracy has been, however, the main source of conflict in these recent years. With the purpose of justifying its position, the TPLF dominated government used to draw a distinction between neo-liberal democracy, which they pejoratively attributed to the opposition parties, and the so-called developmental democracy, suitable according to them for developing countries. The latter allows the state to suspend certain freedoms when economic development and the nation's stability require it. There are plenty of examples of this kind of democracy, starting with China, Ethiopia's great mentor. Thus, for the sake of development, they could put a muzzle on the media, control Internet services or ruthlessly quash protests. It is too soon to predict if Abiy Ahmed will be able to conduct a deep and lasting political transformation of the country. He may count on supporters but he also has bitter opponents.

*Editor's note: Hailemariam Desalegn submitted his resignation as Ethiopia's prime minister on February 15, 2018

the city. That is where the holy monk had his hermitage; there he blessed Kaleb's expedition leaving for Arabia and there he received the King-turned-hermit after renouncing the throne. Tradition claims that a certain stone used to be the place where the King, before becoming one, would sit when talking to the monk. Only the King would take a seat, since popular piety credits Pentelewon with spending his last forty five years standing, without lying down or sitting, not even to sleep. Northeast of Aksum, there is another mountain called Debre Likanos. That, they say, is where the hermitage of another of the nine saints, Likanos, was established. In order to locate the places where the remaining seven monks lived, we only have to meander towards the east of Aksum. Aftse was in Yeha; Gerima in Guma; Sehma near Adwa; Alef in the Alleluia Monastery; Yem'ata in Gerhalta; and finally, Aregawi lived on the spectacular rock of Debre Damo.

Debre Damo

The seemingly magic aircraft that took me to Aksum with its fearless Belgian pilot, Paul, performing impossible manoeuvres. To be able to fly over Debre Damo, one needs to turn north part way between Adwa and Adigrat. Once we sighted our destination from the sky, the plane made three full circles, getting as close as possible to the rock, so that we could take it all in. Whenever an aircraft twists in the air tracing a circumference, the feeling of the inexperienced passenger is one of total disorientation. Only the desire not to miss out on what I wanted to see kept me focused on a fixed point while everything else seemed to float away.

That was back in 1987. Nowadays, not only is it possible to access Debre Damo by land, but it is also reasonably easy. A 12-kilometre road, open year-round, allows tourists to reach the very foot of the rock. This trail heads north mid-way along the road connecting Adigrat with Adwa in the northern province of Tigray, almost on the border with Eritrea. My long-awaited opportunity to have a lengthy visit to the monastery finally came in February 2005.

Debre Damo is an oval-shaped plateau, rising up 17 meters from the surrounding landscape and measuring two kilometres in length. The bare rock walls of this flat-top mountain drop off steeply on all sides. It is only accessible by using the ropes that the monks throw from the top. Then, tied to the ropes, the visitor is lifted to the top of the rock. Merely saying that one is “lifted up” does not precisely express the complexity of the hazardous endeavour involved in this adventure. Indeed, one is not passively lifted up like a dead body. Rather, the monks in charge of this operation tell the visitors to grab the rope in front of them and try to climb up it, while placing their feet in the wall’s narrow toeholds. Sensations, not all of them pleasant, take hold of visitors as they climb up, and even more so, when it is time to go down. Vertigo is one of those sensations that visitors, dangling off a 17-meter-high cliff, experience as, of course, not everyone who wishes to climb Debre Damo is a seasoned mountaineer. The resulting image is one of visitors reaching the top panting, with their hearts about to burst out of their chests. However, the effort is well worth it.

On top of that rock, Aregawi, the most famous and reputed of the nine saints, founded the first monastery in Ethiopia. To this day, the monastery is still inhabited by monks in a supposedly complete detachment from the

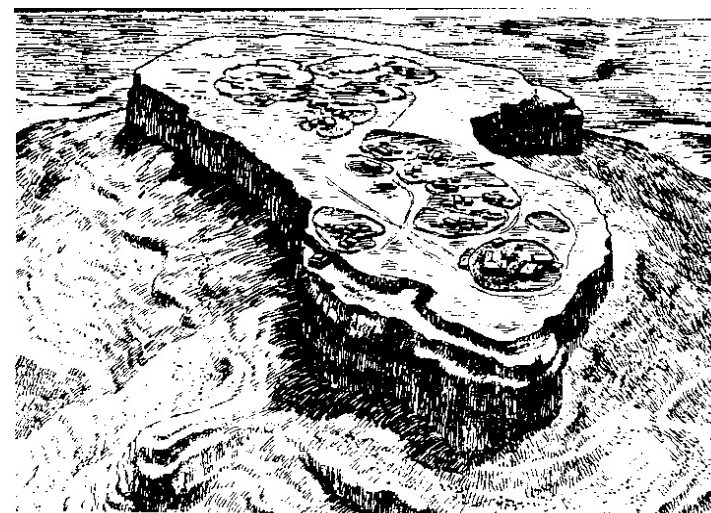


Hailemariam Desalegn, Prime Minister of Ethiopia between 2012 and 2018

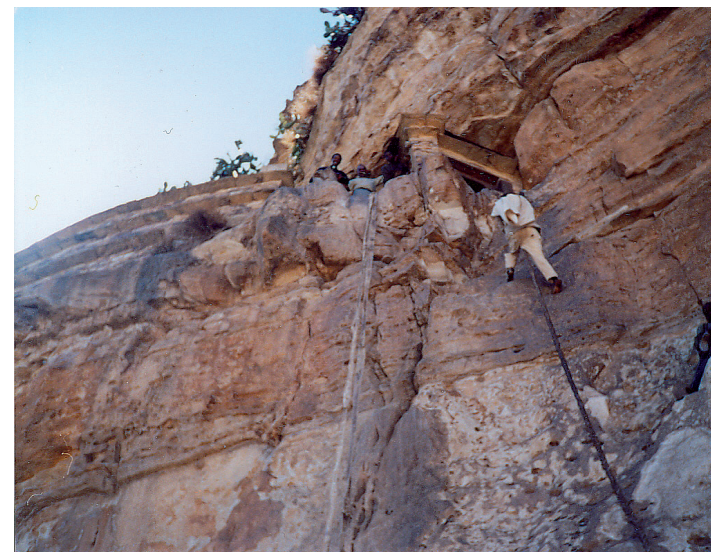
coalition: Oromya, Amhara and Southern Peoples Nations and Nationalities, since the Tigray did not present any candidate. Abiy Ahmed, of the Oromo party was elected after heated confrontations. That was on the 2nd of April. Since then, Abiy has managed to turn the situation around. For this he had two factors in his favor: the first, a great personal charisma; and, the second, the support of his ethnic group, the Oromo, which is the majority in the country, and that of all those dissatisfied with the situation, which were many. The reforms have followed in a cascade: release of political prisoners, call for dialogue to dissident groups based abroad, suspension of the state of emergency... The most surprising measure was the peace deal with Eritrea, with which, after a bloody war from 1998 to 2000, all communication had been cut off.

Ethiopia is a complex nation with multiple conflict factors. The country is composed of about 80 ethnic groups, of which the Oromo account for 34 percent, followed by the Amhara with 27 and the Tigrinya with six percent. The 1995 constitution opted for a federal state based on ethnic groups, but they have not found a balance yet. On the one hand, it led to episodes of “ethnic cleansing”; on the other, the central government assumed many times the almost unlimited right to intervene wherever it suited the ruling party.

Religion is another potential conflict factor. Forty-five percent avow themselves Orthodox Christians, followed by Muslims accounting for 34 percent and Protestants with 15 percent. Since the Orthodox Church had been the official religion for centuries, they have always tried to overshadow Muslims, diminishing their real numbers as much as possible. The Muslims, on their part, now



Monastery of Debre Damo in Tigray (sketch of Eric Robsen)



Access and entrance to the monastery

world. No female presence, not even that of female goats or sheep, is allowed on the holy mountain. As Paul's aircraft circled around the rock, we joked with the women on board wondering if, even from the air, they might be infringing upon the strict rule of the monastery's founder. Today, it is the monks who throw the rope down for visitors to climb up the rock, but who did it for the old Aregawi? Tradition has the answer to this question. Before Christianity there was a snake, worshiped by the locals, dwelling on the rock. It was this snake that, in an attempt to kill the holy monk, helped him up the mountain and, once on top, hurled him to the place where the monastery stands today. The numerous and varied paintings depicting this scene always portray the Archangel Michael brandishing his sword and deterring the snake from hurting the Saint.

The monastery of Debre Damo bears no resemblance to the classical image of a monastery, that of a large building with different rooms intended for the common life of the monks. Instead, it consists of a number of individual houses in each of which a monk leads a solitary life. These are built out of small stones sealed with mortar and surrounded by stone walls which delineate the private spaces around the houses. The resulting complex is a stony labyrinth of houses, courtyards, and narrow alleys.

Despite its geographical isolation and difficult access, Debre Damo has had its crucial moment in the national spotlight. It was in the 16th century that the Muslim leader Ahmad Grāñ began sacking and burning everything throughout the nation. Emperor Lebna Dengel died, precisely in Debre Damo where he had found refuge. And it was in Debre Damo where his wife Seble-Wengel wisely and cautiously planned the resistance against Grāñ, according to the Portuguese chronicles. It was at that both

Uncertain Present

Hailemariam remained a rather grey and shadowy figure. It was not clear which margin he had within a government where the TPLF had the final say and that had in its hands the army, the national security, and a network of companies that controlled large economic sectors, promoting a corruption that we can describe as institutionalized.

The year 2018 has witnessed a series of important political events, the result of a tense situation that has been dragging on for long time. In February, serious disorders broke out with the main roads that pass through the region of Oromya (almost all of them) cut by brigades of young people. Contrary to what happened in 2016, when hundreds of cars, factories and other properties were burned, this seemed to proceed more peacefully. The fact that the government did not intervene immediately was another novelty that could be interpreted as showing that the government itself was going through a deep crisis because the Oromo and Amhara members no longer accepted the almost absolute domination of the Tigray group, the TPLF and its repressive methods. It was in this context that Hailemariam Desaleñ presented his resignation as prime minister and as president of the EPRDF coalition. In his resignation speech, while referring to a serious political troubles, he said that "he saw his resignation as vital to carry out the reforms that would lead to sustainable peace and democracy."

The election of the new prime minister should be carried out by the parliament and the candidates were to be the three presidents of the three parties of the

was to create Meles' Myth, by clinging to the motto of remaining faithful to his "vision," a maxim that inspired politics in post-Meles years.

Meles had brought in a successor, Hailemariam Desalegn, whom he appointed as Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister. This was a very important and also risky decision, since he was opting for someone outside the traditional circle of former TPLF guerrillas. Hailemariam was a simple and unimpressive man. The novelty was that he did not come from Tigray, so far the dominant region within the EPRDF, but from the small southern ethnic group of the Wolayta. He did not fight in the guerrilla war that overthrew Mengistu. He was neither Orthodox nor Muslim, but a member of a small Protestant denomination. In other words, he was not backed by any supporting force, but this could be precisely his strength, because he could break the mould and be the man of consensus and turn pages that should have already gone down in history.

After Meles' death, institutions functioned on a regular basis. Hailemariam, as his Deputy Prime Minister, took the reins in accordance with the constitution, avoiding a power vacuum. A few days later, he was appointed by the EPRDF as Ethiopian President and by the Parliament as acting Prime Minister until the elections scheduled for 2015. At voting time, the election was carried out with the same irregularity as the previous ones. With Hailemariam as candidate for Prime Minister, the EPRDF won again by a landslide victory. The only opposition candidate in parliament since 2010 lost his seat. Indeed, since 2015, the 548 members of parliament, that is, one hundred percent, belonged to the ruling party.



Eastern side of the church in Debre Damo



Constructions in stone, where the monks live

tragic and glorious moment in history that, for the first and last time ever, the rigid rule forbidding women to climb up the mountain was broken. There she welcomed the Portuguese soldiers who came to the nation's rescue and there she received the news of the ultimate victory over Grañ. The church of Debre Damo was one of the very few throughout the Christian empire that escaped the destructive fury of the Muslim Conqueror.

The church is located at the eastern most end of the rock. According to tradition, it was commissioned to be built by Emperor Gebre Meskel, son and successor of Kaleb, during the first half of the 6th century, when Aregawi was still alive. This church would be, then, the most ancient in Ethiopia, and it is basically the only existing proof of Aksumite art. Some scholars suggest that the current church does not date back to before the 16th century. However, other sources believe that the 16th century work was an extensive restoration of the pre-existing church. In the middle of the 20th century, it underwent another restoration that faithfully mirrored the original structure. In any case, in spite of its apparent rusticity, the church of Debre Damo is a work of perfect harmony. The perimeter of the building is rectangular, with alternating layers of stone and wood on its external walls, which break up the monotony and create a soft contrast of light and shadow. The ends of the perpendicular beams protruding from the wall achieve a similar effect. Also of great beauty is the internal part of the roof, consisting of a wooden coffered ceiling on which numerous animal and plant figures are engraved in relief. As a whole, the style is unmistakably Ethiopian, and its connection to the Aksumite architecture is obvious. For instance, the shape of its doors and windows can be also seen in the reliefs

rejection, by giving all its votes to the opposition, was now paying him at the time of his death a tribute of devotion. The massive mourning that surrounded his funeral was certainly organized by the government; however, the signs of respect and appreciation shown were spontaneous and unmistakable. The crowd's admiration pervaded the long week that the coffin remained exposed to the public, first in the *gebbi* or government house, then in Meskel Square and, finally, in the Ethiopian Orthodox Cathedral of the Holy Trinity, in whose atrium he was buried.

Why this change of attitude? In the first place, because people always adopt a more respectful and less belligerent attitude towards a person that leaves this world. Secondly, for the reason that there was, and there still is, the recognition of a fact: Meles was not a Father of the Nation nor an "enlightened guide" nor pretended he to be one; however, history will give him the credit of having put back on track the course of the nation after the stagnation of the last years of Haile Selassie and the traumatic communist experiments of the Derg period. He had made a promise to lift Ethiopia out of poverty and to embark on the path of progress; and to a large extent, he fulfilled it, despite the obvious imbalances. On the international arena, Meles restored the prestige and the relevance that Ethiopia had lost during Marxist rule.

While Meles was still alive, his picture was rarely seen hanging on the walls of offices or official meeting rooms. These rooms were rather decorated with national motifs such as the Aksum's Obelisk, the Nile falls or Lalibela Churches. After his death, however, his portrait, in varied sizes and positions, was everywhere. Not only did the Party want to use his photograph; their intention

are under construction. Some of them raised international controversy due either to their environmental impact, such as the four built on the Omo River, or due to the fact that they touch the “untouchable” waters of the Nile, as in the case of the “Grand Renaissance Dam” on the Blue Nile raising the susceptibility of Sudan and Egypt.

There is, however, a lot to be said in the chapter of the “buts.” Economic progress has its contradictions. While the nation grows on the macroeconomic front thanks to loans, investments, and land transfer to foreign companies, concerning ordinary people, it remains one of the poorest countries in the world. Inflation forces normal citizens to tighten their belts more and more. Two typical classes are being created: the rich and the impoverished. About the political “buts” we have already spoken. What started as an apparently exemplary democracy gradually became a one-party regime. Meles did not hide his sympathy for the Chinese political formula or for that of Mubarak’s Egypt. Scarcely a year after his statements in that regard, Mubarak’s formula blew up. Meles had no qualms about saying that the Egyptian incident could not happen in Ethiopia, because they had anticipated that possibility. We wonder how.

Meles’ Myth and post-Meles

A month after Meles’ death, Meskel Square, the usual venue for great national political and religious events, was filled of huge billboards showing the missing Prime Minister in every conceivable pose with his most famous quotes. The city that back in 2005 sent a clear signal of

on Aksum’s obelisks. Unfortunately, the coffered ceiling is literally crumbling to pieces.

Talking with any of the monks in Debre Damo triggers a strange feeling. Their answers reveal a mind-set different from that of the curious tourist who wants to know precise details of the history and life of the monastery. The questioned monk’s answer will reveal not so much how things actually are as how they should be in compliance with certain archetypes dictated by tradition. Their typical discourse is one of continuously mixing historical facts with what a sound mind would not hesitate to describe as legend. In fact, some of their answers differ from the reality the visitor is seeing with his own eyes. For instance, an improvising monk-guide states that the monastery, in its heyday, accommodated up to six thousand monks and that, even today, the monastery houses two hundred monks, to which 150 young aspiring monks have to be added. But it is hard to imagine that this rocky and barren ground could house even those 350 people, not to mention six thousand, unless they also include as members of the monastery monks who are somehow related to it, but are on a pilgrimage scattered throughout the region, a practice which is in line with the Ethiopian monastic tradition. In the monastery, they have no common life except daily prayers. At midnight the monks gather in the church for the Divine Office, which lasts until dawn. At midday they meet again for the Eucharist. It is now noon and the bell tolls; out of the labyrinthine alleys I see no more than a dozen monks emerging to gather. One ends up thinking that the information about schedules and the common prayers of the community represents more an ideal archetype than factual reality.

Monastic Tradition

Ethiopian monastic life still follows two different traditions that are inextricably linked: the hermitic tradition of Saint Anthony the Abbot and the cenobitic tradition of Saint Pachomius. In fact, surrounding each monastery, there are countless caves inhabited by the monks who opt for the eremitical life. Among the other monks, the coenobites, there are some in charge of bringing them food. Around the 13th century, two holy monks reformed Ethiopian monasticism, giving it its current tone. Ewostatewos reformed the monasteries of the North and Tekle Haimanot, those of the South. Those from the North, to which Debre Damo belongs, were subjected to greater austerity and isolation, whereas those in the South, while remaining austere, opened themselves to the surrounding culture. The monastery of Debre Libanos, the most representative of the South, has opened itself to the extent that it offers their monks regular Bible lessons as well as teaching on other subjects. In contrast, in Debre Damo there is no formal schooling. An older monk is responsible for personally guiding the young novices through the study of the very few available books: the Psalter, the Book of the Liturgical Chants, and the biographies, the so-called *guedles*, of holy monks of the past.

Our self-appointed monk-guide strongly rejects the idea of sending monks from Debre Damo to be educated somewhere else. His viewpoint was that every monk had, in his inner life and in his communion with God, enough resources to feed his monastic life without seeking outside knowledge. Knowledge about the world—he implies—does not help the monk. Obviously, he is also reluctant to

a university degree in economics while he was the Prime Minister. He was not reported as having personal accounts in foreign banks; he did not use luxury cars; his discourse was not populist nor was he inflamed by an empty rhetoric. He did not display large portraits of himself during his life, nor did he promote the cult of personality. He spoke calmly and, at the same time, with absolute confidence and forcefulness. He provided his comrades in arms and his government fellows with new, broader horizons, not only when he left behind Marxist radicalism, but also when he confronted the hardliner TPLF officers, even risking his job, just to give politics a less “Tigrinian” and more “Ethiopian” relief.

Virtues often end up turning into defects. Meles’ word tended to be final, unquestionable; in the end, also ironical and caustic. It was difficult for him to admit that he could be wrong. His sharp mind allowed him to find quick and sure answers—though not always convincing—for everything, both justifiable matters and unjustifiable issues such as corruption within the Party or the increasing human rights violations. The term “terrorist” was a weapon that he frequently used to destroy everyone opposing his ideas, whether a politician or a journalist.

In the political legacy he left behind, there are also lights and shadows. Meles bet on economic development and guided his nation on the path leading to progress. In 2010, he launched an ambitious five-year plan called “Growth and Transformation,” which earned the trust of the donor nations. Meles placed special emphasis on electricity generation for domestic consumption and exports to neighbouring countries such as Kenya, Sudan and Djibouti. Large dams are already operating and others

by anybody else, but himself! He then promised that he would retire in 2015. I doubt he would have done so. Power is very attractive and more so when one can feel that, in fact, one does have power. Meles's word was increasingly becoming more powerful, more unquestionable, more unique, and he was very aware of that. Many feared that he would continue in power indefinitely. His death, which occurred on August 20th, 2012 at the age of 57 and after 21 years leading the nation, excluded that possibility for his own good and the good of those who, like myself, followed his political career first with admiration and then with concern.

Meles was a medical student at the University of Addis Abeba during the 1974 Marxist revolution that overthrew Haile Selassie and with which he sympathized. However, he was soon disappointed by what the new revolutionary power - the Derg - was like. Therefore, the following year he joined the guerrillas of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), belonging to the region from which he came. Meles came to the TPLF leadership at the end of the 80s. His presence in the party had a lot to do with the change the guerrilla group underwent towards more pro-Western positions. Meles also encouraged the dialogue between the TPLF and other ethnic groups and parties in Ethiopia that opposed the Derg, forming the coalition called EPRDF.

Meles' personality is complex, as is his political heritage. He was considered by many the most intelligent and prepared politician in Africa. In fact, he represented Africa in several international forums. He was exactly the opposite of a typical dictator: he led a simple life, totally devoted to his political mission. He even made time to get

accept the possibility of adult vocations, "because, in fact, they already know too much about the world." For him, the ideal vocation is that of the young boy who joins the monastery before having worldly experiences.

Even though it may be the case that not all monks share his mentality, the fact is that boys—almost children—are the ones joining the monastic life. Adult vocations from any sector of society are scarce, and even more so from among the educated. The phenomenon that occurred in the Egyptian Orthodox Church around the middle of the 20th century, when a large group of university men, led by Matta El Meskeen, started to live the monastic life and gave it a fresh impetus that endures up to the present time, has not yet taken place in Ethiopia.

Before the arrival of the monk Aregawi, Debre Damo, as well as the Pentelewon Mountain and, arguably, all the other places where the nine saints settled, had been worship places for the pagans. Ethiopia, though Christian in the upper spheres of the Court since the time of Ezana, had not yet been Christianized at the grassroots level. The evangelization of the people was rather the work of the above mentioned nine monks who arrived in the 6th century. Its impact was so effective that Christianity was to become a key feature of the Ethiopian Empire, as significant as having Semite blood, or light brown skin. The awareness of their Christian identity not only continued but reinforced itself from the 7th century onwards, when Islam cut Ethiopia off from communicating with the rest of Christendom. Ethiopia remained a Christian island in the middle of a Muslim ocean or, if we prefer another comparison, as solid as the rock of Debre Damo, planted in the middle of the immense plateau of Islam.

the West than the opposition. Meles Zenawi's Ethiopia was considered a point of stability in the ever-turbulent Horn of Africa. The Ethiopian army, with all the sympathy and support of the West, entered Somalia at the end of 2006 to underpin the weak legal government against the so-called Islamic Courts, allies of Al-Qaida. The question to be asked was whether, in the long run, it was constructive that countries considering themselves as defenders of democracy should close their eyes in pursuit of political pragmatism.

A team working for the Norwegian Institute of Human Rights had already written about the 2000 elections, which they had witnessed first-hand: "Things cannot go on like this. The TPLF should not delude itself by thinking that it can maintain a State that claims to be democratic but that eliminates all alternatives other than its permanent grip on power." Notwithstanding, things did go on like that. The 2010 elections were evidence of this. Meles and the EPRDF won by a landslide. Their majority was so vast that, out of the 548 seats in Parliament, only one seat was gained by the opposition!

Meles' death and his figure

I originally said of the figure of Mengistu Haile Mariam, that his name and that of the term Derg were so linked that they were interchangeable. The same could be applied to Meles and the EPRDF. Meles insinuated his intention of retiring before the 2010 elections. He did not do it because, he declared, "he had to obey the Party." As if he did not know that these kinds of decisions could not be made

capital, which belonged to them. People went on strike, starting with the taxi drivers, upon whom the responsibility for almost all travel in the city lies. Grave disorders broke out at two different moments in time. The first took place in June, soon after the elections; the second in November. Both were harshly repressed by the police, causing around two hundred deaths. The government blamed the opposition for the chaos, accusing them of promoting violence. The opposition's main leaders were arrested and imprisoned along with journalists and thousands of other people. In July 2007, a group of them were condemned to death on charges of conspiracy. Four days later, they were forgiven and released, though not before forcing them to acknowledge their guilt. This occurred on the threshold of the third Ethiopian millennium since a gesture of "clemency" on the part of the government fitted well.

The opposition's behaviour was not exemplary throughout the process either. A first point to note is that their coalitions lacked a great deal of internal cohesion. What really bound them was the "opposition" to the ruling party. Furthermore, what mainly prompted the electorate to vote for them was punishing the EPRDF rather than actually choosing the opponents. The aggressive and belligerent language used by some of them, together with the arrogance shown in places where they were considered to hold a majority, provided the government with the weapon needed to restrict democratic freedom even more.

In light of the irregularities during the 2005 elections, the European Parliament requested the member nations to impose sanctions on the Ethiopian government, but none did. Least of all we would expect the United States to do so. The EPRDF government instilled more confidence in

CHAPTER 2

THE QUEEN OF SHEBA

The Ethiopian Empire does not only have historical but also mythical origins, according to which Ethiopian emperors were direct descendants of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Furthermore, if God allowed the Ark of the Covenant to be stolen from the Temple of Jerusalem and moved to Axum, it implies that he elected Ethiopia to be the chosen people in the place of Israel. The myth of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba would contribute, more than history itself, to the political, social and religious shaping of Ethiopia.

At Easter 1868 an English punitive expedition led by General Robert Napier brought to an end the reign and life of Emperor Tewodros II. Among the objects looted and taken to England, there was a book of great importance. In fact, the new Emperor, Yohannes IV, just after being crowned, wrote a formal letter to the English government asking for its return. "There is a book," he wrote in the letter, "that contains the laws of Ethiopia, as well as the names of its princes, churches and provinces. I beg you find out who has it, and send it back to me, because neither my nation nor my people would follow any of my orders without it." That book was the *Kebrä Nagast* or *The Glory of the Kings*, which is equivalent to what the *Iliad* is

for Greece or the *Aeneid* is for Rome, that is, the national epic. Pedro Páez, the illustrious Spanish Jesuit who lived in Ethiopia at the beginning of the 17th century, knew of the book and was aware of its importance for Ethiopians. He writes: “For Ethiopians it is truth and fact, inasmuch as one cannot even call into question, that the Ethiopian emperors are descendants of Solomon by the Queen of Sheba. Their books abound with these references and they are proud to call themselves Israelis and sons of David.” He continues, “And so that this story may be not less embellished than the one told in the books of Aksum, from where I took it, I will tell it with the same words”. Páez proceeds then to reproduce a long quote copied from the *Kebra Nagast*, which takes up three chapters of its bulky *History of Ethiopia*. The content, which I here summarize, narrates the following:

The story of Solomon and Sheba

When King Solomon decided to build his temple in Jerusalem, he asked all the merchants in the world to bring him the required construction materials; he would pay them regally. He summoned one in particular, Tamrim, an Ethiopian merchant, who arrived with the most precious objects he could find. During his stay in Jerusalem, the King’s wisdom, tenderness and modesty, not to mention the order and justice that reigned in his home, did not go unnoticed by Tamrim.

Upon his return, he informed his Lady, Queen Azeb or Makeda, of everything he had seen and admired. Suddenly, a burning desire to personally meet such a noble

During the 2000 elections, it became clear that the EPRDF had created a double structure. On the one hand, there were democratic institutions in line with the promises made to the Ethiopian people and the expectations of foreign governments and international organizations. On the other hand, beneath that surface, the ruling party exerted full control at all levels and ensured that no one could challenge it. The opposition was invited to register as political parties. If they were not a threat, everything was fine. Otherwise, intimidation, arbitrary arrests, exclusion under any pretext and retaliation of all kinds were the norm.

Against this background, the elections held in May 2005 were expected to be the test to measure the advancement or restriction of democracy. The results tragically confirmed the latter. For the first time, although only at the last minute, the opposition had managed to group together in parties with a certain consistency and cohesion: the CUD (Coalition for Unity and Democracy), the UEDF (United Ethiopian Democratic Forces), the OFDM (Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement)... The outcomes of the vote said it all. In the main cities and in places where international observers were present, the opposition won by far. The results in the capital of Addis Abeba were a symptomatic expression of this: the CUD won in all 23 electoral constituencies, without the governing party winning a single seat. Yet, the National Electoral Board gave the victory to the government party with 59 percent of the total votes.

The opposition parties did not accept the results and most of them refused to take their seats in Parliament. Neither did they want to form the local government of the

Democratic Regression

The 1998-2000 war effects were disastrous for both countries. The economic growth experienced during the previous years came to a standstill. Their international reputation was severely tarnished. After the conflict, the two nations chose a political path even more divergent than the one they had previously taken. The government of Isaias Afewerki evolved into a dictatorship of the worst kind, keeping the country in a state of permanent warfare. A nation that had fought thirty years for independence, with all the countless sacrifices this involved, deserved better. Many Eritreans do not hesitate to affirm that, if their situation under Haile Selassie was bad and with the Derg even worse, they still had to go through the worst of all: the condition their own children and “liberators” were inflicting on them now. Nevertheless, Eritrea and its history fall outside the scope of this book.

Ethiopia’s advancement towards democracy did not evolve in the linear and transparent way that one could expect after such a promising start. The electoral calendar took its normal course. After the 1995 elections, those of 2000 were held in May while the final offensive against Eritrea was ongoing. This was a signal that the war did not greatly affect the country’s internal functioning. From the 2000 elections, higher levels of democracy were expected. But, as stated by the Ethiopian Human Rights Council, voting was “neither free nor fair.” A slight hint of openness from the government was admitting the irregularities committed in some electoral districts and repeating the vote. However, this only happened where the government knew in advance that the results would not affect much the global outcomes.

King was born in the Queen’s heart, and so she started administering her affairs at home and preparing the gifts she would offer Solomon. Six hundred and ninety-seven pack animals made up the entourage. Upon her arrival in Jerusalem, the Queen was received with great honours by the King himself and she was welcomed with generous hospitality. She stayed in Israel for seven months, during which she had the opportunity to enjoy long talks with the King and wonder in awe at his wisdom and equity. The fruit of those conversations was her conversion to Judaism. “From now on,” she promised, “I will no longer worship the Sun, but its creator, the God of Israel. His Ten Commandments will rule above me and my vassals.”

When one day, she confessed to Solomon her wish to return home, he thought from the bottom of his heart: “Who now, if not this beautiful woman, who came from the uttermost parts of the earth, shall give me offspring?” The day before the departure of Azeb, the King prepared a great feast in her honour which lasted until very late at night. The delicacies had been purposely seasoned with plenty of salt and spices to trigger her thirst. As it was getting late, Solomon invited the Queen to spend the night in his chamber. She accepted, but previously she made the King swear that he would not use violence with her. He replied that he would happily swear to it, if she would also swear that she would not unlawfully take anything from his house. “Why are you saying that?” asked the Queen, offended. “Did I, by any chance, come to you looking for gold and not for your wisdom?” They both swore to it and the King ordered to set up a bed not far from his, and a jug full of water to be placed by the headboard.

After her first sleep, the Queen woke up with her throat parched from thirst. Solomon, pretending to be asleep, was anxiously awaiting his chance. The Queen, thinking that he was really asleep, stood up and quietly outstretched her hand to the jug. “Why are you breaking the oath?” asked the King suddenly. “Could drinking water possibly be breaking the oath?” the queen replied with a trembling voice. “Certainly it is. There is nothing under the sun more precious than water.” And bringing her closer to him, he fulfilled his desires. In the morning, he took the ring off his finger and gave it to the Queen, saying: “Were God to give you a son of mine, do not hesitate in sending him to me; this ring will be the sign that he is my son.” With that, he bid her farewell. Back in Ethiopia, the Queen gave birth to a male son whom she called Menelik. When he had grown up and turned 12 years old, he began to insistently ask his mother who his father was, to which she would always reply: His land is far away and the path to it a hard one. You shall not think of him.” And so the years went by, but when he turned 22, the Queen agreed to fulfil his wishes. She called Tamrim, the merchant, and asked him to take his son to Jerusalem, begging him with tears in her eyes that he would be returned to her safe and sound. She gave Menelik Solomon’s ring and bid him farewell.

In Gaza, at the limits of the land of Israel, the whole of the people of Gaza rushed to pay him respect as they thought he was Solomon himself, so much did he resemble his father. The same thing happened in Jerusalem. When he arrived in the presence of the King, he stood up from his throne and hugged him: “You are my father David returned to his youth. It is said that you look like me, but it is indeed my father to whom you bear resemblance.”

The UNMEE mission had encountered two obstacles: firstly, the restrictions imposed by Eritrea on its freedom of movement; secondly, the Ethiopian refusal to deliver the city of Badme to Eritrea, as decided by the UN Boundary Commission, whose decisions both parties had committed to accept.

The dispute remained unresolved for the last eighteen years during which hostility between both nations was unabated. All sorts of direct relations remained on hold. Each country tried to trouble the other and to support dissident movements in order to destabilize the respective governments. Since they had not yet found an ultimate solution for the border demarcation, the possibility of a new outbreak of war was never ruled out. The territories awarded to Eritrea by the Boundary Commission were held by Ethiopia, which had no intention of returning them, even though it expressed several times its willingness to negotiate an intermediate solution. Unexpectedly, in July 2018, with the advent of the new Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, the Ethiopian government offered to withdraw unconditionally from those territories. It could be doubted that Eritrea was enthusiastic about such an offer, since the Eritrean regime used the situation of war as an alibi to maintain its iron dictatorship over the country. However, against all odds, Isaias Afewerki reacted positively. Immediately, there was a chain of events that less than a month earlier would have been unthinkable: the declaration of the end of the state of war, the visit of Abiy Ahmed to Asmara and that of Isaias Afewerki to Addis Abeba and the opening of all lines of communication.

not apply the same yardstick to the two nations and that they blamed Eritrea as the main culprit of the conflict. On July 31st, 2008, eight years after the end of the open warfare, the UNMEE, considering its presence useless, decided to completely withdraw from the dividing strip.



Meles Zenawí, Prime Minister of Ethiopia between 1995 and 2012

Menelik took out the ring and showed it to his father. But the King replied: “Why do I need any other sign? In your face I can see the truth, for you are my son.” Then Tamrim stepped forward and explained the reason of the visit: The King should anoint Menelik King of Ethiopia and allow his immediate return to his land, as that was the wish of the mother Queen. “Is there any other power a mother has over a son than to painfully give birth and breastfeed him?” asked Solomon. “The daughter belongs to the mother and the son to the father. I will not send him back to his land, but I will make him the King of Israel, my successor, given that he is my first born.”

However, Menelik, despite the pleas of his father, did not wish to accept. “Whatever gifts you may give me, I will not agree on staying here. My flesh and bones urge me to return to the place I was born and I grew up in. With regards to worshipping the Ark of the God of Israel, it is enough if you would give me a piece of the cloth that covers it, so that we can worship it in our land. My Queen and my mother long ago destroyed all the idols and now our people only adore the God of Zion.” Having lost all hope of being able to convince him, Solomon summoned the priests of Jerusalem and the leaders in his kingdom and proposed that, as he would allow his first born to leave, each of them should allow their first-born children to go to Ethiopia with Menelik to carry out alongside him the tasks their fathers had in Israel. “As the King orders, so we shall do,” they conceded.

Menelik was anointed King and everyone prepared for departure. However, Azarias, son of the high Priest Sadoc, felt more bitter to bid farewell to the Ark of God than to his own parents. Thus, he decided to set up a ploy to take

the Ark with him. He involved his comrades in it, and they agreed to keep his secret safe. He ordered to build an ark of the same measurements as the one in the temple that contained the Ten Commandments. With the excuse of offering a sacrifice before leaving for Ethiopia, he entered the temple and replaced one for the other. Wrapping up the true Ark in expensive cloth, he put it in the cart and the caravan left.

They travelled at such a high speed that it seemed as if they were flying. Carriages and animals floated through the air cubits from the ground. At the end of the first



Popular painting with 44 scenes describing the legend of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba

of Djibouti or Berbera. All this made for a bitter controversy between both nations. Nobody, however, thought that this disagreement would lead to war.

In May 1998, the Eritrean army unexpectedly invaded the Badme Triangle and other border areas. Ethiopia was the first to be caught off guard, as they had drastically reduced military spending and fell short on soldiers deployed on the Eritrean border. What they did have was a long experience of war and they did not take long to prepare themselves for the counter-offensive. Over the next two years of war, the tone of the mutual accusations, the ferocity of the attacks and the tens of thousands of deaths on both sides (seventy thousand is the present estimate) were not proportionate to the disputed territory, or to the other unresolved litigations. It was rather a settling of scores between two enemies who harboured old resentments.

Ethiopia's crushing numerical superiority (having at that time more than 80 million inhabitants against the 3.5 million of Eritrea) necessarily tipped the balance in its favor. Meles insistently tried to address international diplomacy. Seeing that nothing was done to make Eritrea withdraw from the occupied territories, in May 2000 Ethiopia launched its planned offensive. Not only did Ethiopia regain the lost territories, but also penetrated Eritrea, coming within a few kilometers of the capital of Asmara. Eritrea was forced to sign a ceasefire and to allow a 25 kilometer-wide demilitarized strip, patrolled by a UN peacekeeping force, the so-called UNMEE (United Nations Mission in Eritrea and Ethiopia). The strip was located on Eritrean land. This was one of the few signs showing that the international community did

nation were not politically recognized. The administrative division was made on purely geographical grounds. Political parties never managed to have any role. The EPLF, now transformed into PFDJ (People's Front for Democracy and Justice), held an increasingly strict monopoly, while taking aggressive stances against all neighbouring nations. In 1994, the PFDJ broke off relations with Sudan. Then, in 1996, it engaged in armed conflict with Yemen over the Hanish Islands. Later on, it was its turn to be at daggers drawn with Djibouti.

The originally friendly relations conducted with Ethiopia gradually soured. It is true, however, that there were unresolved issues from the beginning such as the border delineation. Yet nobody expected this would be a serious or urgent matter. They had many things in common. Both nations shared the same currency, the *birr*. Ethiopia could use Assab's port as a free port. Indeed, it was precisely these two points, the *birr* and Assab's port, that triggered serious disagreements. In November 1997, Eritrea coined its own currency, the *nakfa*. The coinage was named after the northern city of *Nakfa*, which had been the EPLF's impenetrable rock during the war against the Derg. The new currency entailed a political and economic breach with serious implications. Eritrea expected that Ethiopia would accept both currencies as equal and that commercial transactions would be made directly in any coin. Notwithstanding, Ethiopia demanded that, from that moment, business would be done in US dollars. This represented a sharp setback for Eritrea, whose coffers were devoid of foreign currency. Ethiopia, moreover, began to refrain from using their port of Assab, which was economically more burdensome than the alternative ports

day they had already reached Gaza. Realizing that they had travelled in one day what was originally planned for thirteen days, they understood that it was God's work.

Then Azarias said to Menelik: "Here is the Ark of God. If you fulfil His Commandments, the Ark will always be with you and will never leave you." Menelik knelt in front of the Ark and prayed the following: "Lord, God of Israel, may glory be upon You, because they are Your wishes and not those of men."

Meanwhile, the high priest entered the temple and discovered the fraud. The dismay of the inhabitants of



Jerusalem had no bounds. The King left hastily in search of the fugitives with the aim of bringing them back to Jerusalem and *slaying them by the sword*. Once in Gaza, people informed them that it was not worthwhile to make haste, as the caravan had left thirteen days ago and its carriages were traveling at a great speed, not even touching the ground. Solomon cried out saying: “Oh Lord, in my lifetime you have deprived me of the Ark. It would have been better for you to have given me death.” His courtiers comforted him saying that the Ark would be where God wanted it to be; neither he nor his son would be able to force God. If he wanted the Ark to be in Jerusalem, it would find its way back, and if he wanted it to be in Ethiopia, no one would be able to impede it.

Upon their arrival in Ethiopia, the fugitives were welcomed with unspeakable joy. The Ark was placed in a temple and the Queen abdicated in favour of her son, who was again anointed by Azarias, and given the name of David II. He then made all the nobles swear that, from that moment on, no woman would ever be appointed queen. Only the male descendants in direct line of the King could aspire to the throne.

History or Legend?

It is difficult to know to which extent Páez agreed with the opinion of his contemporary Ethiopians who used to believe “as a matter of fact” what the book narrates. His insistence on the conviction of Ethiopians—that “one cannot even call into question”—is better understood in opposition to his own uncertainty. However, if he had

Administrative elections were held in 1992, and in 1995 political elections took place, electing a parliament with 548 members and proclaiming itself the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. The opposition would take a long time to become an important political force. During the first years of the transition, more than 100 parties emerged, failing to join together. Their initial strategy was non-participation in the electoral acts. Meles remarked, “One can take the horse to the river but one cannot force the horse to drink.” The objection raised by the opposition, already in the beginning, was that a free vote was not guaranteed. This reality would become more evident as elections followed. Between 1991 and 1998 there was an explosive economic growth for both Ethiopia and Eritrea. Both nations earned credibility and respect in the international arena. Bill Clinton once referred to Meles Zenawi and Isaias Afewerki as “the new generation of African leaders.” Ethiopia established strong and friendly relations both with the European Union as well as with the United States and Japan. In African politics, the former Abyssinia played an active role in Somalia, helping it to reach an agreement among the various factions. In 1996 peacekeeping troops were sent to Rwanda.

Conflict with Eritrea

Eritrea’s political development differed considerably from that of Ethiopia. Soon the road to democracy froze over. In 1997, a referendum approved a constitution that in certain points was running in direct opposition to that of Ethiopia. The nine ethnic groups that made up the young

launch immediate reprisals. The arrested Derg's senior members were treated correctly while awaiting trial with legal guarantees. Wearing sandals, with tangled hair and uniforms in dilapidated condition, the EPRDF "soldiers" did not prove to be the savage bandits that everyone feared. It was a well-organized body, which soon gained the trust of the population for its courtesy and discipline.

The new leaders established a wise hierarchy of priorities, first and foremost aimed at guaranteeing economic and administrative performance, and in second place, other details, such as removing all the Marxist symbols the Derg had used to fill the streets. Occasionally, it was the people who tore down statues and posters; and what was worse, in some cases, they took justice into their own hands to deal with particularly hated Derg members. A political agenda was adopted and carried out in a timely manner. A new constitution was approved in December 1994. This proclaimed a federal state along ethnic lines, a questionable and risky new development. Eliminating the former division of the nation into 14 provinces, a totally new map was designed according to the ethnic groups' borders. Thus, nine regional states emerged: Tigray, Afar, Amhara, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella, Harar, Oromia, Somalia, Southern Nations Nationalities and People, and two federal districts: Addis Abeba and Dire Dawa. Each ethnic group was granted the opportunity to develop politically, economically and culturally. The danger lay in the fact that centrifugal forces could be stronger than the centripetal ones, compromising the national unity. In actual fact, the constitution even accepted the possibility of a region opting for total independence, as Eritrea had already done.

doubts, he tried to hide them. In his *History of Ethiopia* he gives the same value to the texts taken from the *Kebrä Nagast* as to other records supported by history. For the present-day Ethiopian, especially if he has any ties to the traditional spheres of the Orthodox Church, the historicity of the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba is still unquestionable. In the 1955 Constitution, "given" to the nation by Emperor Haile Selassie, it is said: "The Imperial dignity shall remain perpetually attached to the line of Haile Selassie I, descendant of King Sahle Selassie, whose lineage descends without interruption from the dynasty of Menelik I, son of the Queen of Ethiopia (the Queen of Sheba), and King Solomon of Jerusalem".

However, the leaders of the 1974 revolution which deposed the decrepit Emperor Haile Selassie were not worried that the dethroned was a possible descendent of Solomon, nor would the average educated Ethiopian be startled if the historical value of that tradition were to be questioned. There is no doubt that the tradition of the Queen of Sheba belongs to the realm of legend. It is indeed true that there are certain reasons that seem to support its historicity, one of them being the surprising presence of Jewish features in the Ethiopian Christian tradition. Circumcision, the observance of Saturday, the legal purity, and the construction of churches according to the Jerusalem temple are some of the most remarkable examples of Hebrew influence. And another reason is the existence of a tribe in Ethiopia, the *Falasha*, who call themselves *Bete Israel* or *Israel House* and who since immemorial times have practised Judaism.

However, it would be too much to try to explain these phenomena by appealing to the historicity of the

Queen of Sheba's episode. That would mean that, before converting to Christianity, Judaism would have been the official religion before 4th century Ethiopia. There is no historical evidence to support this claim. On the contrary, inscriptions left by King Ezana prove that, before converting to Christianity, he consecrated his altars to the Arabian Gods—Mahrem, Baher, Meder—or to the Greek Gods—Zeus, Ares, Poseidon. Sheba's story does not explain the Jewish presence; it is, in fact, the opposite: The Jewish presence explains the very existence and popularity of such a legend. And, once created, the legend contributed to reinforcing the Jewish influence. In reality, Judaism, probably made its way gradually to Ethiopia, originating from Egypt or southern Arabia, where Hebrew settlements abounded. Judaism expanded considerably, but had to give way to the influence of Christianity, not without leaving, however, a profound imprint on Christianity.

Kebra Nagast, in whose pages the legend of the Queen of Shaba as we know it today takes shape, was written in the 13th or 14th century by Isaac, a priest from Axum. In the introduction, he mentions that his task was none other than the translation of a book that originated from Alexandria. We shall believe it only partially because, maybe out of modesty, he might have not been acknowledging the whole truth. It is true that he was not the author of this legend, as its very core was already known throughout Alexandria in the 9th and 10th centuries. However, he is, no doubt, the author of the literary masterpiece, which encompasses 119 chapters and, despite the tediousness of some parts, bears great literary value.

As previously stated, Isaac's work is something along the lines of a national epic poem. The author has a twofold

arena. If people thought that Ethiopia was a “different” country steadily heading towards its total democratic functioning, the facts seem to contradict this trend. The constitution enacted in 1995 is in itself an exemplary one. In this text, democracy is not an “African” or “Ethiopian” democracy, if there is any, but simply a democracy. Yet, under that legal cover, the ruling party, the EPRDF, has had an iron grip on power that hinders the democratic governance. Is it, then, a dictatorship clad in democracy's attire?

The first measures adopted by the EPRDF

Meles Zenawi arrived in Addis Abeba on June 1st, 1991, four days after his troops had taken over the capital. He immediately convened a meeting for July 1st, assuring that a transitional government would be created to run the country until the first elections could be held. Within the umbrella party called EPRDF (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front), the TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front) had the strongest voice, but a number of political groups, including those in exile, were also represented. Meles Zenawi, leader of the TPLF and the EPRDF, assumed office as Prime Minister. He left the Presidency, rather an honorary post, for a member of some other party integrated into the EPRDF.

The new government did not take any of the extreme measures that the Derg propaganda had attributed to them when they were a guerrilla. They did not declare *Tigrinya* as the official language; they did not change the Ethiopian flag for the one of Tigray; and they did not

almost messianic, in his speech: “A thousand years from now, when Ethiopians gather to welcome the fourth millennium, they shall say the eve of the third millennium was the beginning of the end of the ‘dark’ ages in Ethiopia.” Are these words a megalomaniac’s overestimate of the EPRDF’s performance or do they meet, at least substantially, the reality?

Anyone returning today to Ethiopia after an absence of several years cannot fail to be impressed by the changes. Addis Abeba and other cities such as Gondar, Bahir Dar, Hawassa, Dire Dawa, and Adama, among others, which until recently could be only described as miserable, are turning into beautiful and modern cities with each passing day. The countryside has undergone similar transformations. Looking at any portion of the national territory, hundreds of zinc roofs can be seen shining in the sun, whereas only a few years ago there were just thatched huts. New factories, new plastic greenhouses for producing vegetables, flowers or fruits, new recreational areas...everything seems to emerge, overnight, from out of nowhere. The road network throughout the nation is being expanded and paved. The annual 10 percent accounting for Ethiopia’s economic growth in recent years—the magic two digits—indicates that all these signs are not hot air, but solid facts.

There is, however, the other side of the coin, the counterpoint for this optimistic view. In the economic sphere, the millennium resulted in unprecedented inflation of 30 per cent and 100 per cent for some items. Simultaneously, while a wealthy minority class is being shaped, the majority are still surviving at the level of pure subsistence. Shadows have also been part of the political

wish of which he is not always aware: the first, to elevate the origins of the nation and the second, to reinforce political and social institutions by granting them divine right. What could Ethiopia turn to in order to elevate its origins? Being the Christian country it was, by tracing back to the heroes of the Bible. And the author did not fall short in the attempt; what the thesis of the book affirms is that the chosen people was no longer Israel, but Aksum, where God wanted the Ark of Covenant to be located.

The historical consequences of this legend were immeasurable. Beyond its borders, it gave the Ethiopian Christian Empire the energy and mysticism necessary to fight against Islam. Within its borders, it provided religious support to certain socio-political structures: an almighty and untouchable sovereign, descendant of David, God’s anointed one, and under him a clergy with the same privileges as the priests of Israel had. It is not strange that Emperor Yohannes begged the English to return the book, “because without it the people shall not follow my orders.” There is no need to wonder at the fact that Emperor Haile Selassie, when providing the people with a constitution, took the precaution of attributing his sole authority to his Davidic origins.

Nevertheless, like all myths, sooner or later they tend to evaporate, and so this was also the fate of that of the Queen of Sheba. In 1974, after the fall of Emperor Haile Selassie, the last offspring of the Solomonic dynasty, his statues and symbols were swept away one after the other from all public spaces. In the meantime, those who deposed the Emperor tried to impose their own myths. The portraits of the socialist trinity—Marx, Engels and Lenin—frowned at the passer-by from all possible angles and crossings. It was

said that they were the guides and fathers of the nation, a nation “which walks firmly towards progress and freedom.” Would the Ethiopian nation be guided by the red star for as many years as it had been guided by the Star of David? On the night of March 9th, 1990, the effigies of Marx, Engels and Lenin were removed from the public eye. One year later, the Marxist regime that had previously placed them there, only to later remove them, was sent, together with its myths, to the underground room of history.

CHAPTER 15

EPRDF POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT: DEMOCRACY WITH RESERVATIONS

On May 28th, 1991, EPRDF forces entered Addis Abeba, ousting the communist regime of the Derg. Transition was much less traumatic than could be expected, almost exemplary. The first steps of the new government promised a new era of peace and democracy. The drawback was that, as time went by, this pledged democracy failed to materialize; on the contrary, it seemed to move further and further away, creating frustration and raising new questions in regard to the political future of the nation. Only since the spring of 2018, with the arrival of the new Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, the situation seems to take on a more positive turn.

The year 2000 began for the Ethiopians on September 12th, 2007 and, with it, the third millennium. Ethiopia is today the only African nation that abides by the old Julian calendar. Even Eritrea, heir like Ethiopia to this old almanac, has lately dropped it to adopt the Gregorian calendar. On the occasion of the new millennium, Ethiopia had the desire to expose itself under the international spotlight with all its implications. The then Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, was very optimistic,

CHAPTER 3

IN SEARCH OF THE LOST ARK

According to the legend of the Queen of Sheba, not only are the kings of Ethiopia descendants of Solomon, but also the true Ark of the Covenant is to be found in Aksum. That was one of the Ethiopian's strongest beliefs and it still is so, at least in the innermost circles of the Orthodox Church. Apart from that, the Ark of the Covenant and its location is one of the mysteries of history that people have not lost interest in over time; rather, the contrary has occurred. Is the answer to this mystery to be found in Ethiopian beliefs?

It is the day of *Timket* or the Baptism of Our Lord. Priests, dressed in their best garments under colourful umbrellas, parade from their churches towards any place where a river or pond might be found. The main priest, walking majestically, carries the *tabot* over his head. Once they arrive, he will delicately place the *tabot* in a tent erected expressly for the occasion. Outside the tent, the crowd will sing and dance all night long, until the following day when the *tabot* will be carried back escorted by a procession to its place of origin. This ritual takes place in all Orthodox churches throughout Ethiopia and Eritrea. The *tabot* is a rectangular-shaped chest containing two tablets made out of wood or stone, about 20 cm wide

and 30 cm long. They are said to be copies of the original tablets bearing the Ten Commandments, the ones God handed to Moses on Mount Sinai, kept in a chapel in Aksum, inside the Ark of the Covenant that Moses built in the desert. The *tabot* is the most sacred object in the Ethiopian Church and it is placed in the most inner part, in the *Kedest Kedusan* or *Saint of Saints*, a room to which only priests have access.

Where does the Orthodox Church's unbreakable conviction—that the Ark of the Covenant is to be found in Aksum—come from? This question can be traced back to greater and more complex mysteries, those being: Why is it that Ethiopian Christian culture, as a whole, has such strong connections to the Old Testament? Or why, since ancient times, have there been members of the *Falasha* or *Bete Israel* in Ethiopia, a Jewish community that currently, after a massive migration to Israel from 1984 to 1991, consists of not more than ten thousand people, but which five centuries ago was an independent kingdom able to defy the Christian Empire? Answers to these questions can be found in two different domains: that of Ethiopian tradition and that of scientific and historical research. Needless to say, the answers are apparently irreconcilable among themselves. Ethiopian tradition holds that what is written in the *Kebre Negest* or *Glory of Kings* is true, as explained in the previous chapter. It states, in short, as follows:

When the young Menelik, the son of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, grew older, he decided to travel to Jerusalem to meet his father. The King of Israel wished to have him stay in Jerusalem and become his successor, but Menelik refused. Then the King ordered all the first

means staying on the side-lines of the intellectual and political world. The second is that, more than by direct evangelization, it has favoured social institutions like schools or dispensaries. The last one is that, by dint of stressing tolerance and trying to avoid proselytising, it may end up becoming irrelevant.

Jesuit mission that ended tragically. And a third one is the invasion of Ethiopia, in the midst of the 20th century, by a Catholic nation like Italy. That historical burden made, until very recently, the Orthodox Church consider Protestants more favourably than Catholics, despite the profound doctrinal differences that divide them.

The relationship between Catholics and Protestants, especially with the most traditional denominations, like the Mekane Yesus (Lutheran) and the Kale Heywet (Baptist) have always been cordial, but never very intense. The Protestant scene has changed with the stunning explosion of Pentecostal groups, which has taken place recently. Out of the two million Protestants that presumably existed in 1985, there are now 15 million. The number of evangelical denominations has multiplied and continues to multiply every day. The phenomena of these new groups that already existed in nations like Kenya, Nigeria or South Africa, caught fire also in Ethiopia despite the belief that its tradition would make it refractory to the Pentecostal phenomena. And with these new denominations, very little ecumenical dialogue is possible at this moment.

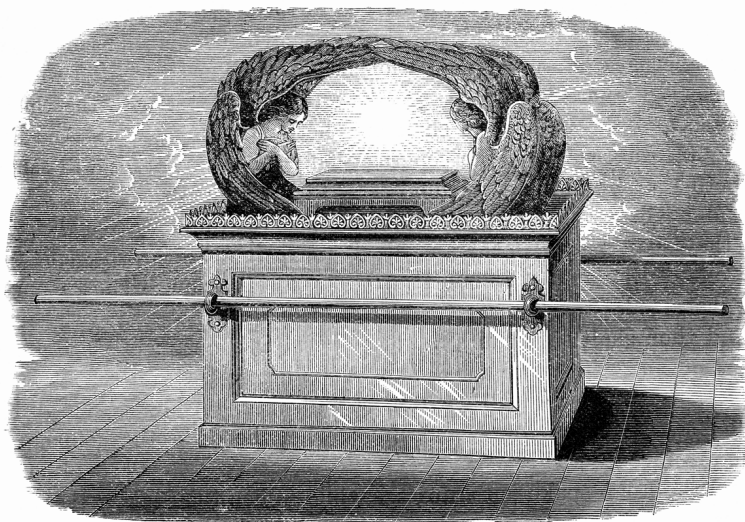
The Catholic Church will presumably continue to grow, especially in the south, although at a slow pace, since, currently, only a small part of the population still professes traditional religions, which have been in the past the main field of conversions. The Catholic Church presents itself with a very well-defined hierarchy and dogma and with very concrete religious practices, all of which at a certain time favoured its growth, above all in rural areas. However, this feature is nowadays less attractive. There are also some dangers threatening it. Dangers are waiting. The first one is that, being more present in the rural world

sons of the Greats in Jerusalem to accompany Menelik to Ethiopia. The night prior to their departure, they stole the true Ark from the Temple, replaced it with a facsimile and escaped hastily, following the path to Egypt. Since then, Ethiopian tradition apodictically concludes, the Ark is to be found in Ethiopia, more precisely in the city of Aksum. Historic research, however, finds it difficult to attribute any truth to this narration.

Hancock, Seeker of the Lost Ark

1992 saw the publishing of a book by the journalist Graham Hancock, *The Sign and the Seal, a Quest for the Lost Ark of the Covenant*. It became a great success not only in English, but also in the several translated editions it was published in, including the Spanish one (*Símbolo y Señal*, Ed. Planeta, 1993). Hancock lived for several years in Ethiopia and, like many others, was impressed by the firm conviction Ethiopians held about the existence in Aksum of the true Ark of the Covenant. He decided to dedicate himself to researching how much historical truth was behind this belief. He travelled everywhere, inside Ethiopia and abroad, to any place that might have a connection to the Ark and interviewed those who might be able to shed any light on this matter. For him, the effort of the five years he spent on his inquiries was not fruitless. Certainly, he had to dismiss many statements by the *Kebre Negest* as legendary or implausible, ultimately came to uphold the hypothesis that the true Ark could possibly be found in Aksum.

The most widespread opinion regarding the disappearance of the Ark from the Temple of Jerusalem is that it was destroyed together with the Temple in 587 BC, by King Nebuchadnezzar. However, there are reasons to believe that the Ark was taken from the Temple before that date. One of them is the fact that the Ark is not mentioned in the detailed list of objects that were taken to Babylon (2 K 25, 13-17), nor it is mentioned in the list of objects returned to Jerusalem in the year 537 (Es 1,7-11). So, when could it have disappeared? Hancock hypothesized that this could happen during King Manases' time (687-642 B.C.). Manases was an impious King who profaned the Temple of Jerusalem by introducing idols of pagan religions. It is probable that a group of devout people took



Facsimile of the Ark of the Covenant

the multitude of the Orthodox Church; it did not have well-settled elites like of the Protestant Churches; there were no Catholics in higher political positions; it did not take radical sides. Rather than among the political and intellectual spheres, the Catholic Church has been present among the poor and marginal classes, mostly in the rural world as opposed to cities. It did not bother much and was the least bothered. It does not mean that it was a “perfect stranger.” The most appreciated schools in Addis Abeba were the Catholic schools. The Ethiopian Catholic Secretariat (ECS), an institution that coordinated and distributed all the help coming from international Catholic organizations at the time of a big drought, managed an increasing volume of aid with recognized honesty and efficiency.

The Catholic Church holds a middle position between the Orthodox Church and the diverse Protestant confessions, one reason why its position could be ideal to favour ecumenical dialogue. It stays close to the Orthodox Church in the confession of faith, which practically differs only in the primacy of Peter. And it is close to the Protestant Churches being a missionary Church, mostly connected to the West and its mentality. However, the mediation task is nowadays more potential than real; the ecumenical dialogue has not come much further in Ethiopia. The doctrinal closeness of the Orthodox Church is not necessarily a source of a better understanding, mostly because history carries a major weight and there are still some dark areas that were never overcome. One of them is the anti-Roman version transmitted by Alexandria to the Ethiopian Church about what happened at the Council of Chalcedon. Another one is the 16th and 17th century

not the only nation to have various rites. In Ethiopia, both rites are legitimate offspring, born of the twin Vicariates that planted the Catholic Church in the nation. This duality poses some discomfort, mostly due to the current mobility inside the population. However, in any case, it is a lesser discomfort compared to the challenges that many current changes bring with them.

Catholic Church and Politics

What did the revolution that in February 1974 put an end to a confessionally Christian Empire in order to introduce a self-confessed Marxist-Leninist regime mean for the different churches? The change affected the different Churches unequally. The most affected was undoubtedly the Orthodox Church, which had profited up to that moment from being the state religion. More than material losses, due the nationalization of its several possessions, the real blow was being reduced to “one more,” at the same level as Muslims, Protestants and Catholics. For different reasons, the various protestant confessions also suffered painfully from the effects of the new situation. Due to their great ability to gather youngsters and intellectuals, Protestants were the ones who most strongly opposed the Marxist regime and it was clear that the regime did not treat possible competitors well. Hundreds of churches were closed down and many leaders imprisoned some of them never to be heard from again.

The Catholic Church was probably the least affected. It is no surprise. Out of the three, it was the least numerous and did not have great privileges to lose: it did not have

the Ark to a safer place, which could easily have been far away, as the King’s criminal activity had extended over a vast region. Hancock suspected that this place could have been Egypt, more specifically the Elephantine Island, nowadays called Aswan, located 1,000 km south of Cairo. In fact, it is historically proven that from the 7th to the 5th century BC, a Jewish settlement lived on the Island and had built a temple where lambs were offered up in sacrifice. The above mentioned temple was destroyed by the Egyptians in 410 BC, most likely during the time when the group continued their southward journey, first alongside the Nile, later alongside its effluents, the Atbara or Takaze, to finally settle down in the surroundings of Lake Tana. They would be the forefathers of the current *Falashas* or Ethiopian Jews.

Hancock insists that the *Falashas* have always lived in western Ethiopia and not eastern, as would have been the case had they arrived from southern Arabia by crossing the Red Sea. Hancock relates his interview with an old Orthodox priest on one of the islands of Lake Tana, Tana Kirkos. The priest told him about a tradition, according to which, for 800 years the Ark had been on that island and sacrifices were offered up. The priest also described how those sacrifices were performed, in a way which substantially coincides with descriptions of the same found in the Old Testament. From Tana Kirkos, the Ark would have been moved to the city of Aksum, at the time when King Ezana converted to Christianity. If we estimate that this happened around 335 AC, that leaves a difference of approximately 800 years from 410 BC, the date in which the Ark previously departed from the Elephantine Island.

Towards a broader perspective

We can sympathise with Hancock's enthusiasm over his hypothesis. As for the rest, his book is an interesting source of news about past and present Ethiopia, which makes it a worthwhile and pleasant read. However, his arguments are not able to merit a rank higher than that of mere conjecture, against which plenty of objections exist. I will point out just one that seems to be the most simple. It seems implausible that an ark made out of wood would not have deteriorated throughout the approximately 3,250 years that separates us from the time of Moses. It could have been preserved, had it been cared for under extremely special circumstances, as its being contained in an Egyptian tomb would have been, but certainly not by making pilgrimages back and forth or being subjected to the humid climate on Lake Tana Island for 800 years.

And there is even a much more radical objection, that the topic of the Ark should be considered from a much broader perspective than solely its physical identity. In 1999, two authors, Grierson and Munro-Hey, published their own research in a book entitled *The Ark of the Covenant*. The authors confront the topic much more critically than Hancock. Their most significant contribution is the critical question: Is the Ark really a physical object that needs to be found somewhere or is it more of a symbol? To illustrate their thesis, they start by making a detailed analysis of what the Bible says about the Ark, and they observe that there seems to have been more than just the one ark, and the several acquired different shapes according to the different theological concepts the Bible had about it. We must not

did not do it in due time, it should be done now, that is to say, the Ethiopian rite should be imposed across the nation as a whole. In fact, they argue, although the south did not belong to the Empire for centuries, Christianity as practised in the north was familiar to them. In any case, today Ethiopia is one, and if other African nations are in search of their own rites, why should not Ethiopia adopt the one that already exists at least in part of the country?

This could have been a powerful argument in the time of Haile Selassie or of the Derg, when the predetermined goal was to make Ethiopia one political and cultural unity overcoming ethnic differences. With the arrival of the EPRDF Government and its option for a federal state based on ethnic groups, strong cultural diversities flourished. Traditional Ethiopian culture, from which the Ethiopian rite was born and has grown, was to be considered by other, non-Semitic, ethnic groups as a culture which should allow space to these other groups. They even accuse it of colonialism, because it wanted to impose itself by force. The resistance to adopting the Ethiopian rite by the southern ethnic groups (Oromo, Kambaata, Welayta, and Sidama) fits in this context. They prefer the Latin rite not because it has been a creation of their culture, but because for them it was the rite they received for the first time and the first faith, which they had made their own.

Once again the question arises: division in the Ethiopian Catholic Church because of the rite? And again the possible answer, we can talk about sporadic tensions but never about division. For the time being, it does not seem possible to reach unity regarding the rite due to the diverse sensitivities. Nor is unity a goal to be achieved at all costs. Diversity is richness if accepted as such. Ethiopia is

Ethiopian rite, while those in the south (Harar, Nekemte, Sodo, Hosaena, Hawassa, Meki, Jimma, Gambela, and Bale) use the Latin rite. Male and female missionaries from different nationalities and congregations arrived in Ethiopia at different times, above all from the 1950s. Most of them went to the as yet non-evangelized areas in the south, where the Latin rite is practiced. That explains why the number of Catholics practising this rite (85%) surpasses by far those of Ethiopian rite (15%); and the same goes with regard to local vocations for priesthood and religious life.

The duality of rite: division or richness?

To speak of rite does not mean to speak of a set of ceremonies done this or that way; it is much more than that. The rite is the expression of religious, cultural, ethnic, and ideological identities. Accepting this means accepting a whole history and culture. To deny it is to deny its existence. When it comes to Ethiopia, all these implications are made evident; to argue about the rite would be equivalent to arguing over the cultural and political identity of a nation. Over a century and a half ago, Massaia took up the Latin rite on the basis that the communities entrusted to him were neither Christian nor belonging to the Empire. Evidently, he had to admit that to a greater or lesser degree they were part of the Ethiopian classic cultural sphere. To what extent this was so, is subject to different opinions. For the supporters of the Ethiopian rite, it would have been normal and logical that Massaia would have opted for it. However, since he

forget that, between the time when the Ark was supposed to have been built (roughly 1,250 BC) and the time when the final writing was done on the books which describe it (Exodus and Deuteronomy), there is a time lapse of not less than 700 years.

The Ark of the Covenant as described in Exodus (Ex 25, 10-22) belongs to the priestly tradition and seems to be much more than a physical object. It seems rather to be the description of some sort of idealized object representing the honourable dwelling place of God. However, Deuteronomy (Dt 10, 1-3) describes a much simpler Ark whose place in the cult is secondary. Which one of the two is the real Ark then? It could even be possible that at different times in history more than two arks had been built.

Moreover, if we go from the Bible to Ethiopian tradition, we will not encounter less darkness or fewer difficulties. First of all, no mention of the Ark can be found prior to the 13th century. The first testimony has been provided by Abu Salih, an Armenian geographer who travelled to Ethiopia during the times of King Lalibela, around 1,220 AD. Abu Salih affirms that Ethiopians have the Ark of the Covenant, on which the Ten Commandments are kept. His description of it partly coincides with the one in the Bible, but it is more of a Christianised Ark, with the cherubs usually placed on the top of the Ark replaced by crosses. Furthermore, there is a contradiction within the Ethiopian tradition. While the *Kebre Negest* and other sources focus on the Ark as an ark, the chest containing the Ten Commandments, another line of thought stresses the importance of the tablets themselves, and not the Ark. In fact, what is worshipped in every Orthodox Church is

not the copied Ark, but the *tabot*, the copy of the tablets. Even though they are to be found in the chest, the chest is not considered to be the main focus of interest, but rather the tablets.

Two events in recent history point in the same direction. In the mid-18th century, an Armenian jeweller travelled to Aksum and asked to see the Ark. What he was shown by the priests of the temple was a piece of stone with some incomplete letters. A century after that, another Armenian national, a Delegate of the Armenian Patriarch, requested the same thing from the priests of Aksum. After heavy opposition, he was shown a cracked marble stone that was kept inside a chest of Indian making. Even if we take for granted that the priests would have never unveiled the true Ark of the Covenant, but rather copy, the fact that they showed him a tablet and not a chest, proves that, for them, the holy object was really the content rather than the container.

What can really be found in Aksum?

The reader may be asking him or herself a very basic question: why not just go to Aksum and have a closer look at the artifact venerated there? It would seem the easiest and most logical thing to do; however, at the present time it is impossible to do so. Hancock, like many other researchers, went to Aksum with the sole aim of contemplating the Ark and talking to someone who could provide firsthand information about it. According to tradition, the Ark was first kept in the church Our Lady

flourishing centres of the Catholic Church developed. The Vicariate of the Oromo did not have much more promising prospects. The few Catholics left behind by Massaia lived in an almost continuous state of persecution. Curiously, just as faraway Keren served as an escape outlet for the missionaries of the Vicariate of Abyssinia, the city of Harar did the same for those of the Vicariate of the Oromo. A year after the expulsion, Taurin Cahagne, who had been colleague and assistant bishop of Massaia, was arriving and settling down in the Muslim city of Harar, which depended at the time on the Egyptian government. When, a few years later after his arrival, the city became part of the Ethiopian Empire, it was not Yohannes who reigned, but Menelik, known by his tolerance towards the Catholic Church. Starting in Harar, the Catholic Church would expand among the followers the traditional religions: Oromo, Sidama, Kaffa... The Vicariate of Abyssinia, stretching along a territory where the population was mostly orthodox, had logically much less extension. In any case, the growth of the Catholic Church was slow, and in numbers, it was always a “small flock” that never reached, nor reaches today, 1% of the population.

As we have previously seen, Justine opted for the Ethiopian rite, taken up from the Orthodox Church, while Massaia opted for the Latin one. When they did so, the two Vicariates were not one unified nation. Only after Menelik’s conquests did they became one. With the passage of time, the two Vicariates started to subdivide as the Catholics increased in number and the two different rites continued to exist. The northern parts of the country characterised by Semitic language and culture (Adigrat, Addis Abeba, Endibir, and Bahir Dar) practice the

were hosted in a miserable hut where Massaia, for many days, remained poised between life and death, suffering from a fever. As soon as he recovered, they were taken to the Emperor who, with his usual disdain, pronounced the definitive word: “Go to your land.” It was January 10th, 1880. He had entered that same place, Metemma, 28 years back.

Europe knew well of Massaia thanks to his diverse writings. The Church officially recognized his weariness, making him Cardinal. By express order of Pope Leo XIII, Massaia dedicated himself to delving into his prodigious memory—he had lost the documents in his expulsion—and reconstructed the events of his missionary life. The result was his work: *My Thirty-Five Years of Mission on the Ethiopian Plateau*. Despite some paternalistic judgements, his book is one the most notable writings of universal missionary literature. Massaia died in the Capuchin Monastery of Frascati on August 6th, 1889. Emperor Yohannes, wounded in the Metemma battle against the Dervish from Sudan, died that same year and Menelik crowned himself emperor.

The Catholic Church after the Pioneers

After the disappearance of the pioneers, the Catholic Church did not experience a very promising moment. The Vicariate of Abyssinia suffered throughout long years from persecution and intolerance under Emperor Yohannes. Missionaries were imprisoned several times and their churches burnt. Only the very faraway Keren, in Eritrea, allowed them a kind of refuge. There, one of the most

of Sion built in Aksum by the Emperor Gebre Meskel, son of Kaleb, in the 6th century. The church was destroyed and reconstructed several times throughout history. At the present times there are two churches, one next to the other, both bearing the same name, Our Lady of Sion. The oldest one dates back to the time of Emperor Fasilides, towards the middle of the 17th century. The newest one was ordered to be built by Emperor Haile Selassie, around the year 1965. He also built a chapel next to the church, with the primary purpose of keeping the Ark; this is the place where the Ark can supposedly be found today.

The Marxist Government of Mengistu Hailemariam (1974-1991) attempted to remove the Ark from Aksum and take it to Addis Abeba with the excuse that the Ark was in great danger due to the advancement of Tigray fighters, but the priests and people of the city categorically opposed doing that. They would have let themselves be killed before allowing the Ark to be touched. At the end of 1988, Tigray fighters took over Aksum, and since 1991, their party, the TPLF, has governed the nation and never attempted to interfere with the Ark in any manner whatsoever. The Ark is guarded by the so-called “Guardian of the Ark of the Covenant,” a monk who is elected to never leave the Ark unguarded, day or night. He is the only one who can see it and touch it. It is thought that any other person who would try to do so, be it emperor, patriarch, priest or mere believer, would immediately die; the Ark of the Covenant would kill him. Furthermore, if someone were found to be sceptical of the power of the Ark and challenged it, the priests and inhabitants of the city would be willing to carry out capital punishment on him or her.

After being granted an interview with the Guardian of the Ark, Hancock reported that the Guardian replied to all his questions and reassured him as to the absolute truth of the existence of the true Ark in Aksum. Regarding its description, the monk, in a diplomatic manner, referred Hancock to what the Exodus narrates about it. To any other question, his answer was always: “I cannot say any more about it.” The great diffusion of Hancock’s book has disturbed the peaceful life of the priests in Aksum, and above all, the one of whoever will serve as the Guardian of the Ark. He has, ever since, been frequently bombarded with questions from both academics and ordinary tourists. Still, nothing has ever changed his position, which is that of the Orthodox Church to on the Ark’s veracity. The Orthodox Church guards the holy artifact with zealous piety. At the present time, it is not expected that it will change its policy nor that they will allow experts to analyse the Ark, as was done, for example, with the Shroud of Turin. The pace of the world changes, however, is quickening and what we deem undoable today may tomorrow succumb to external pressure and make room for a true viewing of the Ark, just as inexorable changes will eventually take place within the Ethiopian Church itself.

I would not like to conclude this discussion of the Ark with the unqualified affirmation that the Ark in Aksum is not the one built by Moses. I do not have final arguments against it, but I do not believe there are sufficient arguments in favour. I wonder, however, what would happen if it were proven that the highly venerated Ark of the Covenant guarded in Aksum is nothing more

End of the Ethiopian adventure

The expulsion of Massaia and his colleagues did not happen because of Menelik, who thought highly of them, but above the King of Shoa there was Emperor Yohannes. He had given Menelik considerable autonomy. He imposed on him, however, one condition: “Kick out those people who preach a faith different from mine,” he told him, “or get ready for war.” Yohannes IV’s position corresponded, first and foremost, to the old desire of every Ethiopian Emperor to religiously unify the nation, but this cause did not explain in and of itself the steadfastness of his intolerance with the presence of Massaia. Around those dates, in Tigray, in the very domains of Yohannes, the Lazarist missionaries lived and worked. They were the successors of Justine di Jacobis. Even though more than once they were disturbed and humiliated, they were allowed to stay. Why were they allowed and Massaia was not? The answer is not difficult; because Yohannes saw in Massaia a key element in the relationships of the King of Shoa with the European powers. In an extremely divided Ethiopia in the 19th century, the one with a bigger support from European governments would be the most powerful. The European governments were in turn eager to mingle in Ethiopian matters.

Massaia’s expulsion and the expulsion of three Capuchin missionaries who were part of his group took place in 1879. Called to the camp of Yohannes in Debre Tabor, the Emperor welcomed them with calculated coldness and, without even looking at them, he sentenced: “You will spend the rainy season in a nearby village; later on I will let you know when you shall leave for your country.” They

Next to King Menelik: Starting Over

At the beginning of 1868 Massaia was back in Ethiopia, in the domain of Menelik, King of Shoa. Menelik was then 24 years old and was one of the three contending the fight for the vacant imperial title upon Tewodros' death. However, he had to submit to the greater power of his rival Kassa, Prince of Tigray, who was crowned Emperor under the name Yohannes IV. Menelik had to wait for his moment and, meanwhile, look to the European powers for support. And who better for that purpose than the newly arrived Massaia? His destination was the missions in Wollega and Kaffa where he had worked years before. However, from the first interview with the King, he understood that the King would never allow him to continue his travels. By his own will or by force, he had to get used to the new situation. Massaia would live another ten years of missionary work close to the King of Shoa as a sort of informal advisor regarding foreign politics, but at the same time he engaged in an intense apostolic work in the area. Around Ankober, the small Catholic communities of Gilogow, Eshia and Rasa were established. And also 150 kilometres to the southwest, in some forest inhabited by the Oromo, the community of Berbersa was born, exactly where, years later, Menelik would found his new capital, Addis Abeba. When in 1879 Massaia was expelled, the few Catholics under persecution would opt for returning to the orthodoxy or emigrating to other areas of the Empire. Such scattering would originate new Catholic communities in more faraway places.

than a simple box built 200 or 300 years ago and that the Ten Commandments in it are nothing more than pieces of stone or wood from a relatively recent time. Well, many believers of the Ethiopian Church would take fright, but once recovered, they would realize that they can still peacefully believe in the God of the Ark. The Ark could even continue to be venerated as it is now, not as a physical artifact, but as a symbol and a sign of the presence of God among Ethiopians. However important the identity of the Ark may be, is not a dogma of Christian Faith. Faith tells us that God is present in life and in Ethiopian history, as it is in the life and history of every other nation.

The orders from Rome were to reunite with de Jacobis to consecrate him bishop. The ceremony was carried out under circumstances that were not exactly canonical. It happened at night, on an island in Massawa. At the shack that hosted them, two wooden boxes were used as an altar and two others as chairs. The only stuff, a stick coated with cloth, was passed alternatively from the ordaining bishop to the ordained. The only witness, the brother Pascual da Duna, kept watch, with two guns at his waist, for the possible arrival of robbers. At dawn, the two bishops went their separate ways. Massaia made another attempt and again tried to force the path towards the Vicariate. He crossed the regions of Tigray and Gonder in disguise, but close to his destination, he was discovered and arrested by the army of Ras Ali, Lord of Gonder, and forced to retrace his steps. In 1850, four years after he had left Europe, he was back in his homeland, having failed to reach his Oromo Vicariate.

With tireless determination, a year later he set out on his way again, this time taking the Sudanese route, disguised as a merchant and under the alias of Giorgio Bartorelli. He entered Ethiopia by the bordering city of Metemma and from there he reached the Blue Nile, which he crossed by holding on to two inflated wineskins. After 20 months traveling, he finally entered the Oromo kingdom, his Promised Land. He himself tells us that he sang: "*Haec requies in aeternum*," "You shall rest here forever," moved, upon kissing the ground. But Massaia was far from resting there forever; he was going to spend 10 years of intense apostolic mission. When he left the country in 1863, there was a young church solidly settled in Wollega and Kaffa, two broad regions in western Ethiopia.

this people .. Eastern people will never be Catholic in their hearts unless they are Latin or sons of Latins, born and educated in the Latin rite.” Massaia was, however, wise and flexible enough and he did not hesitate to incorporate many elements from the Ethiopian into the Latin rite. De Jacobis had done it the other way around: he incorporated Latin features into the Ethiopian rite.

Regarding their apostolic work, both missionaries had to deal with persecutions and imprisonments, and they both carried them like a sweet weight. Both adopted the same external appearance, dressing like Ethiopian monks. Both loved the people assigned to them and were willing to give their lives for them. However, there are differences that, although difficult to formulate, are obvious. While de Jacobis was the “brother” who acts like a brother, Massaia was the “father,” the benefactor, who sometimes seems to exaggerate the description of the misery of his sons to highlight his charity work. Massaia, besides, unfolded all the features of his versatile personality. He wrote for European scientific magazines about ethnography, geography and other topics. He used his medical knowledge widely. The Oromo called him Abuna Fentata, or “Father Smallpox,” because he saved the population from a smallpox epidemic using a risky method of injecting pus from sick people into healthy ones.

How hard it is to reach the Promised Land!

Guglielmo Massaia, a Capuchin from Piedmont, was 37 years old when in 1846 he was consecrated Bishop of the Apostolic Vicariate of the Oromo and sent to Ethiopia.

CHAPTER 4

LALIBELA, A KING AND A CITY

King Lalibela was immortalized after commissioning the construction of eleven rock-hewn churches. He lived during the 13th century. In the eyes of the dynasty which followed, he was an illiterate, a leader of a barbarian people, a barbarian himself and a usurper. In the collective memory of the people, however, he was a Saint, and his time was considered to be a time of Christian fervour and prosperity. Everyone who has been able to visit and contemplate his eleven churches will unquestionably include them among the greatest Wonders of the World. This view has been also recognized by UNESCO, which declared them a World Heritage Site in 1979.

Adadi Mariam, the church located 60 kilometres southwest of Addis Abeba, is a relatively well-known place for the residents of the capital. Dozens of buses go there every year, bringing thousands of devotees, who visit the church on the patron saint’s festival. Even for the foreigners living in Addis Abeba, a stroll in Adadi Mariam could be a reasonably attractive Sunday day-trip. Its proximity to the city allows visitors to get up late, visit the old church and return home stress-free. Be aware, though, that what you can see in Adadi Mariam could be disappointing, were it not for the story behind

it and for its connection with a far more memorable place located about 700 kilometres away. Adadi Mariam is a monolithic church excavated out of living rock. It does not protrude from the ground, so you do not notice its existence until you come upon a narrow ditch, five or six meters deep, which isolates a rectangular block of rocky soil from its surroundings. This block has been emptied from the inside and colons have been chiselled out to form naves and capitals and give place to doors, windows and even an external colonnade.

Adadi Mariam is an obviously rustic reproduction of the type of church that it represents. The ditch is irregular and unfinished in some parts. The “doors” giving access to the first entrance hall could better be referred to as holes. The outer colonnade, built with the clear purpose of encompassing the whole church, was completed only on one of the four sides. This also prevented the completion of the windows. The inside of the church would have been in total darkness were it not for the many candles that devotees light with admirable frequency. Finally, the roof has not been touched; it is covered by weeds and a type of tree with whitish leaves, similar to those of an olive tree, which in the Oromo language is called *adadi* (white), hence the name of the church.

A Monk and a King

The relevance of Adadi Mariam does not lie, as has been mentioned, in the church itself, but in its allusion to another time, to another place and to the person whom the stone has immortalized: King Lalibela. I am in my first

reports of Father Giuseppe Sapeto and the French explorer Antoine d’Abbadie about the readiness of the Abyssinians to accept Catholicism. The division in two vicariates was due to one main reason: the one in Abyssinia coincided with the territories belonging to the Empire and the inhabitants were almost all orthodox Christian; the Vicariate of the Oromo, however, stretched along the southern half of current Ethiopia, inhabited mostly by the Oromo tribes. They were organized in small independent kingdoms and they mostly practised traditional religions. Menelik II submitted them to the Empire at the end of the 19th century.

There are many things in common between the two missionaries chosen for the two Vicariates. However, there were also important differences. The insertion of de Jacobis in the environment where he worked was radical and prophetic, not so much the fruit of methodological considerations as evangelical sensitivity. Hence, he was often misunderstood. Massaia, even if innovative, paid a higher tribute to the ideas of his time. He conceived the mission as evangelization, but also as civilization, understood as the imposition of western culture, without which evangelization, according to him, would be incomplete. While de Jacobis barely “touched”—and reluctantly—politics, Massaia seemed to be at ease with it. And, while de Jacobis did not hesitate to fully adopt the Ethiopian rite, Massaia opted for the Latin. He justified the decision by saying that, contrary to de Jacobis, he worked among followers of traditional religions. But the real reason was his difficulty to value the Oriental Churches and their rites. “Eastern rites,” he affirmed shockingly, “are an eternal monument to the obstinacy of



Cardinal Massaia



The church of St George in Lalibela

visit to the church and an old priest is about to explain, surely for the nth time, the history of the temple. He is shaking a piece of paper in his hands that repeated use has reduced to such a dilapidated state that it can hardly be read. No matter; because the content of the paper has been engraved in the memory of the priest. It only serves

to imbue his words with authority, by showing that he is transmitting the story as it was, in turn, transmitted to him, without changing a single word.

It was around the end of the 12th century—the old priest begins his history—when the Egyptian monk Gebre Menfes Kidus (literally, the Servant of the Holy Spirit) came to Roha, the capital of the Ethiopian Empire during the Zagwe Dynasty. At that time, the greatest of the aforementioned dynasty's kings, Lalibela, sat upon the throne. Lalibela received the monk with great respect and he accompanied the King for a certain time. According to popular tradition, Gebre Menfes Kidus was, by then, an extraordinary man. In the deserts of Egypt, he had lived with lions and tigers and the hair of his body had grown so much that he could use it as his clothing. His only man-made attire was a belt that was tied around his hairy waist in such a way that it resembled a tunic.

After a long stay in the town of Roha, later called Lalibela, the King and monk set off for the southern lands. They roamed the mountains near the place that 700 years later would become the city of Addis Abeba. Continuing further south, they climbed the cone-shaped Mount of Zukwala and bathed in the peaceful waters of the lake which was in ancient times the burning mouth of a volcano. Gebre Menfes Kidus chose that site as his final home, but for some time he still wandered with the King in the surrounding area. One day, a couple of days' journey from the west of Zukwala, the monk said to the King: "Build a church for me here like the ones you built in your city and return home without delay, because the time you have left is short." The King began the construction of

when he received from Rome a no to his question did he decide to endorse the Embassy of Negussie before the French court. It did not help very much. The Embassy was welcomed in France with all honours. That was not enough to save Negussie, but rather military help and that never materialized. Tewodros appeared in Tigray in December 1860 and he needed little time to crush the rebel. Negussie was made prisoner and condemned to a horrible death by starvation.

God spared Justine the pain of having to be present at those events. Months before, exhausted and ill, he was coming back from Massawa to the Ethiopian plateau. Perhaps he was thinking about the first time he had made that trip 21 years before and about the doubts he had had at the time: expulsion or stoning? Which one? Neither of them. On the contrary, he had reaped a harvest both in fruits and sufferings. On the second day of his trip, sitting under a rock, he called on all the members of the parade around him and told them: "I have three hours of life left." After giving them his last pieces of advice, he covered his face with his shama and waited placidly for his end. It was July 31st, 1860. His Superior General, who had been so hard with him on many occasions, admitted that a saint had died. He was canonized on October 26th, 1975.

Guglielmo Massaia and the Vicariate of the Oromo

The reasons why Propaganda Fide had to erect the Apostolic Vicariate of the Oromo (Galla in the sources) in 1846 were the same they had had for creating the Vicariate of Abyssinia eight years back: the optimistic

the border with Sudan. They carried a letter for Metemma's governor, written by Salama and signed by Tewodros, which was equal to a death sentence: "I am sending you someone called Yakob; make sure he does not escape or return to his land." However, the soldiers, who were Sudanese and were not supposed to go back to Gonder, tore up the letter and threw the pieces into the river in the presence of Abuna Yakob. "We know you suffer because of justice," they said, setting him free. The only thing Justine thought of and did was to go back to follow closely the fate of the prisoners. From a refuge not far from Gonder, he managed to send them messages, encouraging them to keep their faith alive.

The misery of politics

In the meantime, in the Tigray region, a nephew of Ras Wubie called Negussie had rebelled against Tewodros. His possibilities to resist the Emperor were low, unless he counted on the help of a European power. Negussie set his eyes on France and thought of de Jacobis as his intermediary. It was almost normal that de Jacobis, whose wounds were still fresh after Gebre Mikael's death, was eager to support before the French court the case of Negussie. It was a difficult and tempting moment. How could religion and politics be separated under such circumstances, when Negussie promised to protect Catholicism if he were able to shake off Tewodros? None of the missionary colleagues in Ethiopia, Lazarists or Capuchins, would have had major doubts, but he had them. At this point, as at many others, his spiritual intuition placed him ahead of his time. Only



Roof of the church of St George



Orthodox priest showing a manuscript in Lalibela

Adadi Mariam and then hurried to his homeland, where he died and was buried in Golgotha, one of the eleven churches he built in the city of Roha.

Here concludes the story of the old priest from Adadi, one which can be read in the Acts (*gedle*) of the Abuna Gebre Menfes Kedus, written around two centuries after the events narrated in them occurred.

A City and its Churches

The eleven churches of Roha are monuments of which humanity can be proud. Francisco Álvares, the chaplain of the Portuguese Embassy, who stayed in Ethiopia between 1520 and 1526, was the first European to visit and write about them. His first reaction was that there was no place like this anywhere in the world, and after a detailed description of each church, he concludes:

“I weary of writing more about these buildings, because it seems to me that I shall not be believed if I write more, and because, regarding what I have already written, they may blame me for untruth. Therefore, I swear by God, in Whose power I am, that all I have written is the truth, and that there is much more than what I have written.”

The Lalibela churches, as they came to be called, replacing the old name of Roha, are not buildings made using stone, or wood, or any other type of material. They are, rather, structures hewn out of a single stone, a large block of solid rock separated from the rest of the mountain by man-made trenches of eight, ten or twelve meters deep. Once a free-standing block of rock has been isolated, it is on to the business of drilling it and hollowing it out

not hidden from Justine and he wanted to be close to his small congregation at the moment of the persecution that approached inexorably. The efforts local authorities made to convince him to leave the city were in vain. On July 4th, 1954 the alliance between the two new powers took place. Salama took advantage of the occasion to ask the emperor for the immediate imprisonment of Justine and his disciples.

“If you answer to me before God, I am even willing to kill them,” said Tewodros.

“Oh, no,” the Abuna replied surprised. “We cannot kill a man like this. Never has a Christian observed the advice and laws of the Gospel as perfectly as he has.”

On July 5th, all religious groups in Gonder were required to publicly swear the declaration of faith drafted by Salama. They all took the oath. Only the small Catholic group did not, committing the crime of high treason. The consequences did not take long to come: for Justine, expulsion from the country; for his five colleagues, prison and torture. The Abuna showed no mercy to Gebre Mikael, the moral leader of the group. Abuna and emperor competed in cruelty. It was all in vain: Gebre Mikael was a rock. After months of continuous flagellations, he was forced to follow, dragging his chains, the Emperor’s army. One day a guard approached Tewodros to tell him that the prisoner was so weak that he could not even carry the chains. “If you take them off, you will have to carry them,” answered Tewodros. And the guard did so. During one of the troop’s breaks, he was put to rest under a tree and in that position his long agony ended. It was August 29th, 1955.

Justine’s fate was, for once, less cruel. His expulsion was ordered and some soldiers escorted him to Metemma, on

not demand of the new candidates, whom he himself trained, an academic level up to European standards. He would take them with him to a kind of mobile seminary and he attempted to instil in them sincere piety and a great fidelity to the Church and the Pope. Neither the superiors of his congregation nor the majority of his missionary companions agreed to his methods. Upon his death, Justine was troubled with the thought that the priests he educated would not be treated with the same affection and respect with which he had treated them.

The cane against the hurricane

Although diminished in power and led by an emperor—at that time Yohannes III—who was merely a symbolic figure, Gonder continued to be the political and cultural capital of the Empire. Justine had first sent Gebre Mikael to pave the way for his visit, and there he was when they were caught by surprise by the events which would dramatically influence both the life of the emerging Catholic mission and the fate of the whole Empire. Kassa, the charismatic adventurer, after defeating the rulers of the different provinces, had just proclaimed himself Emperor under the name Tewodros II. His political agenda was to reunify Ethiopia after 150 years of disintegration. For Tewodros, political unity passed through religious unity: one Empire, one faith. Obviously, that was the Orthodox faith. A key element in the project was the Patriarch Abuna Salama III. Tewodros and Salama met in Gonder to agree on their mutual support. The significance that encounter had for the future of the Catholic Church was

until naves and arcades, columns and capitals, doors and windows emerge. As a whole, they are so symmetrical and so perfect, that their construction prompted later generations to say that angels, not men, were responsible for such a masterpiece.

Obviously, not all of them have achieved the same degree of perfection. Some are only partially separated from the surrounding land, and others are not separated at all, the façade being the only noticeable part from the outside. They are clustered in two groups divided by a little stream, almost always a dry riverbed, called the Jordan. The first group includes Bete Medhane Alem, Bete Maryam, Bete Mikael, Bete Meskel, Bete Denagel and Bete Golgotha; in the second we find Bete Amanuel, Bete Mercoreus, Bete Libanos and Bete Gabriel. The eleventh church is Saint George, which is located further away and does not belong to either group.

Although all follow some common architectural patterns, no two churches are alike either in their layout, their size, or their decoration. The House of the Saviour of the World, or Bete Medhane Alem, measuring 33 meters long, 23 meters wide and 11 meters high, is the largest of them all. It is surrounded by a row of columns creating a sort of corridor or external cloister. Bete Maryam Church is also rectangular. It is the most ornately decorated, with sculptures and paintings representing the main mysteries of Jesus' life. The Church of Saint George or Bete Giorgis, the most impressive, belongs to the last and most exquisite architectural period of Lalibela. It has a Greek cross layout and it measures 12 meters long by 12 meters wide and 12 meters high. Two concentric crosses are engraved on its flat roof.

Rather than trying the reader's imagination with the description of all these churches and their layouts, capitals and underground passages that connect with one another, it would be more appropriate to try to respond to a three-part question that begs to be answered: Who built so many churches, literally attached together? When? And for what purpose? We have made the assumption from the beginning that these churches can be attributed to King Lalibela, who reigned between the 12th and 13th centuries. This is what the archpriest of Adadi Mariam told us; this has been attested to widely by the Ethiopian tradition and this is the way we have accepted it.

The *Acts of Lalibela*, a literary work that appeared in the 15th century, is one that opens the way for the legend. In it, we find the story of how the holy king was carried to heaven. There he gazed on wonderful buildings and God commanded him to build similar ones in the place that He would indicate to him once returned to the earth. In the same Acts, it is claimed that, during the construction process, the angels helped the stone masons by day, while at night, when the workers were sleeping, the angels carried out twice a day's work by themselves.

Other less miraculous sources provide us with more pieces of information. The priests of Roha told Alvares that the churches had been erected by more than 4,000 Egyptian Christians who, in the time of King Lalibela, arrived in Ethiopia as a result of fleeing persecution in their country. This may have been true, but we do not give the main credit for the monuments to them, as some people do. The Ethiopians unquestionably deserve all the credit. Although foreign influences cannot be ruled out, mainly in the decorative elements, the architectural essence is local

been his impression of the Eternal City or the personality of Justine which moved him. The fact is that, after that trip, Gebre Mikael seriously thought about becoming Catholic. But neither his decision nor the steps necessary to put it into practice were hurried. When he finally decided upon it, de Jacobis made him delay it even longer. For three long months together they visited the monasteries of the country. They examined the oldest theological manuscripts. Gebre Mikael found out that some of them had been scratched and corrected; otherwise, they would have coincided with the Catholic teaching.

Gebre Mikael was welcomed into the heart of the Catholic Church in February 1844 and, up to his martyrdom, was Justine's right arm, facilitating the access to circles he would have never been able to enter. The conversion movement sped up. Priests and monks who converted to Catholicism took with them whole parishes. Because de Jacobis had adopted the Ethiopian rite, the transition was almost imperceptible. The only change was the explicit adherence to the Pope and the strong impulse to religious renovation which Justine triggered in the converted parishes.

The adoption of the Ethiopian rite was in the time of Justine an innovation that could be described as revolutionary. The Jesuit mission of the 17th century had failed mostly due to the lack of flexibility regarding the rite. Surprisingly bold was also the way the training for the priests was conceived. Guided by the same principle of respect towards the Orthodox Church, he did not see why the priests in the Orthodox Church could not continue carrying out all their priestly tasks when converting to Catholicism, even if they were married. Similarly, he did

That year he spent in Adwa would be a mere break in his life, usually characterized by a continuous pilgrimage for or against his will. What interrupted it for the first time was a proposal made by Ras Wubie, ruler of Tigray. Wubie invited him to become part of a delegation bound for Egypt to ask the Orthodox Patriarch of Alexandria for an Abuna or Patriarch for the Ethiopian Church. The proposal was so unusual that Justine needed three days to make up his mind and give an affirmative answer. In deciding, he did not wish to snub the Ras, but he also hoped to influence the Alexandrian Patriarch so that he would send an Abuna who was not hostile towards the Catholic Church. He was completely wrong. The presence of a Catholic priest in the delegation rendered even more indisposed the anti-Roman Patriarch, who chose for the Ethiopian seat someone who could hinder the Catholic mission: a 20-year-old Egyptian monk who had been educated in the Protestant school and who took the name of Salama III. He was a man with a very difficult personality. Throughout the 27 years of Patriarchy in Ethiopia, he did everything he could to destroy the newly born Catholic Church. His persecution gave the Catholic Church the first Ethiopian martyr: Blessed Gebre Mikael.

Gebre Mikael was not an unknown character to whom martyrdom and his later beatification would lift out of anonymity. Justine hardly could have settled down so quickly if it hadn't been thanks to the mediation of this monk. He was universally known and respected by the Orthodox Church because of his knowledge and honesty. The two met on the trip to Alexandria in search of the Patriarch. By Justine's will, a part of the delegation, including Gebre Mikael, continued to Rome. It may have

and can be considered a further development of Axumite Art. Indeed, the churches of Roha were not completely unique in their style as if born by magic. There are more than a hundred monolithic churches scattered throughout the country, in which we can distinguish the evolution whose culmination lies in the grand monuments of Roha. In Egypt, there are certainly rock-hewn churches, but these are never separated from the surrounding land. Most of the time, what we can see in Egypt after crossing the façade is a crude cave lacking decoration, and sometimes even an architectural blueprint.

Pilgrim City

Coming to the third part of the question concerning the purpose of the construction of these churches in the same place, we can find a relatively satisfactory answer by delving into the somewhat confusing Ethiopian tradition. Christians of that time had the desire to go, at least once in their lives, to earthly Jerusalem in order to secure eternity in the heavenly Jerusalem. King Lalibela himself had lived in Jerusalem before ascending to the throne and had experienced first-hand the dangers faced on the journey to the holy land. Hence, he came up with the idea of creating a replacement for such a pilgrimage without depriving his people of the innate grace of Jerusalem. The Roha churches were constructed to function as a symbolic alternative to going to the earthly Jerusalem as a means of attaining its heavenly counterpart. The first group of churches was to be a substitute for the earthly Jerusalem: Saint Mary's represents Getsemani; Medhane Alem, the

Tent of Meeting; the Golgotha, the Holy Sepulchre; and the Church of the Virgin Martyrs, the Christian virtues of faith and love. The second group symbolizes the heavenly Jerusalem. Saint Gabriel is the way to Heaven; Abba Libanos represents the cherub holding up the throne of God; Saint Mercurius symbolizes purgatory and hell and, finally, Saint Emmanuel, Heaven itself.

The city as a symbol of these holy sites is reaffirmed in other details as well: behind Golgotha Church is the place of the Skull and the Tomb of Adam. There is also a mountain northeast of Roha known as Tabor and the river which flows through the city, is called the Jordan. For centuries, Christians from all regions, especially the ones from the North, have flocked to and continue to flock to the city of Lalibela to celebrate Ethiopian Christmas and Easter and to visit, in turn, each of the eleven churches.

The End of one Dynasty, the beginning of another

Emperor Lalibela was venerated as a Saint by the Ethiopian Church, along with his wife Meskel Kebre and two other kings of the Zagwe Dynasty, Yemrehanna Kristos and Neakuto Leab, despite the fact that neither the clergy nor the emperors who came later had the slightest sympathy toward the monarchs belonging to the Zagwe Dynasty. They would have rather had their names fade into oblivion. However, their names and actions remained embedded in the memory of the people, such that, by the 15th century their Acts, or *Gedles*, a literary genre, typical for that time, in which legend takes precedence over the history, were written.



On top: Procesión of the Assumption at the Catholic Mission of Haro Wato (Latin Rite). Below: Celebration at the Catholic Cathedral of Addis Abeba (Ethiopian Rite) presided over by Cardinal Berhaneyesus

experience that ended tragically, leaving behind hatred towards Rome which had not yet vanished. The few missionaries that had arrived to Ethiopia after the Jesuit expulsion were either immediately expelled or killed.

Had the times changed? That question must have made the heart of the newly arrived missionary Justine de Jacobis, beat faster while he arduously climbed the steep slopes between the Port of Massawa and the city of Adwa located on the Ethiopian plateau. Which of the two alternatives would be awaiting him: expulsion or stoning? Facts will attest it was neither of these. On the contrary, Justine was going to be able to lay the foundation of a Catholic community, which today, 150 years later, venerates him as its father. Even if times were not right, he made them right. Throughout the first year, de Jacobis lived in Adwa, committed to studying the three languages he deemed necessary: Ge'ez, the liturgical language, Amharic, the language of the Court and Tigrinya, a local language of Tigray. He dressed like an Orthodox monk and led a life of extreme poverty and discretion.

First fruits, first setbacks

The presence of a white person—almost the only one—in the city of Adwa could not go unnoticed. The people in Adwa saw him praying in Orthodox churches. Soon a number of people, especially priests, enjoyed discussing religious matters with him, and so he won the sympathy of key men within the Orthodox clergy; some of them would become Catholic, and others, even if they would not, always considered him a friend.



A priest in Lalibela

In order to get a better grasp of what I have just said, let's return to Aksum. As we said earlier, Aksumite Kings had Semitic blood, since they were descendants of the southern Arabian settlers who crossed the Red Sea and intermarried with the Hamite inhabitants. Aksum, from the 7th century onwards, was in continuous decline until, around the 10th century, a Jewish adventurer called Judith sacked the city and Aksum descended into anarchy. Thus, the centre of power shifted towards the south, to the region of Lasta, a land populated by the Agaw, a Hamitic tribe devoid of Semitic blood. The reigning dynasty in this period was given the name of the Zagwe Dynasty, but when this happened, the Agaw had already fully assimilated both Christianity and the Aksumite culture, so that neither the one nor the other suffered under the Zagwe; rather, both were strengthened and consolidated. The magnificent monuments of Roha are there to bear witness to this. Nevertheless, in the eyes of the Semites, Lalibela and the other kings of the Zagwe Dynasty were nothing more than usurpers.

The year 1270 represents the end of the reign of the Zagwe and the restoration of the "legitimate" dynasty. Its first king, Yekuno Amlak, not only proclaimed himself the heir of the old emperors of Aksum, but also claimed to be a direct descendant of Menelik I, who was son of Solomon of Jerusalem and Queen of Sheba. The seat of power, however, did not return to Aksum; instead, it shifted further south to the Amhara region. This region and its people would be the ones that, in the following centuries, would dominate the political scene and impose their Semitic language, Amharic, as the official language of the Empire.

The monk of Adwa

The 19th century was a century characterized by the missionary "assault" on Africa by Catholics and Protestants. Ethiopia was one of the first beneficiaries of the enthusiasm of such conquest. The imminent reasons for this Catholic initiative were rather coincidental. A Lazarist missionary, Father Giuseppe Sapeto, arrived in Ethiopia on his own initiative in 1838, without mandate from the Holy See or from his congregation. In Adwa, his presence had a positive impact and he hurried to write a very optimistic report, to Propaganda Fide in Rome, asking that advantage be taken of the moment for evangelization purposes. That report was accompanied by another one, no less optimistic, written by the French explorer Antoine D'Abbadie, who traversed the nation around those dates. Propaganda Fide did not need to be asked twice. Using the scarce geographical knowledge they had about the country, they created the *Apostolic Vicariate of Abyssinia* and called on an Italian Lazarist to take charge of it: Father Justine de Jacobis.

It was accurate to say that the moment was favourable, mostly due to political reasons rather than religious ones. Different Ethiopian princes competed to establish contact with European powers, and they considered missionaries as a possible means to achieve that. However, the general atmosphere was far from encouraging. Above all, one must remember that the *Abyssinia* assigned to de Jacobis as a preaching field was not a land of first evangelization, but a Christian land with thousands of churches, priests, deacons and monks. It was a country which 200 years before had undergone, upon the Jesuits' arrival, a Catholic



St Justin de Jacobis

The Muslim leader, Ahmed Grañ, the famous church burner of the 16th century, was also in Lalibela. There are two versions of what happened when he saw the monumental complex. Miguel de Castanhoso, who arrived in Ethiopia in 1541, when Grañ was still unleashing his destructive fury throughout the country, tells us that Grañ “ordered his men to leave the place, since Muhammad did not want such noble buildings to be destroyed.” The Arab chronicler of Grañ, on the other hand, transmits the following story:

“Ahmed arrived at the churches called Lalibela, where the monks had gathered to die in their defence. The imam examined the churches and thought that he had never seen anything like them. The churches and the columns that supported them had been excavated in rock. There was not a single piece of wood in the whole construction... The imam called the monks and he ordered them to collect and fetch firewood. They lit the fire and, when the flames were high, Ahmed told them: ‘Now, let one of your people and one of our people enter the fire.’ He wanted to test them and see what they would do. Then the superior (of the monks) said: ‘Let it be, I will enter.’ But a woman who had taken up the monastic life stood up quickly and said: ‘The one who explains the Gospel is going to die before my eyes!’ And she threw herself into the fire. The imam shouted, ‘Get her out!’ They pulled her out immediately, but part of her face had been burned. Then they threw the objects into the fire, broke the images and looted the silver, the gold and the silk dresses they found.”

The churches, however, did not suffer any major damage.

Lalibela can be easily visited today. A tourist whose preference is speed and comfort can make the trip by plane. Whoever is willing to give up those two conditions can also go there by car. The latter will need two days to arrive if they are coming from Addis Abeba. By way of compensation for the lost time and the unavoidable discomfort, the visitor making a drive out of the journey, will see beautiful landscapes, such as the Valley of the Tekeze River, on the way, visible from the heights of the so-called Chinese road, which links Weldiya with Werota, near Lake Tana. Such a visitor will not “fall from the air” in Lalibela, but rather he will see the churches located in their geographical, human, and aesthetic context.

On this last word, aesthetics, I think it might be useful to add that the people of today have aesthetic canons that do not necessarily correlate with the beauty of the Lalibela churches. Today, we tend to associate beauty with perfection and technically exquisite works of art. A large modern building made of steel and glass could better comply with modern canons of beauty. It is not a question of having bad taste. It is simply that our palate is used to other aesthetic delicacies. The churches of Lalibela are essentially rustic and unfinished in regard to details in comparison not only with a modern building, but also with European Gothic cathedrals dating from same time. However, if these churches do not evoke aesthetic pleasure, we can at least be assured of their originality and inner harmony, and these factors are bound to elicit our admiration and amazement over and above their well visible aesthetic beauty.

CHAPTER 14

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, A LITTLE FLOCK OPEN TO DIALOGUE

*After the 16th and 17th century Jesuit Mission, the Catholic Church became extinct in Ethiopia. The current existing church dates back to the mid-19th century thanks to the evangelizing work of two important missionary figures: Justine de Jacobis and Guglielmo Massaia. Humbly dressed as an Ethiopian monk, barefoot and carrying a stick, de Jacobis (Abuna Yakob), first Vicar of the Vicariate of Abyssinia, was a brother for Ethiopians. Since 1975, he is in the catalogue of the saints of the Catholic Church. Cardinal Guglielmo Massaia, first Vicar of the Apostolic Vicariate of the Oromo (“Galla” in the sources) in Western Ethiopia, dedicated 35 long and hazardous years of his existence to the mission. His outstanding book, *My Thirty-Five Years of Mission on the Ethiopian Plateau*, holds an honoured position within missionary literature from all times. His beatification has been introduced. After a slow growth between prosecutions and difficulties of all kinds, the Catholic Church continues to be today a “small flock” (700,000 members in a population of a hundred million) which stands out above all because of its social work and openness to dialogue within a religious context that is mostly leaning towards fundamentalism.*

But, above all, these churches are impressive because they manage to transmit the faith and the Christian vision of the people who ventured to erect such buildings, and that of those who today go to them in pilgrimage. Lalibela is not a mere fossil from the past, appealing only to an increasing number of foreign tourists. The number of tourists, in fact, is a drop in the ocean compared with the throng of devotees who come to Lalibela to celebrate the great Ethiopian Christian festivals such as Christmas, Easter or the Feast of Meskel or Holy Cross. The churches of Lalibela smell of fresh candle wax brought by the pilgrims and lit in front of the images to which they have a particular devotion. The priests go back and forth extending the crosses they carry in their hands to be kissed and giving the *tsebel* (holy water) to drink to those who ask for it. We may find some of the monks looking out some of the small hewn-rock windows, reading God's Word from their old and weathered goatskin books. They normally do not get offended if a tourist asks them to pose for a photo, especially if the tourist hands them a few coins. In Lalibela we can find not only the rock-hewn churches of the past, but also the living Church of today, visible in the people with their deep faith.

their publications. Tensions with the Orthodox Church reached a pinnacle in October 2017. This was on the date when Patriarch Mathias declared this association illegal and tried to close their television programs due to their continuous criticism of the official Church, whom they accuse of allowing Protestant influence over their educational institutions.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church also took important steps forward regarding administrative organization. The number of dioceses has multiplied and different departments have been created. The government returned most of the buildings confiscated by the Derg, although not the lands. By means of good management of these buildings and the generous contributions of the worshippers, new churches, some of them luxurious and of great beauty, are being erected both in cities and further inland.

they will join the other Churches' ranks, especially the numerous Protestant Pentecostal denominations that have taken over Ethiopia in recent years.

Albeit slowly, the Ethiopian Church has also embarked on the road of renewal, as revealed in two key areas: catechism and administrative organization. The loudspeakers that every day, around five o'clock in the afternoon, deafen pedestrians who pass by an Orthodox church have become one of the most common noises in each big or small city. It is catechesis time. The preacher talks from the door of the church to the listeners scattered throughout the atrium. Most times, the preacher uses an exhortative and moralizing style without much doctrinal content. This is certainly an improvement compared to the noticeable absence of catechesis from previous times. This comes, partly, in response to the challenge posed by the many Orthodox faithful defecting to the Protestant Churches.

The main actor encouraging this catechist effort is an institution known as *Mahibere Kidusan* or The Society of Saints, initiated during the Derg's time by young Christian University students. With more than 500 centres throughout the nation, Mahibere Kidusan has become a very powerful institution within the Orthodox Church, to whose hierarchy it is often in opposition. They publish a lot of catechetical material: books, pamphlets, magazines, music and preaching cassettes. Their recordings are often played in the most unthinkable places, such as bars or stores, and their television programs are broadcast through a channel based in the USA. Mahibere Kidusan's approach is fundamentalist, hence the attacks against Catholics, Protestants or Muslims frequently displayed in

CHAPTER 5

IN SEARCH OF PRESTER JOHN

Medieval Europe was greatly captivated by a legend, according to which, far from the Muslim world, there existed a Christian Empire ruled by a priest-king called Prester John. The Portuguese went out to search for him and stumbled upon the Ethiopian Empire. They maintained close ties with the empire and, at a certain time, the Portuguese saved them from a likely disappearance at the hands of the Muslims on the coast of the Red Sea. As a witness to those feats, architecture of Portuguese influence, culminating in the acclaimed castles of Gondar, can still be found in Ethiopia.

In my mind, I am back in 1983. An area of intricate alleyways in Addis Abeba's Merkato was the kingdom of old books. Book sellers knew me due to my regular visits to their tiny shops. They knew I was interested in books on the ancient history of Ethiopia, the more ancient and obscure, the better. I did not always come across new findings, but once in a while there were nice surprises. One day, an unknown man, wandering around with a pile of books held between his arm and his chin, beckoned me over and showed me two volumes entitled: *The Prester John of the Indies*. Showing enthusiasm or interest in a book we would like to buy is encouraging the seller to double the price. "How much do you want for that?" I said

nonchalantly. “One hundred and twenty-five dollars; it’s an exceptional book,” he remarked. I was well aware of what it was, but the price seemed exorbitant and I thought we could reach an agreement. “Are you crazy, man? I’ll give you fifty.” To my astonishment, he did not insist; he turned around and left with his pile of books squeezed under his chin. He probably thought I was an invincibly ignorant person with whom haggling was not even worth his time. And so vanished my chance of owning, even if only in its English edition, one of most remarkable books ever written about Ethiopia. Its original Portuguese title is *Verdadeira informacao das terras do Preste João*. It was first edited in Lisbon in 1540 and the author, Father Francisco Alvares, was a priest at the Portuguese Embassy who arrived to the Ethiopian Imperial Court in 1520.

Towards the Kingdom of Prester John

One of the richest legends in Europe during the Middle Ages was the one about Prester John. The legend already existed in the 11th century but culminated in the 12th century thanks to a letter supposedly written by Prester John himself to Emperors Manuel I Komnenos and Frederick I of Germany. The letter narrated the existing wonders of the empire of the priest-king John: one-eyed men, one-horned animals, herbs that protected against evil, fountains that prolonged life, and so on. The King would go to war preceded by thirteen golden crosses, and each cross was followed by 10,000 soldiers on horseback and 100,000 soldiers on foot. The King confessed that

Merkoreos. The Holy Synod proposed an agreement recognizing him as Patriarch Emeritus and offering him a decent retirement within Ethiopia if he and the group of his bishop supporters returned to the unity of the Church. Either because of him or his circle of diaspora bishops and politicians opposed to the EPRDF, Abuna Merkoreos declined the offer. Only in July 2018, pushed by the winds of the new Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s reconciliation policy, both Synods ended a division that had lasted 27 years. All this reflects the close interdependence between the government and a Church that, even though it is no longer the official one of the State, still remains bound to it by ties that cannot be severed overnight.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the present times

The changes that have taken place in all walks of Ethiopian life since the 1974 revolution have caught the Orthodox Church off guard. Although it has been recovering from its first shock, it does not always succeed in measuring the size of these transformations. The political dimension is not the only concern, not even the most determining one. The main problem is that a large portion of society is no longer the same. A desire for renewal has permeated every spectrum of Ethiopian society. Will the Church be able to continue responding to its believers’ spiritual hunger using old legends held as unquestionable truths? The hearts of Ethiopians are still with “their” Church; their temples are filled as much as before. However, followers would like to find a newer spirituality and a greater biblical formation. Otherwise,

Abuna Merkoreos left for the United States. From there, alongside other bishops, he tried to reverse his resignation, claiming to have been pressured, and established a parallel Ethiopian Church abroad. Any attempted reconciliation failed. In February 2007, the Holy Synod chaired by Abuna Paulos excommunicated him and his closest collaborators. The support that Abuna Merkoreos obtained among the Ethiopians residing in the United States and Canada was rather limited. Likewise, Abuna Paulos had difficulty in being accepted by many. He was originally from Adwa, in Tigray. It so happened that Adwa was also the hometown of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. This coincidence, together with the close friendship between both of them, did not favour Paulos in the eyes of those opposing Meles and his government.

Abuna Paulos died in August 2012, a week before Meles Zenawi, when the death of Meles was already considered imminent. The Holy Synod then elected Abuna Mathias, bishop of the Ethiopian community in Jerusalem. Mathias had lived for many years in the United States, serving as Bishop of the Diaspora. Abuna Mathias bore the difficult task of updating the institution, with an emphasis on education and decent sustenance for the clergy and the monks, a duty already expected from his predecessor but that failed to become a reality. He inherited a Church full of internal tensions, whose management is proving to be extremely complicated. All this pressure led him to announce his intention to resign in November 2017, a decision that has so far not been carried out, at request of the government.

Abuna Mathias' appointment provided an ideal opportunity for a dialogue with the dissident Abuna



Le Pretejan ou Empereur des Abyssins

Priestr John, king and priest, as he was imagined in Medieval Europe

his biggest dream was to re-conquer the Holy Sepulchre and the Promised Land in its totality, in the name of Christianity. In Europe it was believed that his kingdom was located somewhere in India, east of Media and Persia. This explains the credibility attributed to the legend, for it was the secret hope that Islam could be simultaneously attacked from the east and west and thus be caught between two fronts. When explorers and missionaries started to multiply their travels to the East and could not find any trace of such a kingdom, their interest turned elsewhere, towards the Christian Empire of Ethiopia, whose king was represented by Prester John. In 1177 Pope Alexander III addressed a letter to him, calling him “John, Distinguished and Magnificent King of the Indies.” We have to go back to the end of the 15th century to discover why Alvares had the opportunity to write in situ about Prester John and his domains:

“It was the year 1487 when King John II called on Pero de Covilhao and Afonso de Payva to communicate to them that he would require their services in an endeavor of great interest for him, which was that they should go by land in order to discover two things: the first, a Christian King in the Indies, who was called Prester John; the second, whether the ocean through which the navies navigated could lead to India and transport the spices to Portugal, that otherwise had to be transported through the Red Sea or the Route of Cairo to Alexandria (...). Afonso de Payva and Pero de Covilhao offered their help to serve their King; and, after a series of detours, they arrived in Ethiopia. However, none of them ever returned to Portugal: Payva died in Cairo and Covilhao, upon arrival there (to Ethiopia), was not allowed to return”.

rulers from intervening in religious affairs, particularly in the Patriarch's election. In 1976, Theophilos, accused of being a capitalist and oppressor, was deposed by the Derg's government. Shortly after, he was imprisoned and vanished into thin air. Only in 1991, after the Derg's fall, did it come to light that he had been killed by the government in 1979.

His successor, Takla Haymanot, a gloomy monk with an ascetic reputation who lived in the south, would have never been chosen by the Church. He was imposed by the government through a sham popular vote. Upon his death in 1988, the bishops were prepared to choose the successor in accordance with the canons of the Holy Synod. “We are going to show the government that we are capable of choosing on our own,” said an Orthodox bishop at that time, as if trying to encourage himself. Neither was this possible. None of the candidates proposed by the Church proved to sit well with the political powers, which ended up imposing their own: Abuna Merkoreos, Bishop of Gondar. He had distinguished himself by his sympathy for the Derg, remaining silent in the face of the massacres that took place on a larger scale in Gondar during the “Red Terror.” During his Patriarchy, Abuna Merkorios continued to be persistently accused of working closely with the Derg.

After the Derg's downfall in 1991, large sections of the Church refused to accept Merkoreos as Patriarch. The new EPRDF government also expressed its reluctance to cooperate with him, and consequently, in 1992, he abdicated “for health reasons.” Abuna Merkoreos' resignation was accepted by the Holy Synod, which conducted the election of Abuna Paulos, Archbishop of Axum.

this. In 1929, being still the regent, he managed to get the first five Ethiopian bishops ordained, even though the Patriarch still remained Egyptian. It was not until 1951 that an Ethiopian, Abuna Basilius, was consecrated with right to succession to the Patriarchal seat, once the last foreign Abuna had died. That happened in 1959. Basilius then seized all the powers of Patriarch, including that of ordering other bishops. The agreement with Alexandria included a series of clauses intended to keep this dependence; however, these would soon become a waste of paper. After Basilius' death, which occurred in 1970, Abuna Theophilus was chosen to succeed him, regardless of the agreement with Alexandria. The Ethiopian Church was, finally, "Autocephalous," that is, independent.

Did we say independent? This concept is always relative and always to be conquered. We can be chained by many things; the fact is that we cannot notice these chains until they lie heavy upon us. Both Basilius and Theophilus were not candidates proposed by the Church, but by the Emperor. That, however, was not viewed as a lack of independence, but as the natural order of things. Was not the Emperor the heir of David and Solomon, who were, by divine will, the legitimate "Shepherds" of Israel? The problem arose when the 1974 revolution placed some "Shepherds" who were Marxists and, presumably, atheists on the throne. What would become of the unbreakable union between political and religious power? The new leaders, with manifest logic, proclaimed the separation of Church and State and reduced the Orthodox Church, at least in principle, to the rank of the rest, on an equal footing with the Catholic, Protestant or Islamic faiths. Nonetheless, that separation did not prevent the political

So writes the Portuguese Jesuit Father Emmanuel d'Almeida, who was a missionary in Ethiopia a century later, in his *Historia de Ethiopia a Alta*. He also narrates that Covilhao was welcomed kindly and treated honorably by Emperor Eskender (Alexander), who reigned between 1478 and 1494. The fact that he was not allowed to leave the nation was, according to d'Almeida, attributed to "the customs of those people." Covilhao lived close to the Court during more than thirty years and he was still alive when the Portuguese Embassy settled in Ethiopia in 1520. His knowledge of the language and local traditions were invaluable to those who had recently arrived. It is logical to think that it was Covilhao who persuaded Empress Elena to establish relationships with Portugal with both kingdoms benefitting from those ties: Ethiopia, since the Muslim Kingdom of Adal, on the coast of the Red Sea, was summoning courage and threatening the Christian Empire; Portugal, since Ethiopia could back them on their travels to India. Elena sent a representative to Portugal in 1512. The Portuguese answer took eight years to arrive; it was the previously mentioned embassy from 1520, presided by Rodrigo de Lima and whose chaplain was Francisco Alvares.

Unfortunately for the embassy, upon arrival to Ethiopia, Elena had died and a young emperor, *Lebne Dengel*, was the one to replace her. He warmly welcomed the Portuguese, but he did not believe in the need of reaching an agreement with them. He had overwhelmingly defeated the Muslims on the coast and was convinced that they would never be able to get back on their feet. *Lebne Dengel* allowed himself the privilege to play cat and mouse with the embassy. He

held them in Ethiopia for six years and when finally, the embassy was allowed to leave, no agreement had been reached.

Alvares and his book

We shall briefly interrupt the story to comment on what Father Alvares did during his six years of forced stay in Ethiopia, as well as on his personality. The first thing we shall note is that his book, *Verdadeira informacao...*, was the first book that provided Europe with “true information” about the real situation of Ethiopia, contributing to the disappearance of Prester John’s legend. Something else we should highlight is the fact that the Ethiopia Alvares knew



Bridge built by the Portuguese near the monastery of Debre Libanos

were boys and even babes in arms. To Alvares’ amazement, the Abuna explained to him that he was now very old and there was no knowing when another Abuna would arrive from Egypt once he died. Between his predecessor and him there had been a twenty-five-year interregnum, and this was not even one of the longest.

Many were the attempts, throughout history, to put an end to such an abnormal situation; nonetheless, Alexandria always managed to get away with it. It was only in the 20th century when the first steps were taken for an eventual consecration of an Ethiopian Abuna and the subsequent independence of the Ethiopian Church. It took all the skill of the great diplomat Emperor Haile Selassie to achieve



Abuna Tekle-Haimanot, Patriarch of the Orthodox Church during the DERG

the Ethiopian Church as obstinate. They might have their reasons, but, in any case, it was up to them, as guests, to adopt a tolerant attitude, something they did not show. The implications were disastrous. Hostility towards Rome increased to the extent that a paradoxical saying became commonplace: *Better Muslim than Catholic*.

Towards an Abuna or Ethiopian Patriarch

Having an Egyptian Patriarch or *Abuna* in the Ethiopian Church proved a heavy burden over the centuries. Many of them lived as strangers, without learning the language or understanding the Church's challenges. Most of the Patriarch's duties were carried out by the Emperor or the Echegue, or the head of the monks. Conferring Holy Orders was almost the only duty performed by the Abuna. That was quite a lot, since in a nation accustomed to having thousands of priests and hundreds of thousands of deacons, that function was vital.

Francisco Alvares witnessed in the 16th century how ordinations were performed during that time, and he describes them in detail. They took place nearly every day; the Abuna was continually escorted by a large crowd shouting: "My Lord, make us priests and deacons. And may God grant you a long life." The candidates were marshalled in line and were asked to read a few words out of a book. The successful aspirants, almost all of them, were stamped with a seal in ink on the right arm. Then, the Abuna, seated on a mule, laid his hands on each candidate and, when they were finished, they concelebrated mass all together. For the deacons, it was still easier. Most of them

and described was prior to the hecatomb that occurred in the mid-16th century due to the military raids of Grañ and the Oromo invasions. The Ethiopia Alvares knew was the Ethiopia that had enjoyed uninterrupted internal peace and a surprising cultural and literary blossoming during two and a half centuries. It was the Ethiopia of thousands of churches and monasteries housing manuscripts, paintings and precious objects. Wherever one looked, says Alvares, his sight could behold five or six churches aligned on the horizon.

Regarding his compatriot's work, d'Almeida says: "Everything Francisco Alvares affirms to have seen with his own eyes should be believed and credited, for he deserves that for being a sincere and truthful man. Having seen the things he says to have seen, we know that nothing contradicts what we see and hear. Nevertheless, those things he found out through others are not all true." This was not out of the ordinary. D'Almeida himself produced his work using the written material of his predecessors. However, Alvares was a pioneer.

The best-known aspect of Alvares' work, and the one which clearly differentiates him from his Jesuit compatriots of the following century, was his general tone of sympathy and capacity to show empathy towards anything Ethiopian, even though he would consider it strange and shocking. This is, in a way, explainable due to the circumstances. D'Almeida, Barradas, Mendes, and Lobo were missionaries with the task of converting the nation to Catholicism. Their judgments are those of the Catholic man who judges the heretic. Furthermore, they were *post-Tridentine*, and displayed such close-mindedness and stubbornness in

their views that in some cases, approached bigotry. Even more difficult yet was the fact that they write after being expelled, the bitterness of failure still an open wound. Alvares, on the other hand, was an optimistic *Renaissance man*, who had travelled to Ethiopia as a mere priest at the embassy, without a clear missionary task.

All in all, as the historians Jones and Monroe state, the reason behind his attitude was his character. He was a priest worried by the religious situation of the country. He asked questions and made observations, not ignoring the anti-canonical aspect of some of these practices. He immersed himself in theological discussions, confessing his own ignorance on many matters. He even put pressure on Ethiopia to unite again with Rome. He did all of that in a manner that did not bother anyone; on the contrary, he earned general esteem. The Emperor and Abuna (Patriarch) were among his most sincere friends. In relation to this, Alvares recalls and foresees the one who was to be the most relevant figure in the missionary world of the 16th and 17th century: the Jesuit Pedro Páez, of whom we will talk later on. Now it is time to continue the story where we left off.

Grañ the “left-handed” and Cristrovaio da Gama

King *Lebne Dengel* would have time to regret his disdain towards the Portuguese Embassy. Shortly after the embassy returned to its homeland, in 1526, the Muslim power on the coast rose from the ashes thanks to the great work of General Ahmad Ibn Ibrahim, known by his nickname of

this separation, or was it simply imposed? There are reasons to believe that King Kaleb and the Nine Saints were still Catholics at the beginning of the 6th century. The first reason is that Kaleb had friendly relations with Emperor Justin of Constantinople, a Catholic who did not like “heretics.” The second is that Kaleb is venerated as a saint by the Catholic Church. Assuming Kaleb was Catholic, the same should necessarily apply to the Nine Saints, as friendly collaboration would be unthinkable had they disagreed on their faith.

Since the 7th century, the Catholic Patriarch disappeared in Egypt so the Ethiopian Patriarch had necessarily to be sent by the Monophysite Patriarch. Therefore, it was only a matter of time before hatred towards Rome and the Chalcedonian doctrine professed in the Mother Church would influence the Daughter Church. Remnants of the caustic Alexandrian language appeared in Ethiopian books. Chalcedon was called the “Council of Fools”; and Pope Leo, author of the formula approved in that Council, was nicknamed *erkus* (dirty, cursed) Leo.

Unfortunately, Alexandria is not the only one responsible for the prejudices harboured today against Rome by the Ethiopian Church. The ill-fated contact they had with the Catholic missionaries also added to these. When, at the beginning of the 16th century, the chaplain to the Portuguese Embassy, Francisco Alvares, arrived in Ethiopia, he was still able to discuss matters of faith with the clergy in an atmosphere of mutual respect and admiration. That atmosphere was ruined after the failed missionary enterprise of the following century. The Catholic missionaries who carried out the mission branded

The fact that this humiliating canon is false is easy to prove. The Ethiopian Church did not yet exist at the time of the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. Therefore, it is unlikely that that Council could legislate on it. This canon was probably the invention of an Alexandrian patriarch of the 7th century who, fraudulently, attributed it to Nicaea.

The Council of Chalcedon endorsed the doctrine of Pope Leo I according to which in Christ there are two natures, divine and human, and a single divine person. This declaration was aimed at excluding the heresy of Eutyches who avowed a single nature in Christ (the divine), as well as Nestorius' assertion of the existence of two persons in Christ. The issue was that for the Alexandrians, whose doctrine was based on other philosophical concepts, acknowledging two natures in Christ would mean accepting the existence of two persons. That is the reason why they rejected the Council's definitions, even though they continued agreeing on the Council's essence, namely, that Christ is true God and true man. The two factions returned home irreparably divided. The Alexandrians accused the others of being Nestorian and the latter labelled the Alexandrians as Monophysites, while they were neither one nor the other. Behind the theological disagreements, there were old antagonisms of a political and cultural nature.

Since the Alexandrian Church was its sole connection with Christianity, Ethiopia remained separated from Rome, playing no part in that schism. However, did this happen immediately? In Alexandria, there were still two Patriarchs up until the 7th century, one Catholic and another Monophysite. Which of them sent the Patriarchs to Ethiopia? Did Ethiopia consciously and willingly accept

Grañ, "the left-handed one." The city of Harar became the center of his restored power. In the years from 1529 to 1543, every province of the Christian Empire fell into the hands of the dreadful warrior, who burnt churches and monasteries, slit thousands of Christians' throats and forced those who did not want to suffer the same fate to convert to Islam. The Emperor, according to Ethiopian history, "roamed from one desert to other, suffering from hunger, thirst, cold and complete abandonment." He finally sought refuge in the monastery-fortress of Debre Damo where he died in 1540 as a fugitive, convinced of the disappearance of his empire. Shortly before dying, he had commanded doctor Joao Bermudes to seek help in Portugal. Joao Bermudes was a member of the embassy in 1520 and for unclear reasons, stayed in Ethiopia. Portugal launched a military expedition composed of 400 men under the command of Cristovao da Gama, son of the great sailor Vasco da Gama. The expedition arrived at the Port of *Massawa* in July 1541 and undertook its epic travel across the Ethiopian plateau. The expedition was hailed as a savior the world over.

The first skirmish against the army of Grañ took place in Amba Sanet, not far from Aksum, the old capital of the Ethiopian Empire. None of the 1,500 men of the Muslim garrison escaped alive. The Portuguese front, however, suffered only eight casualties. Two more battles were clearly in favor of Gama's army. As reported by Ethiopian history, "The sons of Tubal (the Portuguese) came up from the sea. They were dauntless and courageous, thirsty for war like wolves, hungry to kill like lions." However, the fourth battle was fatal for the Portuguese. More than 200

men lost their lives. Their own leader, Cristovao da Gama, was injured and held prisoner. He was taken to Grañ, who humiliated and tortured him ignominiously before beheading him. At that time Da Gama was considered by both Ethiopians and Portuguese as the archetype of a Christian gentleman who fought for his faith, covered himself with glory, and died professing the same faith, before obscure ambitions could leave a mark on him. Eighty years later, the Patriarch Afonso Mendes would attempt in vain to locate his remains, hoping, although not very realistically, for a possible process of beatification.

The survivors of the expedition continued their travels hazardously until they were reunited with the paltry army of the new Emperor Claudius, a young 18-year-old boy, son of Lebne Dengel. The final battle against the Muslims took place on February 22nd, 1543 in the proximity of Lake Tana, in Wayna Daga. Grañ was shot down at the start of the battle by a Portuguese soldier. His army, without a leader, was literally exterminated. The Muslims of the coast would never again endanger Christian Ethiopia.

Builders of castles

None of the 150 Portuguese survivors of the battles against Grañ would ever return to their homeland. They married Ethiopian women. They, as well as their children, and their children's children, established a specialized army which, following direct orders from Portugal, would always fight on the side of those who would uphold the imperial title. They knew who to stand by among the



Celebration of the Timket or Baptism of the Lord in Addis Abeba

Chalcedon and its implications

I am not referring to any city in Ethiopia bearing that name; there is none. I am talking about the ancient city near Constantinople, where the Fourth General Council of the Church was held in the year 451 AD. There is no record that the Ethiopian Church sent any representatives to that Council and it is even likely that they did not hear about it until many years after its celebration. However, the events that took place there would have a critical impact on it. The Ethiopian Church was born united to Rome. This is not surprising, since in the middle of the 4th century, at the time of its birth, the big schisms dividing the one Church of Christ had yet to occur. Saint Frumentius, its founder, was in communion with Rome, as was St. Athanasius of Alexandria, who consecrated him as bishop. After Saint Frumentius, Ethiopia remained dependent on Alexandria as a daughter Church. Over time, the Mother Church would assume abusive rights. These include the election of only one bishop for Ethiopia, the Patriarch, who had to be of Egyptian origin. To this effect, the Mother Church forged a canon ascribed to the Council of Nicaea, which said verbatim:

For the Ethiopians, a Patriarch shall not be appointed among their learned men, nor can they appoint one by their own will. Their Patriarch is subject to the Patriarch of Alexandria, who is entitled to appoint over them a (Egyptian) Patriarch who hails from his region and is under his jurisdiction. Whoever will be elected as Metropolitan (that is, Patriarch of Ethiopia) is not permitted to consecrate bishops. He shall only be honoured with the name of Patriarch, but shall not have the powers of the Patriarch.

complicated mess of uprisings, proclaimed and deposed emperors, and never-ending internal wars they were forced to witness. They were not always treated with the same consideration by Ethiopian kings. Claudius acknowledged the services they rendered and gave them lands to be able to live decorously. However, Claudius' successor, Minas, humiliated them, taking away their lands once cultivated and giving them barren land exposed to Muslim attacks. With Sertse Dengel in power, and above all with Susenyos, they profited from a more privileged position.

The Portuguese were also specialists in construction work. The bridge over the Blue Nile, in the proximity of the *Tisat Falls*, another bridge close to *Debre Libanos*, erected amidst an impressive landscape, and some other construction work scattered throughout the country, keep alive among Ethiopians the memory of those sons of Tubal, who in one of the key times of its history saved the Empire from disappearing. Fasil (1632-1667), son of Susenyos, required their services in the construction of his castle in the newly founded capital city of Gondar, even though it is not easy to assess how much the Portuguese really contributed to this construction. *Fasil (or Fasilides)*, the man who isolated Ethiopia, severing its communications with the West, was the one who decided to put an end to the relationship with the Portuguese, which until that time had been maintained with the old metropolis. He abolished all the privileges that, as a special community, the Portuguese had enjoyed. Cut off from their roots and mestizos for various generations, they were easily absorbed by the local population.

Besides the bridges, the castles and the blood that runs through Ethiopian veins, the imprint of the Portuguese on

Prester Juan's nation is still alive in some words that, once corrupted, became part of the local language. So *bertukán*, which means 'orange' in Amharic, is supposed to be the deformation of the word 'Portugal,' maybe because it was upon the arrival of the Portuguese that Ethiopians came across that fruit. What a 'sweet' way to be remembered by a nation.

Only priests have access to the latter. The communion is not the main religious practice for the members of the Church. From puberty to old age, even the most devout they stop receiving it since they consider themselves officially impure. Fasting is the most deeply rooted tradition in Ethiopian spirituality. Mediocre Christians will stop practicing any other religious act, but they will still keep fasting as an indissoluble bond between them and their Christian faith. And this is not a very easy observance, since throughout the year most days are fast days: 250 fast days for priests and monks and 180 fast days for the rest of the faithful, to be exact.

We could continue describing Ethiopian Church characteristics; however, there are other more substantial issues awaiting an answer. Why does this Church, born sometime in the 4th century and without having any name other than being part of the one Church of Christ, today define itself with so many descriptors? Indeed, it is called "Coptic" because of its rite, which it inherited from the Alexandrian Church, although now the Ethiopian Church does not want to use the term. It is "non-Chalcedonian," because it did not accept that General Council of the Church. It is "Monophysite," since it holds that Christ has only of one physis or nature. It is "Tewahedo" (united, composed), because this one nature of Christ is neither only divine nor only human but composed of both. The Ethiopian Church is "Orthodox" along with all the Eastern Churches separated from Rome. It is "Autocephalous" as it is not subject to any other Church. It is "Ethiopian" and it was the religion of the State until Emperor Haile Selassie's fall. These are the many labels which will be made clearer throughout this story.

powerful loudspeakers. Mass begins at sunrise and lasts several hours, maybe three, maybe four or more, depending on the relevance of the festivity they are celebrating. The beginning of the service is not what establishes the believers' time of arrival, nor is the end of the mass what marks their return home. The faithful do not go to church to "hear mass." Most do not even enter the church. They stay in the atrium, praying and discussing different issues. They give alms to the poor who line up along the way. They hear the sermon delivered by a priest from the stairway. They devoutly kiss the outer wall of the church, pray before the Virgin or some saint, and finally return to their homes. They went to "kiss" (the walls). This expression is comparable to what a Catholic would call "hear mass." Besides priests, deacons and singers, only a small group of people will go inside the church to follow the celebration from start to finish and to receive Communion.

What is described above is just one of the many practices that distinguish the Ethiopian Church from any other, whether Western or Eastern. Isolated from the rest of Christian world for centuries, it sought in the Old Testament the inspiration to complement what it could not obtain from the practice of other Churches. Even the design of the building of worship is, in many details, reminiscent of the Temple of Jerusalem. The Ethiopian churches are normally octagonal or circular in layout. They consist of three enclosures separated by another three concentric walls. The outermost enclosure is the *k'ane mahlet*, or place of the singers; the one in the middle is called the *keddest* (the Saint), which is used for communion; the innermost is the *mak'das* or the Holy of Holies, which contains the Ark of the Covenant and a copy of the Tables of the Law.

CHAPTER 6

PEDRO PÁEZ, MISSIONARY AND BUILDER

The Christian empire of Prester John, separated from the Church of Rome since the 5th century, was about to return to Catholic unity in the 17th century thanks to the missionary initiative of the Portuguese and Spanish Jesuits. In this mission, Father Pedro Páez, a Castilian based in Portugal, deserves a special place. With his sensitivity and apostolic tact, he managed to convert two emperors to Catholicism. This difficult mission failed, largely due to the lack of tact from some of his successors. The inheritance of these events is the rejection of Catholicism that prevails in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church up to the present day.

When I visited the city of Gondar for the first time in 1985, it looked sad and impoverished. What was once the arrogant capital of the Empire had succumbed to the same fate as Axum, fading into oblivion. Its inhabitants had at the same time a proud and shameful demeanour like that of long-forgotten knights. Fortunately, I have visited Gondar several times since 2008 and have found it renovated, with restoration work in every corner. Founded by the Emperor Fasilides around 1635, the city was embellished by him and his successive emperors with splendid castles, churches and baths. During the two

hundred years that Gondar was an imperial residence, it knew both the relative greatness of its first kings and the decadence of its last ones, not to mention the disgraceful intrigue in their royal mansions. In the middle of the 19th century, Tewodros, enraged at the reluctance of the Gondar people—who could not pardon him for not being a descendent of the Solomonic dynasty—to accept him as Emperor, burned the city down. Gondar would never again be the capital of the Empire.

Although Gondar came into being after the events we will refer to now, it has, however, a close relationship with its protagonists, including with our main protagonist Father Páez, even if he died 13 years before the foundation of the city. Indeed, he tells us in his book *History of Ethiopia* how, one day, Emperor Susenyos took him to a variety of locations in order to find out which one Páez considered most suitable to found a city. Páez rejected them all and, instead, pointed out one that he chose by himself. While he does not provide us the name of the place, the whole description fits with the location of Gondar. Susenyos never carried out his founding project, but his son Fasilides did.

Pedro Páez

Who was this man considered by all historians as the most capable, discreet, and successful of all the Jesuits who staged the mission of Ethiopia in the 16th and 17th centuries? Pedro Páez Xaramillo was born in 1564 in Olmeda de la Cebolla, a town not far from Madrid, Spain, known today as Olmeda de las Fuentes. Being a young student in Coimbra, he joined the Society of Jesus. His

CHAPTER 13

ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH, THE OLD AND THE NEW DAYS

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church boasts among its believers 45 per cent of the nearly one hundred million inhabitants that populate the country. Originally, Ethiopia was in communion with Rome, as was the Coptic Church of Alexandria, on which the Ethiopian Church depended. At the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD), Alexandria split from Rome, taking Ethiopia along with it. Surrounded by Muslims and isolated for centuries from the rest of Christendom, the Ethiopian Church developed very original ways of spirituality and liturgical life. Deeply attached to its old traditions, it is now struggling to adapt to the current changes in society and the challenge posed by the rapid spread of other Christian groups, especially the Pentecostal Protestant Churches.

At dawn, on any festive day, a stream of people flows quietly through every street, road or path leading to every hill where an Orthodox church rises up. Devotees never get up early enough to find the church's doors closed, since priests and *debteras* (singers) have already preceded them. At one, two, three, or four o'clock in the morning, they have already broken the quiet of the night with their monotonous chants, magnified by

period as a Jesuit student coincided with a time of great missionary expansion of the Society: everyone wanted to go to India, to China, to Japan. Páez also expressed this desire in a letter to the Father General. He mentioned as a potential destination China or Japan, “but I am willing,” he added, “to go to any of the other places that your reverence may send me, even though I feel that I lack the skills required for such a mission.”

The answer to his letter was immediate. His request was made in 1587 and, a year later, with his theological studies barely initiated, he was already leaving for India



Castel of Fasil, the oldest and biggest of all the Gondar castels

with a provisional destination. In 1589 he was definitively assigned to Ethiopia. This mission was considered so difficult that the superiors, contrary to their normal course of action, did not assign anyone to it without having first asked for their explicit approval. Páez did not think twice about it; he had made up his mind, at least initially. Given the urgency of having missionaries in Ethiopia, Páez immediately received all the Holy Orders, including the priesthood, although he had only attended the first year in theology studies. He left with Father Antonio Monserrate, an elder Spanish Jesuit with vast missionary experience.

All that haste would prove painfully futile. Seven years later, both of them returned to their departure point without having even set foot in Ethiopia, in the



View of the compound where the castles of Gondar are found

times of Aksum. When Italy invaded, at the end of the 19th century, it encountered demonstrations and armed resistance by Emperor Yohannes IV. It is not strange that, under those circumstances, Ethiopia wanted to defend what it deemed to be its own.

History is an ambiguous source of argument. How far back should one go in the past to claim certain rights? If we go back to time immemorial then, as Addis Abeba claims, Eritrea is indeed Ethiopian. If, on the contrary, we go back to the time of Italian colonization, as EPLF claims, then Eritrea is a territory to be decolonized, according to the principle of inviolability of colonial borders. This principle was established by the OAU in 1963, and it not only did not hinder Eritrea's independence, but demanded it. Or should we consider the UN decision as the base of all legality? Then, Ethiopia and Eritrea should adjust again to the federation regime.

Too much blood was spilled in the 30 years of war and too strong resentments were awakened. When, in 1991, the two guerrilla armies overthrew the Derg and installed themselves in power, the one in Asmara the other in Addis Abeba, it was widely assumed that the independence of Eritrea was non-negotiable. Isaias Afewerki agreed on delaying his proclamation until 1993 to avoid being accused of rushing. In that year a referendum was held and 99.8 per cent of the population voted in favour. Many in Ethiopia blamed Meles Zenawi and the RPDRD for accepting the secession. Also, the United States was accused of not having done anything to impede it. But neither Ethiopia under Meles nor America could have done anything more than what 30 years of war had failed to achieve. The EPRDF understood it rightly, but not the nostalgic people who dreamed, no matter what, of maintaining this impossible unity.

in Eritrea, who demanded independence. The federation came into effect in 1952 and ten years later (1962) Haile Selassie abrogated it and integrated Eritrea into Ethiopia as a simple province. Given that this outcome “was seen coming,” there had already been established, prior to that date, the ELF (Eritrean Liberation Front), a guerrilla group that initiated the armed struggle in 1961. Since then, the guerrilla war kept the Ethiopian army perpetually on the rack, despite a series of internal divisions, which led to the formation of a different group, the EPLF (*the Eritrean People's Liberation Front*).

Rivalry between both factions prevented them from taking advantage of their struggle. An Ethiopian army attack in 1978 managed to break up the ELF. Conversely, the EPLF moved towards the north just in time and thus the city of Nafka became its impregnable stronghold. In 1984 they recommenced their attacks, alternatively occupying and retreating from the cities of Agordat, Barentu and Teseney, and sporadically attacking the Port of Massawa and the capital, Asmara. From 1988 onwards, the superiority of the guerrillas became evident. The Ethiopian army had to cope with defeat after defeat, in Eritrea as well as the neighbouring Tigray.

Given the situation, one would say that the Eritrean side, the victim of Haile Selassie's plot and Ethiopian imperialism, was entirely right. The suppression of the federation by the Emperor was, without a doubt, an outrage. But there was also a reason for Ethiopia's decision, which the UN also had in mind and which did not allow for the total independence of Eritrea as it did for Libya and Somalia. It is a fact that Eritrea, or at least a part of it, had belonged to the Ethiopian Empire from the ancient

aftermath of a terrible captivity under the Turks, in which they were subjected to galleys, abject prisons and diseases that took them to the brink of death. Monserrate would never recover enough to consider returning to Ethiopia. Páez, after a long convalescence, resumed his theological studies in Goa, alternating them with pastoral work. Once completed, he could be considered a veteran. Those seven years in captivity had provided him with experience, maturity and patience, along with a perfect command of Arabic and Armenian. It was time to retry his luck. Dressed as an Armenian merchant, in April 26, 1603, he finally managed to set foot in Prester John's domains where he remained until his death.

Páez's Method

The Catholic mission in Ethiopia did not start with Páez. The launching of this mission had been the result of the Portuguese military intervention, which saved the Christian Empire from succumbing to the armies of the Muslim leader Ahmed Grañ. The Pope, the King of Portugal and even Saint Ignatius of Loyola considered that this was a unique opportunity to draw the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia to the Catholic faith. A first group of five Jesuits, including the Patriarch, Andrea de Oviedo, arrived in the country in 1557. Oviedo and his Jesuit fellows left a reputation as ascetics. However, their hasty eagerness to point out the errors of the Ethiopian Church and to criticize them from a narrow-minded Latin viewpoint failed to reap the potential fruits. Respected, but only tolerated, by the Emperor Claudius, persecuted



Map showing the places where the missionary life of Pedro Páez developed in the vicinity of Lake Tana

and humiliated by his successor Menas, accepted again by Sarsa Dengel, they lived in absolute poverty in the lands that Claudius had granted to them in Fremona, near the present city of Adwa. Once their communication with the outside world was cut by the Turks' conquest of the Red Sea, they died off, one after another, with no one to replace them. When Páez managed to enter Ethiopia, the last of them had died seven years earlier and only one

Biancheri's idea to turn Keren into an independent vicariate was not possible because De Jacobis passed away soon after and Biancheri replaced him as Vicar of Abyssinia. But his will and that of his successors to escape to Keren continued to exist, partly because of the persecutions which regularly happened in Tigray and partly due to the complexity of coming to terms with the local clergy which had been ordained by De Jacobis. Monsignor Touver, second successor to Biancheri, replaced the small church he had built in Keren with a slightly bigger Greek cross-shaped one, the best within the vicariate, which is the one I can contemplate today. It was consecrated in 1875 and dedicated to Saint Michael. From then on, Keren held a privileged position within the vicariate and it became the seat of the Major and Minor Seminaries until 1954. The main part of the Bilen people converted to Catholicism and they have contributed to the Ethiopian church with a great number of priestly and religious vocations.

The reasons behind the long Eritrean war

Which version shall explain a war that lasted 30 years? I will start by narrating the most recent origins of the conflict. Eritrea was an Italian colony from 1889 to 1941, when Italy lost it together with the Italian colonies of Libya and Somalia. However, while the latter two remained under the control of the United Nations and afterwards gained their independence, the UN took a different decision with regard to Eritrea: the federation with Ethiopia "under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian Crown"; the decision was against the majority of people

rite and the local bishops followed criteria in line with the Orthodox Church. Biancheri did not share those views and dreamed of an independent vicariate in Keren, where he could start from scratch with the liturgical rite of the Latin tradition and bishops educated according to European standards. His colleague Stella brewed even stranger dreams, fuelled by the political situation of the time.

Bilen people officially belonged to the Ethiopian Empire due to a tax they paid to the governors of Tigray. However, they were too far away to be properly ruled or protected. Egypt or the tribes they supported frequently attempted to impose Islam by force, kidnap people or steal cattle. Upon Stella's arrival in Keren in 1854, one of these raids occurred: 1,800 head of livestock were stolen and 324 women and children were to be sold as slaves. Stella did not waste time; he went to Kassala to mediate with the British Chancellor and was able to rescue the women and children.

After this intervention, his prestige grew and he did not think twice to take advantage of it for bizarre aims. He assumed that the territory was “no mans’ land,” and he thought of turning it into a Catholic colony under European power control. In the meantime, he started to behave as designated leader of the territory: “as a pasha,” as later on his bishop Bel would say. He collected a great arsenal of weapons, imposed taxes on caravans, administered justice, punished and imprisoned. He soon would abandon the priesthood to marry a Bilen woman. His attempt was ephemeral, thus no potential power supported him and the area continued to be a land of dispute between Egypt and Ethiopia.

Indian priest, Melchior de Silva, who had managed to enter dressed as a sailor in 1598, remained in the mission.

Páez's missionary activity in Ethiopia was a contemporary of three other great apostolic initiatives that were about to convert other empires to Catholicism, like that of Jerome Xavier in the Empire of the Great Mogol, Matteo Ricci in China, or Alessandro Valignano in Japan. All of them followed the directives of Saint Ignatius: first, adaptability and respect for local customs; second, predominant attention to the court. Yet, the four missions would come to nothing for one reason or another.

Apart from following Saint Ignatius' advices, Páez did not distinguish himself by any revolutionary method in the style of Matteo Ricci. What is more, his writings show that it was difficult for him to pass positive judgement on the practices of the Ethiopian Church. He probably believed he had to achieve its Latinisation if Ethiopia were to convert to Catholicism. If Páez stands out from his precursor Oviedo or his successor Afonso Mendes, this is not as much for his theological ideas as for his exquisite prudence, his humility, and his apostolic tact. He never pushed anyone indiscreetly; rather he was the one who advised prudence in the face of the hurried conversion or of the radical measures coming from the emperors whom he converted.

Qoga and the Wars of Succession

The city of Qoga—today known as Emfraz—is located in the middle of rolling hills northeast of Lake Tana, on the road that connects Addis Abeba with Gondar. Qoga

is one of the many places where the Ethiopian court was placed and from where the court moved without leaving lasting signs, except for the ruins of a castle, Guzara, on the top of a nearby hill. If we are interested in this place for this story, it is only because this was the scene of the tumultuous political events that marked the arrival of Páez in the country. At that moment, Jacob, a thirteen-year-old boy, was the ruler who, upon learning of Páez's arrival, promptly summoned him to court. However, before Páez could even set out on his way, Jacob was deposed by his uncle Za Dengel. One of the first acts of the new sovereign was to confirm Páez's invitation. After a first meeting, everyone in the court was impressed by that cheerful and captivating man. The Emperor invited him on several occasions to discuss religious matters with him. Only a few months had passed when he told Páez his intention to become a Catholic. Páez, surprised, could not do anything other than advise him to be prudent and warn him of the serious political consequences that step could entail. However, the Emperor was determined to go ahead and wrote a letter to the Pope, expressing his obedience, and another to the king of Portugal, who by then was Philip III of Spain, asking for military help to fight against the Turks.

Despite the effort made to keep them secret, the letters were discovered and triggering more tragic consequences than Páez himself could ever have imagined. A popular uprising, fuelled by the same group of Rases that had helped him to dethrone Jacob, took the life of Za Dengel. He had reigned for less than a year. From his heart, Páez grieved over the death of that man, whom he describes as “fair and educated” and who promised a great deal for



Panoramic view of Asmara, capital city of Eritrea

direction he set out. Nevertheless, he did not forget the land that stretched towards the north of Eritrea. Although Jacobis never made it to Keren, he was familiar with its surroundings. In 1843, shortly after venturing into Ethiopia, he explored the north and he came into contact with the Bogo and Bilen people, the main ethnic group settled in the region of Keren. Eventually, he himself would not carry out the pastoral mission there, but rather his two missionary colleagues: Biancheri, his assistant bishop, and Father Stella. They left *Giustino alone in Tigray so that they could settle almost permanently in Keren. They did not leave him there to conquer new communities and to preach the Catholic faith, but because they disagreed with his pastoral teachings.* De Jacobis had opted for the Ethiopian

resist the force of the attackers. How many people lost their lives in this battle from each side is something we will never know, since the political agenda of both contenders at that time was to hide the number of casualties incurred. The guerrilla fighters were not able to take over Asmara and had to move back to Keren. Thus the memory of that attack would still have been alive in my 1987 visit. The damage had never been repaired, the signs of bullets in the walls, the destroyed tanks, half-buried at random points in the city. Reconstruction? What for? The guerrilla war was still very close, hiding behind the wild summits, ready to come back.

Catholic mission: good fruits of an unsure harvest

After a long meander through the different neighbourhoods in the city, I walk up the street that leads to Saint Michael's Church. A row of young trees lines each side. In this short avenue different Catholic institutions are located: schools, nurseries, dressmaking shops, and the seminary. Everything is well taken care of, well preserved. In the background, at the top of the street, Saint Michael's church and tower rises up, symbol of a permanence which defies storms. I start to think that the church is the only thing constructed solidly within this temporary scenario, impassive in its task, regardless of how the winds blow.

Catholic presence in Keren was born out of a sort of original sin, fruit of the disagreement among missionaries. *Giustino de Jacobis* knew that the Vicariate of Abyssinia, under his command, was located in the heart of the orthodox world: Aksum, Adwa, Gondar...and in that

the Catholic cause. The following years there was a civil war between the dethroned Jacob, who returned from his exile, and a marginal character until that moment, called Susenyos. The war ended in 1607 with the victory of the latter and with Jacob's death on the battlefield.

According to Ethiopian custom, Susenyos, a direct descendant of Emperor Lebna Dengel, could be a pretender to the throne. As a child, he had been taken prisoner by the Oromo. Once rescued, he lived on the margins of the court in the possessions he had inherited from his father. After the death of Za Dengel, he saw his great opportunity, and by forming a small army, he ended up seizing power. Páez describes him as "brave, determined, versed in Ethiopian books, discreet, well-mannered and generous, used to all kinds of privations ..." From the very start, Susenyos offered his friendship to Páez and to the Jesuits who would gradually arrive. He did not conceal his sympathy for Catholicism, despite bitter resistance from the clergy, from a large part of his family, and from the nobles of the court. His response to the orthodox priests' protests was to call for theological discussions, in which he actively participated supporting the Catholic party.

In the meantime, four more missionaries had arrived in Ethiopia, two in 1604 and two in 1605. No others would come until shortly before Páez's death, almost twenty years later. The king granted them land to settle. The most important Jesuit residence was Gorgora, located on a small peninsula north of Lake Tana. Páez divided his time between this residence and the court, where the Emperor requested his presence continually. Susenyos called him not only to the court: Páez often accompanied him in military campaigns throughout the nation, where



Sources of the Nile. The spring is in the middle of the big trees.

Susenyos spent much of his time. It was during one of these campaigns that Páez had the opportunity to “see,” about 100 kilometres south of Lake Tana, the sources of the Blue Nile.

Gish Abay or the Source of the Blue Nile

What today can be contemplated in the sources, known to Ethiopians as Gish Abay, does not differ much from what Páez described four centuries ago. There is a marshy circumference so wide that “one cannot throw a stone from one side to the other, although it is easy with a sling.” When walking on this circumference, the ground trembles and slightly sinks like a soft carpet, showing that the layer underneath is full of water. Exiting the circumference,

passed through Keren and occupied it in 1875 to the great joy of the Catholic missionaries, who found Egypt ruled by Muslims more tolerant than Christian Abyssinia ruled by Yohannes IV. In 1889 Italians arrived there and also occupied it. Through Sudan, British troops led by General Platt also invaded it and evicted the Italians in 1940. The never-ending rows of crosses in both cemeteries, where the deaths of each side rest separately, make clear the price they had to pay upon changing owner.

This small Ethiopian Armageddon witnessed its last battle in 1978, as the EPLF guerrillas carried out their most serious attempt to take over the region. Keren, defended by the soldiers of the Addis Abeba government, saw gunshots coming from each mountain hideout and they could not



Eritrean children and youths ready for battle

gardens mentioned in the Italian guide, were there, but they were uninhabited and had been invaded by brambles, with broken glass and windows. Petrol stations on the corners of the most central streets had nothing to sell. However, the inhabitants of these lands were anything but negligent. There should be another reason for that abandonment. It was the war. And why did war come to this secluded potential orchard?

Keren is a crossroads: from Sudan to the Eritrean lowlands, from Asmara to Nakfa or Karora in the northern corner. Throughout history there was always someone interested in crossing it on the warpath in either direction. I will not go very far back in history to avoid getting lost; I will only focus on the last part of the 19th century. Egyptians



Cemetery in Asmara containing the armaments destroyed in the different battles



Tis Abbay falls on the Blue Nile

the water forms a small current, which, 100 kilometres to the north, becomes a considerably large stream, the largest river flowing into Lake Tana. Hence, Ethiopians regarded this river as the true source of the Nile, naming it *Guelguel Abbay* or *Little Nile*, to distinguish it from the *Abbay* or Blue Nile itself, which flows out of the lake from the southeast to join Khartoum with the White Nile.

Páez went to the sources of the Nile on April 21st, 1618. He was so aware of the significance of what he was witnessing that he was overcome by emotion. “I confess,” he wrote in his *History of Ethiopia*, “I was overjoyed to see what in ancient times King Cyrus and his son Cambyses, the great Alexander and the famous Julius Caesar had so longed to see.” Páez was the first to offer a description of the sources for his European contemporaries. Interestingly,

he never claims to have “discovered” them, but simply to have “seen” them. His description was so modest that it had rather little impact in Europe. The sources would become much more noticeable when in 1770, 152 years later, the Scottish explorer James Bruce visited them and proclaimed himself as their “discoverer.” Bruce describes the scene resembling a comic opera:

“Removing my shoes, I ran down the mountain to the small island of grass. (...) It had an altar shape (...) and I remained standing in ecstasy (...). Though a mere private Briton, I triumphed here, in my own mind, over kings and their armies. I looked at Strates waiting for me at the foot of the mountain. ‘Strates, said I, faithful squire, come and triumph with your Don Quixote at that island of Barataria, where we have most wisely and fortunately brought ourselves. Come and triumph with me over all the kings of the Earth, all their philosophers, and all their heroes’ ”.

Neither Bruce, who intended to ignore it, nor the European Africanist researchers of his time were so uniformed as not to be aware of what Páez had written. Bruce’s attempt to show off was discarded with a derisive smile by his contemporaries.

Today, the marshy circumference is considered *tsebel*; that is, holy water with healing powers. On my first visit there in 1985, I came across only a few patients. The fence that surrounded the circle was a rustic stick fence, mostly symbolic, that could be easily jumped from any point. All was simple and bucolic. No visitor, however, could enter the fenced area and drink the water without being accompanied by one of the priests of the church located on



Map of Eritrea

main square with sand and stones. No one had cleaned it. Very few people wandered in the streets; those who did were mainly soldiers. Some walked listlessly, with no great desire to reach their destination. Others guarded every crossroads, seated on sandbags to be used as cover in the event of an attack. The neighbourhood next to the mosque seemed a bit livelier. Shops were open and groups of men sat in front of the shops chatting. They wore turbans, wide trousers and white djellabas. Their clothing made us think we were in an Egyptian or Sudanese town, rather than an Ethiopian one.

I do not speak of poverty in Keren: people did not seem poor. I would rather speak of abandonment and improvisation, a flair for indifference. The detached houses with verandas surrounded by year-round flowering

ghout Ethiopia, war was perceived as a surrounding cloud. However, in these northern lands war was a tangible reality; it was an overwhelming weight.

Keren is located 90 kilometres northeast of Asmara. For half that distance, the wave-shaped road matches the rolling hills of the Eritrean lowlands. Then it drops down, twisting and winding through the narrow passes. At a certain point, it becomes clear that its M-shaped path pays tribute to the Italian engineer who designed it for Dictator Mussolini.

There are plenty of curves along the road and behind each of them a surprise could be hidden: an army truck driving up on the middle of the road or a big sinkhole produced by a mine that exploded some days, or a month, or a year ago. There, where the canyons are wide enough to be considered prairies is where Keren is located. A 1937 Italian guide describes it as follows: "A picturesque, garden city with a gentle climate that makes one's stay a pleasant one. The houses, most of them detached and with a veranda, are surrounded by year-round flowering gardens and by agricultural tobacco, coffee, and fruit farms..." It is easy to understand how foreigners, for centuries past, came here to escape the suffocating heat of Massawa. At 1,400 meters altitude, 1,000 meters lower than Asmara, and surrounded by mountains of pure and limpid granite, Keren could be an orchard.

Armageddon of many battles

However, what I saw in my 1987 visit was not a garden. A week before my visit, torrential rains had flooded the

the top of the hill. The sick people should drink the water on an empty stomach, otherwise "the water would kill them." For the purpose of preventing me from tasting the water (Páez says he tried this water and it was very soft), the priest assured me that he had seen a *farenji* (white person) not taking this seriously, drinking the water, and falling dead at the foot of the spring. Trying to test the veracity of his words would be out of place.

Some years later, when I next visited the fountains, significant changes had occurred there, not all of them to the visitor's liking. The nearby Orthodox church had intensified its control over the place. The rustic stick fence had been replaced by a high wall made of concrete and stone. Only sick people could enter the enclosed place to be "baptized" by the priests. Inside, they had built a small chapel with zinc roofing, which constituted a blatant offense to the aesthetic and ecological sense of those wishing to see pure nature in such a beautiful and historically significant place. Outside the wall surrounding the source, the entire field was crowded with sick people who were going to drink the water or to collect it with their containers. A long line of plastic containers, of all colours and sizes, waited to be filled with holy water. Visitors, especially foreigners, were immediately informed of a number of requirements to enter the place and its surroundings. Not only should they take off their shoes, even though they have to splash around in the mud, but also they should comply with other more embarrassing requirements related to ritual purity. I confess that, while the first visit left in me a bucolic taste of joy, I returned from the second visit with an unpleasant taste in my mouth.

Turning to the discovery of the sources of the Blue Nile, it should be noted that the main enigma of the Great River's springs was still to be solved. The sources of the longest branch, that of the White Nile, located thousands of kilometres further south, in the heart of the African continent, were yet to be revealed. The credit of "discovering them" was this time for the explorers Speke and Grant, who arrived at Lake Victoria in 1862, 244 years after Páez reached the sources of the Blue Nile.

It is clear that the matter of the sources of the Nile is not only a geographical issue, but also a historical one. If we raise the question about the location of the White Nile sources, the usual answer is that they are to be found on Lake Victoria's outlet, because it was considered so by Speke and Grant, while, for instance, we tend not to locate them at the birth of Kagera River, the largest of the rivers flowing into that lake. So why then are those of the Blue Nile said to be located at the source of the Little Abbay and not at Lake Tana's outlet? Merely because this position was generally agreed as Páez and other subsequent explorers introduced them for us. These are perhaps vagaries of those who write the pages of history. In any event, Páez merely followed the views of the Ethiopians themselves, who already at Páez's time believed the birth of Little Abbay to be the source of the Great Abbay. The very name given to the two rivers confirms this fact.

Gorgora

If on one side of the scale we place all the places I saw on my first trip in 1985, as I was following the steps of

CHAPTER 12

ERITREA – THE REASONS THAT LED TO WAR

Keren, Eritrean city of white houses, a communications centre since ancient times, on the periphery of the Empire, was a transit point for many people, background to thousands of battles, and cemetery to nameless heroes.

It could have become an orchard, but in later times became a scrapyard for tanks and other gutted military material. Its strategic location placed it together with Asmara at the heart of a war that, for 30 years (1961-1991) set the then region of Eritrea against the rest of Ethiopia. The outcome was independence. The dream was fulfilled...but only to aggravate the situation.

I travelled from Asmara to Keren in the last days of August 1987. On that date, covering that distance implied overcoming incredible bureaucratic obstacles. The proceedings to obtain a travel permit were long and tedious. It was necessary to apply for it, a day prior to departure, only a day. Then, it was required that the car was approved by the police in Asmara, which belonged to Derg; it was required for the driver to have a specific license for that specific car; it was required to have a list of passengers stamped by the police, and this had to be shown at countless checkpoints: it was required ... Throu-

being willing to sacrifice everything for it. For this reason, it is unlikely to see Mengistu becoming a myth.

Mengistu lives in a farm in Zimbabwe. A few years ago he was tried in absentia and sentenced first to life imprisonment. In May 2008, following the Government's appeal, the Federal Supreme Court judged him again and sentenced him to death along with 17 other members of his government. These members, after spending about twenty years in prison, are now free. A number of them have written their memoirs. Also Mengistu wrote his own, even though nothing really new is found in them. If he were extradited when years ago the EPRDF government demanded his extradition, he certainly would not be put to death. But now extradition itself is out of the question since he is a Zimbabwean citizen and enjoys the protection and confidence of the new, post-Mugabe rulers of Zimbabwe, who have him as a kind of political advisor.



Window in one of the walls of the church of Gorgora

the Castilian wanderer Pedro Páez, and on the other one we place Gorgora, the latter would outweigh all the rest. This shows how stunning is Gorgora, the name given to the hill overlooking the water in the northern centre of Lake Tana. The hill juts into the lake like a tiny peninsula, which Páez chose as the site of his residence. In 1985, unless the visitor was willing to walk for four hours, the only way to access this peninsula was by a motor boat, which could be rented in the modern city of Gorgora. A few years later, it could be reached by an off-road vehicle, though only during dry season.

In Gorgora, Páez started to erect a church and a residence. It was at the request of Emperor Susenyos and his brother, Sela Kristos, who bore all the costs. Historians have concurred in identifying the current Gorgora ruins with the construction of Páez. This is reflected in many

books, including my own in its first editions. Recent archaeological research seems to deny it. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that there Páez built the palace and church that Susenyos entrusted to him between the years 1614 and 1621. The two-story palace was built with stone and mud, without using lime. Between 1625 and 1627, when Páez had already died, these constructions were replaced by another church and palace of greater proportions. Most probably, the ruins we can see today belong to these constructions.

The builder of the new church and residence is likely to be the Spanish Brother Juan Martínez (or *Joao Martins*, in Portuguese), following the style of the Jesuit Church in Diu. Little remains of this church. During my 1985 visit, I still had the opportunity to photograph and gaze at the wide wall with reliefs and false round windows separating the church from the residence. Apparently, it collapsed in 1995. What we can see today is a shapeless pile of stones, the only exception being a section of the apse. This still resists the wear and tear of time and has been reinforced with a metal structure by a team of Spanish archaeologists from the Complutense University of Madrid, Spain. A significant portion of the wall of the residence is also remaining.

Páez completed its construction at the end of 1621. In March of the following year, the Emperor called him urgently to his court in Dankaz, where he had been living since 1618. Susenyos himself, who during his reign had favoured Catholicism and had basically made it the State religion, had not yet converted to it. His condition as a polygamist, as much as his political considerations, prevented him from doing so. Now, finally, he had made

political vision? What is true is the many deaths directly attributable to him, ranging from Aman Andom's death in 1974 to that of the 12 generals executed in 1990. These also include the deaths of Tafari Benti, Atnafu Abate, 59 high dignitaries from the Emperor's time, and that of the Emperor himself.

"We shall fight up to the last man and the last bullet," he declared at some point when his fall was imminent. The widespread fear was that, before moving out of scene, possibly by committing suicide, he would plunge the nation into the last bloodbath. His way of escaping through the back door, although not very elegant, was something to be grateful for. Behind every public figure there is always a certain halo of greatness that comes from his privileged position. Some of that greatness is reflected in Mengistu's behaviour. Examples were his commitment to work, his aversion to corruption and an innate sense of justice, although his way of exercising it was rough and arbitrary.

It comes natural to compare him with other African politicians who were his partial contemporaries. If we draw a parallel between him and Idi Amin from Uganda or the "Emperor" Jean-Bedel Bokassa from the Central African Republic, we should immediately point out that Mengistu was not that kind of person. Mengistu was not a buffoon and he never abdicated from certain standards of dignity and coherence. If, already in Ethiopia, he is compared to the Emperor Tewodros, it is obvious that Mengistu never reached Tewodros' levels of cruelty and irrationality. The issue is that Tewodros was a dreamer, a remarkable character. That explains why he went down in history as a legend. Per contra, Mengistu lacked that dimension. Few believed that he really loved Ethiopia to the extent of

preferred the word Derg to avoid pronouncing the name of someone feared and detested by almost everyone. But, in reality, they all assumed that Mengistu Haile Mariam was the embodiment of the Derg. They were quite right.

Speculations still persist about the family origins of this daring and smart military man, who made his way to the top of power by eliminating every possible competitor. His mother was a servant in the house of Dejazmach Kebede Tessema, a nobleman of rancid lineage. His father, Haile Mariam, was a working guard in the same house of the Dejazmach. However, rumours abounded that Mengistu was the son of Kebede, who, after getting the maid pregnant, would arrange her marriage with Haile Mariam to hide his affair. Mengistu was born and grew up in Kebede's compound. He did not have much contact with Kebede's legitimate son, Kassa Kebede. It is also claimed that Mengistu was a complicated and undisciplined young man, a natural leader of street gangs. Kebede, not knowing how to control him, sent him to join Holetta Military Academy. Also there he ran into troubles due to his misbehaviour. Being Dejazmach's protégé got him out of a few predicaments.

In 1989, when Mengistu visited North Korea, it is said that he told Kim-Il-Sung: "There are only three real communists left in the world: You, Fidel Castro and I." The statement can be taken as a fact; however, it is questionable whether Mengistu was really a convinced communist or if Communism was nothing more than a tool for him to exercise absolute power. Did Mengistu believe in the wisdom of the political and economic programs in which he embarked the nation or was it a way of getting ahead coming from a stubborn man lacking

up his mind. After getting rid of all his women, except one, he confessed for the first time and received communion at the hands of Páez, making solemn profession of the Catholic faith.

Páez, who had never openly urged the Emperor to take this step, but who wanted it with all his soul, returned to Gorgora. He may be reciting to himself the canticle "Nunc dimittis ..." ("Lord, now let your servant depart in peace..."). Not coincidentally, Páez was seized with a high fever on his way back home, where he died a few days later, assisted by his fellow priest, Father Fernandes. This was May 3, 1622. His final resting place, uncertain for us, was somewhere in the church he had built. Bruce, his declared enemy, said about him: "This strange man was so friendly, sympathetic and humble, that he could never talk to people, even to heretics, without turning them into friends." It goes without saying what the Emperor thought about him. It is better to remember what d'Almeida, one of the Jesuits of that time, tells us: "Every time Susenyos came to Gorgora, he used to kneel for a long time at Páez's grave, shedding plenty of tears."

Dankaz

If, during my 1985 trip, accessing Gorgora was difficult, getting to Dankaz was almost impossible. After walking for more than two hours once I had turned off the main road, people showed me, from a hill, the mountain where Dankaz was located. I still had four more hours to walk, a hike for which I had neither the time nor the strength. No one I asked for the location of Dankaz could understand

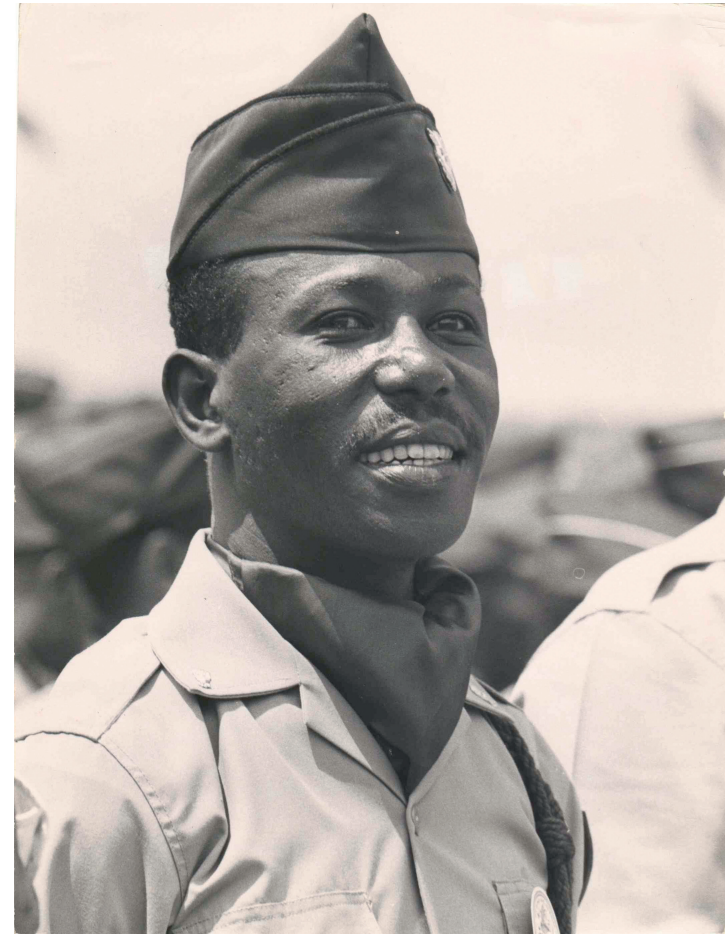
the reason why a *ferenji* (foreigner) was so interested in visiting such a place, “a mountainous village, full of dangerous people.” The history of Dankaz seems to have disappeared from the locals’ memories. Would Ethiopians have intentionally wiped away this page of their history like a bad dream they wanted to forget about?

Susenyos chose Dankaz as the location of his court instead of Qoga. Dankaz witnessed all the steps leading Catholicism to becoming the State religion, as well as the Emperor’s conversion. Having an already Catholic Emperor, what was left to Catholicism other than its progressive and irreversible diffusion? Was it not the tradition from immemorial time that the King’s religion was also the religion of his subjects? This was what the group of Jesuits who came to Ethiopia after Páez thought; and this was also what Rome and the Portuguese Court (then under the Spanish Monarchy) believed. At the time of Páez, the missionaries were never more than five. He did not think it appropriate for more missionaries to come. He considered Catholicism in Ethiopia as fragile as a small boat that an excess of cargo or a gust of wind could easily sink. Instead, after his death, the number of missionaries increased dramatically until it doubled, tripled, and quadrupled... A Patriarch, Afonso Mendes, also arrived to Ethiopia.

Many times Mendes has been blamed for ruining the Ethiopian Catholic mission. This criticism is too harsh, since the armed riots against Susenyos’ pro-Catholic policy were already taking place in the time of Páez. Nevertheless, Mendes must certainly shoulder a considerable share of responsibility for this. As soon as he arrived in Ethiopia, he enacted the most radical and counterproductive measures

Mengistu Haile Mariam

I have interchangeably used the name of Mengistu and that of the government which for 17 years had led one of the most bloodthirsty and absurd dictatorships. People



Mengistu Hailemariam

plane took him to the agreed destination in Zimbabwe. Before his departure, Mengistu appointed his Vice-President Tesfaye Gebre Kidan as the president-in-office. As soon as the news of his escape spread, events took over. Two days later, on May 23rd, the army stationed in Asmara and its 200,000 men surrendered to the EPLF forces. The remaining Derg soldiers in the east and the south followed suit. In Addis Abeba, people rushed to make a gesture that they had longed for: pulling down the monumental statue of Lenin, located in front of Africa Hall.

Chaos was beginning to take over the nation. The main concern of all internal and external actors was to avoid turmoil and to organize a transitional government to fill the vacuum created by the total collapse of the regime. American diplomacy moved quickly. Profiting from a previously scheduled conference in London on May 27th, the EPLF, the EPRDF and representatives of Derg were summoned to participate. However, events within the nation were developing faster than the London discussions. Tesfaye Gebre Kidan's provisional government was failing to get to grips with the situation. The soldiers no longer obeyed any authority and they started plundering themselves. In response to this, Tesfaye Gebre Kidan ordered the military commanders to allow the EPRDF forces entering the capital and taking charge of the situation. He asked the United States Embassy to transmit this message to the conference in London. Meles Zenawi accepted and the EPRDF troops, with the support of Western governments, entered Addis Abeba on May 28th. Except for small pockets of resistance, those that the Derg had described as destroyers of the nation were welcomed as liberators.

that one could possibly imagine in those circumstances. He tried to force all the subjects of the Empire to embrace Catholicism and he wanted complete Latinisation. These measures included re-baptism of the converts, re-ordination of the priests, re-consecration of the churches, and so on.

What followed were years of endless rebellions and wars. The Emperor was trapped. His intransigent Catholic attitude, coupled with the even greater intransigence of Mendes, could not prevent him from realizing that he was up a blind alley. Defeating and killing each rebel, whom he repressed with increasing cruelty, did not solve anything because new insurgents were coming out from under every stone.

One day in June 1632, the weight of evidence prevailed: "Hear you, Hear you—the imperial proclamation was heard in Dankaz—first, we gave you this faith (the Catholic faith), believing it as good. But innumerable people have been slain, like Yolios, Gebriel, Teklegiorgis, Sertse Kristos and now these peasants, for which reason we now restore to you the faith of your forefathers, that of King Jacob, that of Melak Seged. Let the former clergy return to the churches, let them erect their tabots, let them say their own liturgy and do rejoice." He then abdicated in favour of his son Fasilidas. This proclamation had been adulterated. As these words proceeded out of the Emperor's mouth, he was meaning to grant freedom of religion for everyone. Instead, as it was proclaimed, it meant the forced return to the Orthodox faith. The hand of the Crown Prince Fasilidas was behind this manoeuvre, and behind him was the heart of almost all the people.

Susenyos, exhausted and old, overwhelmed by the events, only survived for three months after the proclamation. Once Susenyos died, Fasilidas moved swiftly to erase with unusual cruelty every trace of Catholicism. Jesuits were ordered to leave. Mendes tried to delay his departure, but finally had to resign himself to departing with the other twelve missionaries. Far worse was the fate of the eight missionaries who tried to avoid the imperial order by taking refuge among Catholic friends. They were captured and put to death one by one. In 1640, the remaining two missionaries, Bruni and Cardeira, were imprisoned in Idaga Hamus, near the current city of Adigrat, and hanged in the public square. The most prominent Catholics who did not willingly return to orthodoxy were exiled or executed. This is what happened to Susenyos' brother, Sela Kristos, who was executed in 1636. Gorgora and Dankaz were abandoned, fading into oblivion in exchange for the emergent city of Gondar. It took Catholic missionaries another two hundred years before the Catholic Church was permanently re-established in Ethiopia.

I still recall the curious conversation I had with the Orthodox priest who accompanied me to the ruins of Gorgora in 1985. The boat engine roared so hellishly loud that I had to put my ear close to his face to be able to hear him. He stroked my beard in a fatherly fashion while commenting on the historical events of that time:

“Susenyos's tongue –the priest was saying– had grown and he could not put it back in his mouth until he returned to the Orthodox faith to die in it. This is also what happened to all those who at that time had abandoned their fathers' faith.”

The Derg hampered and delayed the *Falashas'* exit permit. Hence international speculations began on whether Mengistu would be using the *Falashas* as hostages in exchange for Israeli military aid. As the situation deteriorated further, a massacre of *Falashas* was feared. Therefore, the American Jewish pushed the US government to intervene more resolutely in Ethiopian affairs. Following negotiations that also included the TPLF, in May of 1991, a few days before the end of the regime, an air bridge was established, transferring about 25,000 *Falashas* to Israel. In the rush of the operation, no one bothered to check who was really a *Falasha* or who, taking advantage of the chaos, had snuck into their ranks.

By April 1991, the EPLF was at Asmara's doorstep, and the EPRDF reached the doors of Addis Abeba. Both international diplomacy and the two guerrillas were doing the impossible to prevent a final and useless bloodshed. The EPLF made the great effort to renounce to proclaim immediately the independence putting it off for a subsequent referendum. The only big question was Mengistu. Would he resist “to the last bullet,” as he had repeatedly stated, or would he quietly leave the scene? The United States had prepared the ground for the latter prospect and Zimbabwe had offered him political asylum. Everyone seemed to rule out that he would surrender with dignity. At the end of April, he still called for a general mobilization with the aim of “safeguarding the motherland's integrity.” It was pure rhetoric, since nobody would listen to him anymore.

On May 21st, Mengistu left Addis Abeba in a small plane with the supposed intention of inspecting a military camp in the Bilate, not far from Hawassa. After taking off, he ordered the pilot to fly to Nairobi. From there, another

in any aspect, nor were the guerrillas. Militarily speaking, they had everything in their advantage; politically, they preferred a new future where there would not be room for the old regime. However, the conversations held at this respect were not a waste of time. The discussions served at least for the West to understand better the guerrillas' ideology and positions and for the guerrilla to get closer to the West. Starting from 1990, both Isaias and Meles paid continuous visits to the United States in order to make their positions known and to shake off the label of Marxists.

Mengistu was also interested in engaging with the West. He strengthened his contacts in case this could provide a way out of the crisis of his government, a solution that he was no longer expecting from the USSR. Those relations were intensified due to Israel arriving on the scene. In fact, in 1989 an odd and unnatural collaboration started between Mengistu's regime and Israel. This alliance was in the interest of both nations. For Mengistu, Israel could supply the weapons that the USSR had denied to him and could forge the path for a rapprochement with the United States. For Israel, Ethiopia could be an ally against the Arabs. Israel wrongly believed that these ones were supporting the guerrillas. The thorny question of the so-called Falashas, the Ethiopians of Jewish religion who expected to be taken to Israel, like all the other Jews scattered around the globe, also was waiting for an answer. Several thousands of them had already been transferred to Israel during the famine of 1984-85. Throughout 1990, another twenty thousand more were gathered in makeshift camps outside Addis Abeba awaiting the transfer.

“You still haven't forgotten your resentment towards Catholics for those events?”

“No, son, how could we forget all that?”

What the priest was telling me was not historically accurate. The real facts were that, when Susenyos was asked in his last moments by the Jesuit accompanying him, in which faith he was dying, he responded loudly and clearly: “I die in the Roman Faith.” The real facts do not count here though. What the priest said expresses the unwavering full adherence of these people to their Orthodox faith, as well as their instinctive rejection of anything threatening their belief. A story that could have ended in an Orthodox nation becoming Catholic, ended up being an Orthodox nation with an increased hostility toward Catholicism.

Time for acknowledgment

In 1988, when I published the article “*Pedro Páez: Tras los pasos de un andariago*” (*Pedro Páez: Following the steps of a wanderer*) in the Spanish magazine *Mundo Negro*, I was aware that I was writing about a character almost completely unknown in Spain. In the English-speaking countries, they knew more about him. However, he was often mistaken for a Portuguese, since almost his entire Jesuit fellowship who carried out the evangelizing adventure of Ethiopia in the 16th and 17th centuries were Portuguese. He himself had become a Jesuit in Portugal and his book *History of Ethiopia* was originally written in Portuguese.

Fate has begun to change for this outstanding missionary, remarkable both in the field of evangelization and in that of profane history. In the year 2001, the well-known writer Javier Reverte published a book about him: *Dios, el diablo y la aventura* (*God, the Devil and the Adventure*), which significantly contributed to the popularity of his figure. The Embassy of Spain in Ethiopia, on its part, organized a number of events with the aim of making him known. From December 8 to 14, 2003, a symposium on Páez took place in Addis Abeba. Together with the commendable voices of Ethiopian and foreign historians, there was also the critical counterpoint from an Orthodox Church representative. The voluminous *History of Ethiopia* written by Páez in Portuguese has been translated into Spanish and published in two different editions: one incomplete (only the first of the four books) by the Al Andalus Foundation in 2019, and the other, this one complete, by Ediciones del Viento in 2014.

Final months

After the disaster of Enda Selassie in May of 1989, a group of military men of the Derg staged a coup d'état to topple Mengistu. The putsch failed and Mengistu used the occasion for purging the army once again depriving it of its best leaders. One hundred and seventy-six officers were imprisoned, including 24 generals, 12 of whom were executed in May of the following year. Since then, total demoralization filled the army ranks. Defecting and switching sides to join the guerrilla by taking the available weapons with them occurred frequently. Both guerrillas continued their slow but unstoppable advancement. In February 1990, the EPLF captured the city port of Massawa, on the Red Sea. From that moment, Addis Abeba was only connected to Eritrea by air, since the whole land border was already in the hands of the TPLF-EPRDF. After being conquered by the EPLF, Massawa was bombed and semi-destroyed by the Derg forces. This deterred the EPLF from taking over the capital Asmara so that this city would not experience the same fate as Massawa. The EPRDF, in turn, after controlling the entire Tigray region, continued its march towards the south in what they called "Operation Teodros." In March 1990, Gondar and Bahir Dar were captured. In March of the following year they crossed the Blue Nile. Addis Abeba, its final goal, was already within reach.

There was no shortage of last-minute international efforts to mediate between the opponents. Both the United States and Europe tried to arbitrate without attaining great results. Mengistu was not willing to give up

Liberation Front). The OLF had an armed wing, which became noticeable due to some sporadic attacks on Derg's positions and to the kidnapping of some foreigners. However, it had little cohesion as a party. Its members ranged from the most radical, who strove for Oromia's independence, to the most moderate, whose aim was the Derg's downfall, but who were not interested in maintaining their own guerrilla. The Oromo ethnic group is the largest in Ethiopia and it covers the central part of the country, separating the northern regions (Tigray, Amhara ..) from the Southern Peoples. An eventual independence of the Oromo would atomize the country.

Faced with the difficulty in reaching an agreement with the OLF, the TPLF decided to sponsor the formation of a new Oromo party. This is how the OPDO was created, a party that brought together all those who did not feel represented by the OLF. Nevertheless, the TPLF continued to seek collaboration from the OLF for the final step of the Derg's overthrow. Eritrea was also offered the opportunity to participate in a transitional government, putting the independence on hold for later. Yet Isaias Afewerki did not accept. The EPRDF stood out for being very tolerant in the regions that were under its control. The people resettled by the Derg were given the chance to stay there or to return to their land of origin. Most of them opted for the latter. Likewise, prisoners of war were offered two possibilities: joining the guerrilla or being released to return to their territory. This approach made the population, especially farmers, cease to distrust the guerrillas, having realized that they were not what the Derg propaganda wanted them to believe they were.

CHAPTER 7

TEWODROS, GOD'S CHOSEN ONE

There once was a young candidate to be a monk who became the leader of a band of robbers, and later the Emperor of Ethiopia. Convinced of having been chosen by God for such a position, he gave himself the name of Tewodros, bound to ancient prophecies, and set himself the task of implanting law, justice and national unity. After realizing that reality did not bend to his dreams, he became the slaughterer of his people. He challenged the British colonial pride of the Victorian era and the English travelled thousands of kilometres to meet him and settle scores with him. Upon his death, there was, perhaps, less law, less justice and less unity in Ethiopia. However, the quest for these three values was greater than before. The seed of unity he planted, and that he did not know how to cultivate, would not be lost.

A portrait, sometimes smoky and grimy, hangs on the wall of many Ethiopian houses. It shows the face of a handsome man with a stern appearance, and with braided hair, as women usually wear today. He was both a great and horrifying king— as people say when asked who he was. An anecdote, which must have been repeated a thousand times over, illustrates this fact. As soon as he reached the throne, he issued the order that every Ethiopian should work honestly in their parents' business:

the merchant in trade, the farmer on the land ... One day some bandits came to him and said: "Our parents thrived on theft. Can we continue practicing the same profession?" "I must deliberate on that," the King replied. "You should come another day, but with many more of you. Today you are not many." Happily and joking around, they returned another day in much greater numbers. The King said unto them: "This is how I will allow you to pursue the occupation of your parents." And at his command, the soldiers attacked them, slaying them all.

No single person in the history of Ethiopia, perhaps with the exception of the legendary Queen of Sheba, has sparked the people's and writers' imagination as much as Tewodros, even many years after his death. Book novels, theatre plays and simple orally-transmitted stories are proof of this, since his life holds all the necessary ingredients of a character of tragedy: greatness of ideals, cruelty, fatalism...

A son of the people crowned Emperor

The Ethiopian inheritance law to the imperial throne was very broad. Any descendant of an emperor, legitimate or bastard, could succeed. The only condition was having imperial blood. Tewodros did not have royal blood, no matter how much he tried to pretend he did once he was already on the throne. Kassa (as his first name was) was born around 1818. He was the son of a local chief of the Qwara district, located to the west of Lake Tana, near the border with Sudan. His father died while Kassa was still a child. His widowed mother was so poor that she was forced to sell kosso (tree leaves used as purgative medicine)

West. Less clearly was the shift made by the leader of the EPLF, Isaias Afewerki, since he entertained the futile hope that the USSR, after abandoning the support to Mengistu's Ethiopia, would give it to the EPLF. Isaias, as well as Mengistu, was also slow to grasp the significance of the *perestroika* and to realize the transformation taking place in the USSR.

Their ideological position was not the only reason for conflict between the two guerrillas. Although they were united in the final stage of the fight against the Derg, they had previously had conflict among themselves, even armed confrontation. Their spirit and goals were very different. EPLF was decidedly separatist and it did not hide its intention to make Eritrea independent from the rest of Ethiopia as soon as the Derg would fall. Instead, the TPLF wanted to overthrow the Addis Abeba regime, but providing an alternative that would keep Ethiopia united. While the EPLF remained monolithic and inflexible in its ideological positions, the TPLF progressively evolved towards increasingly liberal political and economic formulas, thus preparing the ground for Ethiopia to successfully face the post-Derg era.

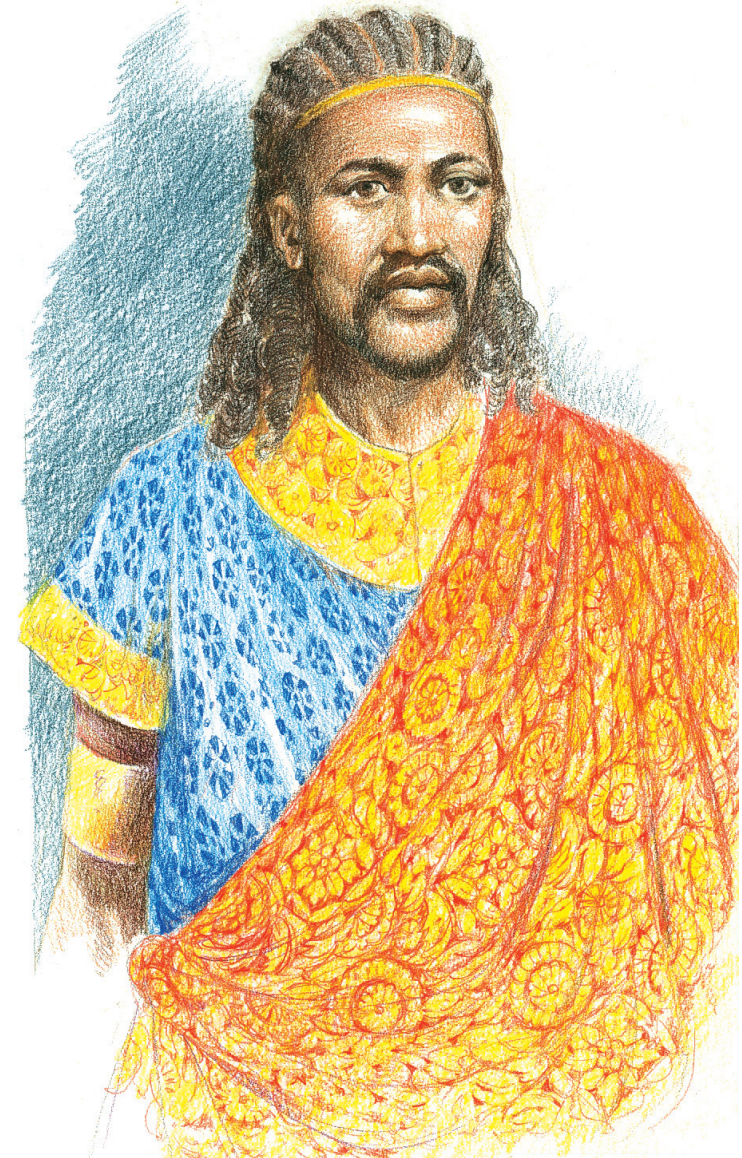
One of the TPLF's priorities was to make contact with all the parties or groups that opposed the Derg, whether they were regional or national like the EPRP and the MEISON. These contacts resulted in an umbrella organization, the EPRDF (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front), which brought together a number of them. One was the EPDM, which had its main support among the Amhara, in the north of Shoa, and the other was the OPDO (Oromo People's Democratic Organization). The Oromo people had their own party, the OLF (Oromo

supply the Derg with one billion dollar's worth of weapons annually, most of which ended up in the hands of the two guerrillas. When, finally, Gorbachev considered the Ethiopian situation, he ordered an immediate reduction of aid and the withdrawal of a large part of the councillors. Mengistu sought allies elsewhere. He went to knock on the door of Deng Xiaoping's China only to realize that Beijing was no longer living in Mao's time.

Guerrillas, the external enemy

The two guerrilla fronts, the EPLF (Eritrean People's Liberation Front) and the TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front), continued making military progress. Two conclusive belligerent actions decided the fate of the war long before it ended. One action was the EPLF's victory in Afa-Bet, in the north of Eritrea, in which 20 thousand government soldiers and their team were captured. This occurred in March 1988. The other one was the one won by the TPLF in Enda Selassie, Tigray, in February 1989. After this victory, the entire Tigray region and north of Shoa came into the control of the TPLF. If they still took two years to reach Addis Abeba, it was more because of political strategy rather than military incapacity.

The two guerrilla movements initially had a Marxist ideology. They were Marxists in the 70s and during much of the 80s. Even towards the end of that decade, some officials from the TPLF ranks still showed admiration for the Albanian version of Communism. The arrival of Meles Zenawi at the top of the movement in 1989 ushers in a shift in focus. Meles firmly chose to open up to the



Sketch of Emperor Teodros

in the market of Gondar. “The Kosso Seller’s Son” would be the disdainful name given to Kassa by his detractors, whenever they felt out of the reach of Tewodros’ anger. As a young man, he spent some time in a monastery, where he was educated in the Christian faith. This episode would provide him with a layer of permanent mysticism. The monastery was raided and burnt to ashes by the bandits, Kassa being one of the few who escaped alive. For some time, he lived in Gondar with an uncle of his, who trained him in the use of weapons. Upon his uncle’s death, Kassa was twenty years old and had nowhere to lay his head.

In Gondar, at that time there was an Emperor only in name, Yohannes III, who reigned over Ethiopia, but ruled over nothing. The different provinces were almost independent and they wasted their energies fighting against each other. This time is known in Ethiopia as *Zemene Mesafint* or Era of Judges, since it happened in the Judges’ time in Israel according to the Bible “in those days there was no king and every man did that which was right in his own eyes.” In Kassa’s own eyes “the right thing” was to become a *shifta*, that is, a bandit. His band soon became the terror of the Muslim merchant caravans. His appearance was that of a vulgar bandit; however, something made him different: his dreams of going far and changing Ethiopia. In fact, Kassa was a political dissident, a guerrilla, and his band was day after day joined by rebels like him.

In 1845 his power was so remarkable that Queen Menen and her son Ras Ali, in whose territories Kassa was operating, agreed to make him Governor of Qwarra and to give him Ali’s daughter, Tewabech, in marriage. This unstable alliance lasted for a few years, during which



Celebration of the revolution on the streets of Addis Abeba

Despite the fact that hardliner government leaders, headed by Mengistu himself, neither believed in such reforms nor truly supported them, the President echoed them in a famous speech on March 5th, 1990. These words caught everyone by surprise. He wanted to take a step back right away, but it was already too late. The speech was the trigger for people to start taking reforms into their own hands. Rapid dismantling of collectivized villages and expansion of free trade were consequences of this.

In the meantime, the power that provided the Derg with weapons and ideology, the URSS, had begun the *perestroika*, a movement from which Mengistu did not learn or draw any consequences. On the contrary, he forbade the media to mention this word. Gorbachev, busy with many other internal problems, paid no attention to Ethiopia at first. He let the old military continue to

pretence of the enlightened leader. The legalizing process brought some relief for the population. The jails were partially opened to let free political prisoners languishing in their dens since 1974. The “disappearances” were also proven. Some were not released because “they were no longer there”; the revolution had swallowed them up.

Ironically, 1987 marks the transition to the other edge, the downfall. This occurred slowly like a long-lasting agony. The domestic situation was increasingly deteriorating with no possibility for recovery. The vast amount of money invested in resettlement and villagization programs was a waste of money. None of the resettlements became self-sufficient or was able to feed their inhabitants. Deaths caused by malnutrition, dysentery or malaria decimated the resettled population. Those who found the opportunity to escape did not hesitate to do so. The villagization plan, although less traumatic, affected many more people. From the promised communal services, such as schools and dispensaries, very little materialized. The nation’s economy declined, reaching unprecedented low levels. The factories did not exceed 25 percent of the intended production. Population opted for passive resistance and black economy. By witnessing the government’s gradual weakening, people stopped following its instructions.

Everything pointed to a turnaround. Western nations pressured the government to change its course. Some more lucid internal voices also asked for change, though with the required caution in a repression environment. Thus, the Central Planning Commission, a government body consisting of more than 300 professionals, prepared a package of reforms that represented an important breakthrough on the road to the economy’s liberalization.

Kassa amused himself fighting the Muslims on behalf of Ras Ali on the borders of Sudan. However, in 1852 he felt strong enough to challenge his boss’ power. Successive armies sent against him were defeated by the *Kosso Seller’s Son*. In June 1854, Ali suffered definitive defeat and Kassa took control of two large provinces: Begemeder and Gojjam. After that, he went to meet Ras Wubie, governor of two other large provinces, Tigray and Semien, and he defeated him on February 9th, 1855 in Deresge. Two days later, he had himself crowned Emperor with the name of Tewodros II. The Era of the Judges was over. Ethiopia had an Emperor determined to prove that he was a real one.

A new age does not come true

In the 15th century, after the brief reign of Tewodros I, a legend was created that another king, also named Tewodros, would restore peace and justice in the nation, destroy Islam, and conquer Jerusalem sitting on the throne of Solomon. The name chosen by Kassa has, therefore, a religious and millenarian component which explains much of his behaviour and attitude. His reform plan was ambitious and aimed at national unity. In order to achieve this, he intended to strengthen the central power through three basic measures: the direct appointment of each province’s governors and judges in order to abolish hereditary fiefdoms; the creation of a paid regular army that did not live off pillage; a tax system paid by the people. All this was fair, but absolutely new, and the opposition was tougher than he could expect.

He had clear views on religious matters: The Orthodox Church should be the foundation of unity, and therefore, the State religion. This was established during his first meeting with the Patriarch, Salama III. The emerging Catholic group was automatically excluded, as this was seen as an alternative Church having its own hierarchy. The bishop Justin de Jacobis and the Ethiopian priest Abba Gebre Mikael had to experience the effects of the new religious policy in their own skin. For the Protestant Church, things were, in principle, different, since Protestantism was not presented at that time as an alternative church, but as a reform movement within the Orthodox Church. Tewodros' political leanings towards England was another reason why the Protestant missionaries, bound to the English interests, enjoyed the official favour, although, in the end, this favour would turn against them.

For Tewodros, the best years were 1855 and 1856. Wolo and Shoa, two provinces not yet subdued at the time of his coronation, were soon annexed. National unity, even though still only nascent and weak, had been attained. A ray of hope shone over the country. At times, Tewodros could be frightening, but he was also fair and reasonable. Justin de Jacobis, even when persecuted, has words of praise for this "extraordinary" ruler who stands out for "his admirable laws and for his ordinances of public prosperity and morality." Protestants, who were more willing to praise, describe him as devoted, compassionate and kind. Kienzlen goes on to claim that "he is the only man in Abyssinia who possesses the fear of God."

However, the obstacles to be faced were many, and Tewodros experienced his first serious conflict with the clergy. Lacking funds to maintain his army, he decided

regrouped, but to move also here towards collectivization. The small garden next to the house would be the only private property. All the remaining fields should be common. Once again, people's opposition and the lack of resources of the government, engaged with the endemic war in the north, prevented this second phase from being carried out. Little by little, many of these villages were abandoned and people returned to rebuild their homes in their place of origin.

From DERG to People's Republic and the final outcome

Proclaiming itself as PMAC (Provisional Military Administrative Council), the Derg had to find a way to legalize its status. The chosen path was the creation of the Communist Party. In 1979, a commission—COPWE—was formed to organize the Party. The official foundation took place in 1984, the tenth anniversary of the revolution, and was called WPE (Workers' Party of Ethiopia). The next step was drafting a constitution, discussed in national assemblies and voted on January 31st, 1987. This text largely mimicked the Soviet Constitution, except for the president's duties, which were taken from Ceausescu's Romanian Constitution in order to broaden the chairman's role. Following this, in a free voting simulation, the members of the parliament or *Shengo* were elected. Proclamation of the People's Democratic Republic on September 12th, 1987, the thirteenth anniversary of the revolution, was the final stage. The protagonists were the same old ones, but now they were confirmed in grace and wearing civilian clothes. Colonel Mengistu was entitled to put himself on

composed of 300, 500 or more families. The reason given was that the villages gave the possibility of better services: schools, drinking water, and health care. The downside was that these services hardly ever amounted to anything more than a pure promise. From 1985, more than twelve million people were grouped in rural areas. The socialist village houses (actually huts) were perfectly aligned: equidistant, with a small garden measuring the same meters and centimeters as the next house. Its streets were totally straight. Rather than the expression of the desire for order and perfection, these villages were the abnormal result of the will of dominion and absolute control by the government. The plan's aim was not only having people



Detail of the monument to the revolution showing President Mengistu Hailemariam as leader of the masses

to levy taxes on the many possessions of the Orthodox Church and to restrict the number of clergymen assigned to each church. The Church confronted him defiantly and Tewodros was forced to give up, his popularity suffering the first major blow. Even worse, continuous rebellions took place in all the four points of the compass of his newly-annexed empire. Gojjam or Wolo, Gondar, Shoa or Tigray had successive on-going uprisings, forcing the Emperor to continuously travel there to squash them. The punishments imposed on those defeated were increasingly cruel, which led to more insurgencies. The future he had so longed for seemed to vanish before he could touch it with his hand, and Tewodros did not find the political wisdom to match the reality and make the most of it. On the contrary, he let the beasts of pride, cruelty and brutality seize him.

The year 1860 marks a quantum leap on the trajectory towards his irreversible fate. His great friend, the English consul Plowden, was murdered near Gondar. Out of his mind, Tewodros killed and maimed about two thousand peasants creating an absurd holocaust. Shortly before, his wife Tewabech, daughter of Ras Ali, had died. While she was alive, she was the guardian angel who could soften her husband's temper. The loss of his beloved wife plunged him into a depression that he tried to heal with alcohol and indiscriminate sexual excesses. His ruthlessness began to take on an extravagant and unpredictable form.

By the end of 1860, Tewodros went for the second time to Tigray with the aim of squashing the long-running rebellion of Ras Wubie's nephew, Negusie. Justin de Jacobis had pinned his hopes on this Prince, who promised Justin to support Catholicism if he could get him assistance from

France. De Jacobis tried; nevertheless, before any help could turn up, Tewodros completely destroyed the young rebel and condemned him to death by starvation. De Jacobis had died a few months before. God saved him from this last sorrow. Strangely, the Emperor did not trouble the Catholics, despite being aware of their connections with Negusie.

England, an elusive love

Tewodros knew how to nurture friendship with the Europeans arriving to his realm. To some extent, this friendship was in his interest, since he wished to modernize the country and he needed technicians for that. In 1862, he sought to go one step further and to establish direct contacts with the European governments. He did not entertain any illusions about France, as he knew that giving freedom to the Catholics was the unavoidable requirement in order to reach a possible understanding with this country. From England, however, he was expecting more due to his long friendship with Protestant missionaries, who—even though most of them were Germans—belonged to English institutions.

He wrote a letter to Queen Victoria purely out of courtesy. As time passed and no reply arrived, Tewodros took it personally and, in January 1864, ordered to chain up the English Consul Cameron and the Protestant missionaries, imprisoning them in the Magdala fortress. Only the so-called “Pilgrim Missionaries” remained free. They were from Germany and belonged to the St. Chrischona Institute, near Basel in Switzerland, but they



Monument to the Marxist revolution, inaugurated in 1984

hand, Ethiopia, with 90 percent of peasant population, was a feudal regime. Among a few landowners: relatives of the Emperor, aristocrats, former soldiers and the Orthodox Church, they owned almost all the land. No wonder, then, that land nationalization and redistribution awoke immense hopes in the people. However, the Derg's intention was not to stop at redistribution, but to move towards collectivization through the creation of state cooperatives. The resistance this measure faced from the population resulted in little progress during the first years. The catastrophic drought of the year 1984-1985 gave the government the occasion to reactivate its old plan. Claiming that large areas of Tigray and Wollo, repeatedly drought-affected, had been eroded beyond all hope of recovery, the government embarked on the great task of relocating people from those regions to more fertile and less populated zones on the border with Sudan. The villages emerging there were, "according to the spirit of the new socialist Ethiopia," totally collectivized. Between 1984 and 1985, about 600,000 people were resettled. This was done by methods so harsh and hasty that the French organization Doctors Without Borders declared: "The great problem for Ethiopia today is that people are dying not from hunger, but from relocation." The price the organization members paid for such a statement was their immediate expulsion from the country.

International pressure provoked, however, the program's suspension. They then started to give priority to another no less traumatic plan for the society and the traditional Ethiopian economy: the villagization. The population scattered over valleys and hills was forced to demolish their houses and to group themselves in villages

were sent to Ethiopia on behalf of England. These men were lay people and had received instruction in different crafts such as carpentry, masonry, leatherwork, as well as Bible studies. Arriving in 1856, they soon enjoyed the predilection and intimacy of the Emperor, who went regularly to their home to discuss both technical and religious topics. The pietistic spiritualism of these laymen offered Tewodros a sort of alternative option amidst his conflicts with the Orthodox hierarchy.

However, this imperial friendship would turn into a stifling embrace for them. Obsessed with war, Tewodros forced them to work only in the repair and construction of firearms during the final years. Their excuse that they were not experienced in the arms field did not work for them. They were forced not only to do so, but to work against the clock. Freedom in those conditions was more oppressive than imprisonment itself. Waldmeier, who was the closest to the Emperor, wrote at that time: "I often wished I was chained with the other prisoners at Magdala, out of sight of the formerly good-hearted, but now so cruel, monarch."

Events snowballed. The rebellion of the provinces could no longer be quelled. In 1864, half of the national territory was beyond the Emperor's control. And from 1867, he owned only the limited space he occupied with his army, which, in turn, was reduced day after day due to defections. At this moment, his behavior was completely eccentric and his acts of cruelty, dreadful. England sent a special envoy, Rassam, with the idea of negotiating the release of the European prisoners. He brought a letter from Queen Victoria and several presents. Firstly, Tewodros received him with happy displays, but soon after he put

him in prison too. A second letter from the Queen invited the Monarch to respect those international rules “that, between nations considered civilized, are considered as sacred.” However, this had no effect. On the contrary, Tewodros started playing a cat-and-mouse game with the prisoners, by promising them freedom today, and threatening them with death tomorrow.

Extraordinary expedition

In August 1867, one of the strangest military expeditions in the world was decided on in London. This one was not aimed at enlarging the territories; neither was it intended to conquer a nation. It was simply meant to rescue a handful of prisoners. Not even that, since Tewodros could very well kill them all before the English came to rescue them from his clutches. This was a question of honour: someone had besmirched the British Empire’s honour and this could not go unpunished. The British did not care about the cost. If they cared, they would have known that the price of that expedition was going to be enormous, and the risks, many. It was a reckless adventure: going into the heart of a nation independent from time immemorial; dealing with an extreme climate, heat next to the Red Sea, rainfall in the interior; challenging the rugged mountains and the deep gorges of a unique geography.... Sir Robert Napier, in charge of leading the operation, did not underestimate the difficulties. The number of men and animals he originally ordered went, at the time of specific calculations, from 12,000 men and 20,000 animals to 32,000 men and 55,000 animals.

War and Famine

These issues were indeed many. The first one was the war, inherited from the previous regime. Eritrea, the northernmost region, had been fighting since 1961 for independence, or at least for self-government in federation. Perhaps, this region could expect more sympathy to their claims from the new men set by the revolution than from the Emperor. However, this was not the case. The Derg made it clear from the outset that its approach was hard-line. Subsequently, the Eritrean guerrilla stepped up their attacks and in 1975 they were about to conquer Asmara. At the same time with the offensive in the north, Somalia dusted off its old border claims and invaded the Ogaden region from the east, reaching the gates of the city of Harar. Only the massive aid from Russia and Cuba in weapons, technicians and soldiers freed Ethiopia from a probable fragmentation. Somalia never created serious problems again—it plunged itself into chaos. Instead, the war in the north did not only grow more intense, but also spread to the neighbouring region of Tigray, from where another guerrilla movement, the TPLF (Tigray People’s Liberation Front) arose. Since Mengistu’s government never accepted any solution other than arms, it was forced to increase the military expenditure, reaching 54 percent of the national budget in 1988. In addition, an army of 300,000 men required relentless drafts in the young population to cover the continuous casualties.

The second serious problem, also a legacy from the past, was the famine and the backwardness. On the one hand, since ancient times droughts occurred with constant regularity, especially in the north. On the other

(Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party) and the MEISON (All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement). Ideologically speaking, they did not differ much, except that the EPRP seemed to be more radical. Whereas it demanded the immediate handover of power to the civilians, the MEISON accepted the military government as a transitory measure. Whether it were out of conviction or to avoid being outdone by their antagonists, the army also embraced the Marxist ideology. They embarked on a series of reforms of extreme radicalism: nationalization of industry, bank, land and housing; land redistribution and organization of the farmers in agricultural cooperatives; sending thousands of students to rural areas for literacy and political awareness campaigns (in order to keep them away from the capital?).

Discrepancy between the two civil parties and the military government grew, degenerating into urban guerrilla. The Derg took harsh action once again. Allying itself first with the MEISON, it proceeded to dismantle the EPRP, composed mainly of teachers and students. This campaign is known by the evocative name of "Red Terror." Between 1977 and 1978, thousands of young people suspected of belonging to the EPRP were torn from their homes at night before the frightened eyes of their parents. They were shot in the middle of the street. Those who wanted to recover the body of their children had to pay the bullets' price. With the EPRP eliminated, next came the turn of MEISON. By the end of 1978, political parties had virtually ceased to exist and the Derg, free from rivals, could focus its attention and energy on the nation's problems.

On January 2, 1868, Napier disembarked in the port of Zulla, a few kilometres South of Massaua. He sent an ultimatum to Tewodros and a letter to the people of Ethiopia in which he said among other things: "To the governors, the chiefs, the religious orders, and the people of Abyssinia ... you should bear in mind that the Queen of England has not unfriendly feelings towards you ... The sole object for which the British Force has been sent to Abyssinia is the liberation of Her Majesty's subjects and others captives unjustly detained. As soon as this goal is achieved, it will withdraw. There is no intention to occupy permanently any portion of the Abyssinian territory or to interfere with the government of the nation." In fact, the people, terrified by Tewodros, received the members of the expedition as liberators. Kassa, the new leader of Tigray and future emperor under the name of Yohannes IV, extended his full cooperation and provided them with supplies.

The troop's column embarked on a journey towards the interior of the country. The image of that endless row of soldiers marching in perfect order through gorges and ravines was engraved into the Ethiopians' memory. Their destination was Magdala, a rocky platform one kilometre long, by little more than a half kilometre wide, and about three hundred meters high above the surrounding plain. Tewodros, who considered Magdala impenetrable, had stored many objects of the royal treasury there. There were also the European prisoners, and that was the place Tewodros wanted as the scene of his encounter with the English. He planned to save his honour against those who came to avenge his own.

Honours saved, each in their own way

Tewodros seemed to be pleased with that imminent encounter. He was going, he said, to have the opportunity to fight with a real army, like the one he had dreamed of having. When his faithful friend Waldmeier suggested making peace with the English, he took out the gun to kill him. “Only God stopped his hand,” Waldmeier would write. Tewodros was so dazzled that he did not seem to know anyone. One day, the British army column finally emerged from the ravines towards the plain that surrounds Magdala. Tewodros was so impatient that he came down from the rock to fight them on the plain. It was April 10th, 1868, Good Friday. The emperor’s men, struck by the desperate madness of their master, fought in total disarray against the British ranks, which, with each round of gunshots, increased the pile of corpses. Seven hundred dead and twelve hundred wounded Ethiopians, versus twenty wounded (two would die later) from the visitors was the result of an encounter as dramatic as uneven. Only the sunset prevented a greater slaughter.

The King, very excited, spent that night drinking in abundance. In the morning he ordered the European prisoners be called. They all thought that, according to Tewodros’ mental state, it would be to shoot them. However, this was not the case. He sent them all to the British camp, after begging Rassam, the group’s leader that, if one day he saw him dead, he should have mercy on him and should not leave his body unburied. Then, making clear his intention not to surrender, he sent the following message to Napier: “The warrior, who has held strong men in his arms as if they were children, will not let himself

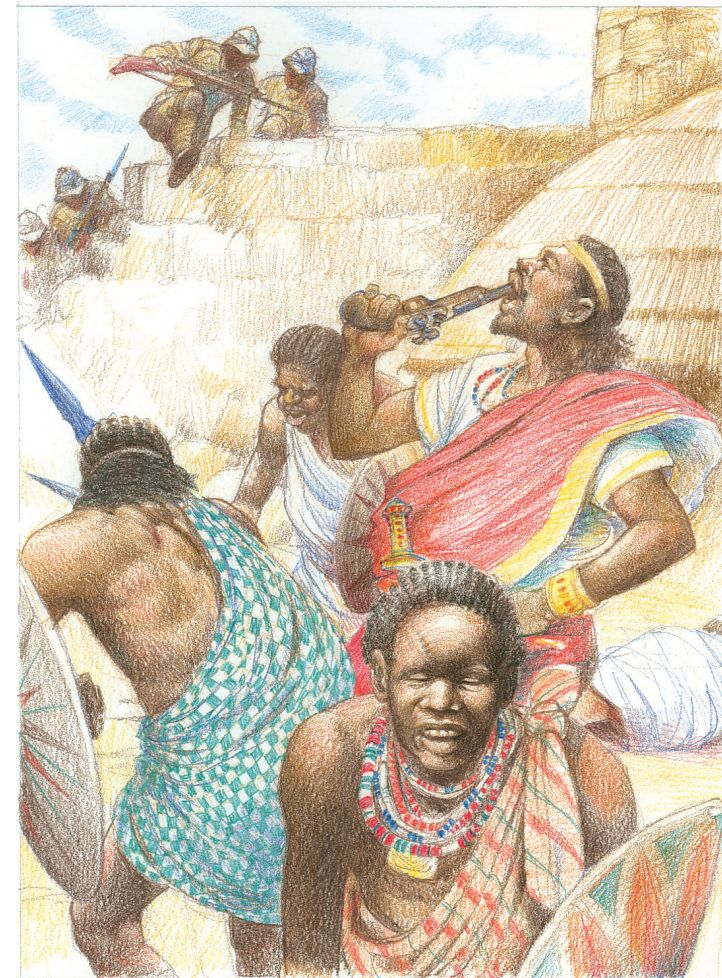
Who really was the Derg? It was said to be a body consisting of 126 soldiers of different ranks. Who really was the one in control of that heterogeneous mass? Certainly not Aman Mikael Andom, an old military man chosen as the first president, leveraging his popularity as a hero in the Somalia war. A young officer, Major Mengistu Haile Mariam, soon began to stand head and shoulders above the group. Determined, radical and simple in his approach, it was him who held in his hands the strings of the puppet theatre. Rising to full power, he would eliminate all real and possible opponents. The first one to fall was the recently appointed president Aman Andom. Having refused to submit to the Derg’s orders, he and his residence were crushed by the tanks sent to arrest him. Aman Andom had not lasted more than two months in his position. A few days later, on November 23rd, the world felt silent, astonished by the execution without trial of 59 of the former government’s highest officials who had been imprisoned throughout the previous months. A vague terror, fuelled from time to time by new deaths, seized the nation. On February 3rd, 1977, Andom’s successor in the Derg presidency, General Tafari Banti, was killed in a palace scuffle. The third president was Mengistu. In November of the same year, he summarily executed Atnafu Abate, his vice chairman and only potential rival.

In parallel with the struggle for power within the Derg, another no less violent duel was unfolding between it and the non-military political groups created at the beginning of the revolution. Two main parties competed with the Derg for the right to be the official actors of the revolution. They both were of Marxist-Leninist ideology: the EPRP

letters were concluded; “... *ale menem dem*” (“... and without bloodshed”), added the Ethiopians proudly. What in English was named “creeping coup” (“*progressive Coup d’État*”) had just begun. Nobody could imagine how bloody it was going to be when it came to light, not even, or perhaps less of all, their own protagonists.

The DERG

The direct trigger of the strikes mentioned above had been the drought that devastated the northern provinces of Tigray and Wollo in 1972, producing more than 200,000 victims. Not only did the military join the protest, but also a group of young officers profited from the prevailing chaos to form a junta called “Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces.” Without touching the old Emperor or apparently overthrowing his regime, this committee became the only source from which laws, decrees and reforms were drawn. One after the other, they were imprisoning members of the government, military cadres, and the aristocracy. No one had given them power, but no one had the strength to take it away from them. It became true that the victory is for the boldest. This situation lasted from February to September of 1974. On the 12th of the latter month (the second day of the year according to the Ethiopian calendar), they took a qualitative step forward by deposing Emperor Haile Selassie. The Coordinating Committee emerged from the shadows and became the Derg or Provisional Military Government. The “creeping coup” was over.



Sketch of Emperor Teodros committing suicide

be shaken by anyone.” Saturday and Sunday, thousands of the Emperor’s soldiers deserted, moving to the enemy’s camp, or fleeing during the night. By Monday morning, he had no more than fifty men left. Tewodros rode his horse

and ran across the plain screaming, wielding his sword and, as a tragic Ethiopian Don Quixote, challenging the English to a single combat. Not receiving any answer, he withdrew with his last followers to the fortress to resist the final assault. The attack came swiftly. With the first cannon round shot by the British, the wooden turret used as the entrance blew up. Tewodros let his people run away. After that, alone, he started walking down the small slope towards his residence. He would never reach it. Halfway there he put his pistol's barrel in his mouth and pulled the trigger... It was the gun that Queen Victoria had given to him as a present.

Lying on the ground, the English soldiers passed several times by his corpse without recognizing him. When Rassam proved his identity, he was taken to the church of Magdala and buried the day after with the highest honours that the situation could allow. From Tigray to Shoa, and from Gojjam to Wolo, Ethiopia was breathing mixed feelings of relief, respect and even affection. The one who died was not a vulgar bloody tyrant. Once the beasts of intemperance and pride were driven away, the dignity of "God's chosen one to bring about justice" returned to his noble face. "At the top of Magdala shouts are heard; they are undoubtedly coming from a woman, because the only man there was dead," says a popular song today.

Once their mission was "happily" completed, and not forgetting to take with them precious manuscripts and other royal treasury objects, Napier's expedition set out on their homeward journey with the same dignity and discipline with which they had arrived. They kept their promise not to occupy an inch of Ethiopia's land or interfere in the internal affairs of the nation, even knowing that,

CHAPTER 11

REVOLUTIONARY TIMES NOT EVERYTHING NEW IS GOOD

It all started in February 1974. What seemed to be simple protests, turned into a rebellion; what seemed a peaceful revolution, ended up being one of the the most radical and bloodiest upheavals. Searching for an ideological robe, the revolutionaries came across the one in highest demand on the market at that time: Scientific Socialism. The faces of the "Socialist trinity" (Marx-Engels-Lenin) dominated streets, squares and offices. However, the evils of the nation did not vanish by the spell of their maxims. In the end, the three "masters" fell from grace. One night in March 1990, their portraits were furtively removed by those who had placed them there. A year later, the revolutionary regime was coming to an end.

The euphoria of the following days after the series of strikes and demonstrations of students, taxi drivers and other social classes in February 1974 knew no bounds. The military had also joined them and the repression of the strikes had become impossible. A motto emerged that seemed to rouse enthusiasm: "Itiopia Tikdem" (Ethiopia First). With this rallying cry the speeches ended; with those two words scratched on the paper the official documents, the less official ones and even the private

Somewhere in the outskirts of the city, I could perceive how hundreds of destitute people crowded around a facility where several huge cooking pots, half-buried in clay, boiled from morning to night. Firewood is in Jijiga a precious good and no tongue of flame should be wasted. The pots had been set by the Missionaries of Charity, founded by Mother Theresa of Calcutta, who arrived in Jijiga in response to the emergencies caused by the war. These dauntless women are always to be found where there is an extreme situation, and Jijiga, on the edge of the desert and on the border between two antagonist nations, was the perfect setting for them.

after their departure, a civil war would be unavoidable. In fact, there were three pretenders to the imperial title vacated by Tewodros: Gobezie from Lasta, Menelik from Shoa and Kassa from Tigray. “No quito ni pongo rey... (I neither remove nor put a King...)” but, during his passage through this last region, Napier left Kassa a good number of weapons in compensation for the help he had provided to the English. These weapons gave Kassa the advantage he needed to impose on his rivals and to become Emperor in 1872 under the name of Yohannes IV.

Being much more realistic than Tewodros, Yohannes knew that unity in Ethiopia could not be achieved at once and by force. Actually, neither he nor any of his successors until now saw this unity Tewodros dreamed of come true. In Ethiopia there is too much diversity and too many disintegrating forces. Wanting too much comes at the cost of receiving little.

The last battle of Jijiga took place in 1978 between the WSLF (Western Somali Liberation Front) and the Ethiopian Army. Oddly enough none of the contenders was actually what they claimed they were. Under WSLF we would understand a guerrilla group fighting to annex Ogaden to Somalia, but in reality it was the Somali Army, whose President Siad Barre had embarked on the plan of creating a “Great Somalia.” Under the name of Ethiopian Army, there was Russian weaponry and Cuban troops. Siad Barre, the then president of Somalia, had taken advantage of the current chaos in Ethiopia, after the 1974 Revolution, to attack. Thus, it became easy to invade Ogaden, conquer Jijiga and penetrate up the mountains towards Harar. He claimed he had the right over the Awash valley and over all territories which during medieval times had belonged to the small Muslim kingdoms dependent on Harar.

For Ethiopia, this would have meant a very hard loss. But little could Ethiopia have done, had they not been taken out of trouble by someone else. Those who put the Somalis in their place at the gates of Harar and reconquered Jijiga in a perfect battle, from a strategic point of view, were not soldiers of the Ethiopian army, which comprised almost in his totality unorganized popular militias. They were Cuban soldiers armed by the Soviet Union. That is the reason why I was expecting to find Cubans wandering around Jijiga, but they were not there any longer. I found out that, a couple of months back, they had moved back to Harar, which was a sign that Somalia and its WSLF’s protégés were no longer a threat. Very few years after the stunning 1978 invasion, the only Somalis in Jijiga were refugees who were escaping their own regime.



Stoves at the quarters of the Missionaries of Charity in Jijiga

of all those possible occasions. I decided to have a look at that city whose name smelt like fresh gunpowder. (Don't forget that I am talking about my visit of 1986). It was obvious that for locals the name Jijiga did not trigger the kind of feeling that it produced in me, as they swarmed busily and carelessly around the decaying bus which was about to take off. That reassured me. Jijiga is located towards the East, where the mountains on which Harar stands fade into the huge lowlands of Ogaden. Its name awakened in me dramatic connotations, not due to old battles, but to very recent ones. I was expecting to find checkpoints along the way, but I did not. I was expecting to see Cuban soldiers wandering around the city, but I did not. As proof of the recent war, there were only burnt tanks, left stuck by the roads or piled up at improvised scrapyards next to the military camps.

CHAPTER 8

MENELIK II, FOUNDER OF MODERN ETHIOPIA

King of Shewa from 1865 to 1889 and Emperor of Ethiopia from 1889 until his death in 1913, during his reign Menelik II doubled the extent of the national territory. He defeated a European Army in Adwa, something that hadn't happened since the times of Hannibal. He rubbed shoulders as an equal with colonial powers and pushed Ethiopia through the hazardous path of modernization. All of this helped him become the father of modern Ethiopia in the eyes of both nationals and foreigners.

The equestrian statue of Menelik II solemnly presides the square that bears his name. It is one of the most central and attractive places in Addis Abeba. The eagerness of erasing or creating history of their own will made the 1974 revolutionary government cleanse the streets and even remove books of anything that could remind them of the existence of Emperor Haile Selassie I. However, this did not affect his predecessor, Menelik who remained triumphant on his horse. Had he been obnoxious to the men of the Derg, nothing, not even the fact that he had been the founder of Addis Abeba, would have saved his statue from landing in the dark corner of

some storehouse. But already back in time, he did not pose any threat and he continued being venerated for what he was: the man who had given back to Ethiopia, and by far, the imperial borders previous to the 16th century.

From Addis Abeba to Ankober

There are many things in the Ethiopian capital, besides the equestrian statue, that evoke the name of Menelik. There is the *Gebbi*, the hill where he erected his palace, and there are the thermal waters where he used to go to with his wife Taytu. Further away, on top of mount Entoto, which protects the city from the north, there are the remains of the first camp-residence and the Mariam and Raguel churches. Taytu commanded the first one to be built while the second, so as not to seem less devoted than his wife, was ordered to be built by the Emperor himself. Only the unpleasant climate made them descend from the captivating mountain from which they could cast their view over the plateau. At that time, that plateau was a forest and nowadays it comprises the city of Addis Abeba. Another place that also evokes Menelik is the Baata Maryam church, located behind the *Gebbi*. There, in its crypt, the Emperor and his consort rest in their final dream.

If we wish to go from the tomb back to the cradle, we have to travel 150 kilometres northeast from Addis Abeba. The road glides slowly through the vast prairie, displaying the scenery of old and recent battles. Upon arrival at *Debre Berhan*, a secondary road leads us to the very border of the Shewan plateau. Here, where the plateau formidably and

writings,” explains bishop Jaroseau, “and I never suspected that the man I had in front of me harboured such exceptional capacities.” Every now and then he would visit the mission, and even though he was a distant and cold man, he behaved with courtesy and was ready to help the missionaries as much as he could. The man was the poet Arthur Rimbaud. His literary career had been a flash. He started off at the age of 17 and finished it at 19, becoming the seed for French symbolism. Afterwards, he left his pen aside and started with the weapons and ivory trade.

“He was aware of how poor we were,” continues Jaroseau, “and would bring us things he received from France. He led an extremely simple life and often he would be seen walking depleted of energy with no more food than some roasted corn he had filled up his pockets with. It seemed to me that he had chosen the wrong profession: he should have become Trappist or Carthusian.” In 1891, Rimbaud became seriously ill and he was taken to France where he died that same year. His sister wrote to the missionaries of Harar: “In his last days he insistently asked for the prayers of the members of the Catholic mission in Harar. That was his supreme wish...” And she concluded: “Could you throughout the year celebrate some masses for his eternal rest at the Mission’s church?”

To Jijiga, towards the desert

To travel more than 500 kilometres to reach Harar and not cover the 160 kilometres that separates Harar from Jijiga was something I could regret. Traveling was never easy during the Derg times and we had to take advantage

Because he was not able to access Yohannes' domains again, he thought Harar was a more strategic location to re-establish contact with the missions of Wollega and Kaffa as soon as circumstances would allow it.

In March 1881, he set foot in the city and bought a house very close to main mosque, a place where still today the residence of the Apostolic Vicar of Harar can be found. The beginnings were not easy and Catholic missionaries were able to experience how Muslim intolerance was in no way less than Orthodox intolerance. For a long time, they had to lock themselves at home to avoid being stoned. Only slowly the inhabitants of the city got used to their presence. Upon Menelik's conquest, the situation changed radically for the missionaries. The new governor, Ras Makonnen, was an old friend of the missionaries and they always benefitted from his admiration and protection. When he set off for the battle of Adua, he entrusted his four-year-old son —the future emperor Haile Selassie— to the custody of the Catholic mission, where he was educated until the age of eight. Harar became then the second cradle of the Apostolic Vicariate of the Oromo, funded by Massaia in 1846. His successor Taurin Cahagne as well as the third Vicar, Andreas Jaroseau, who ruled the Vicariate for 38 years (1900-1938), started unfolding new missionary locations, first among the Oromo settlements of the surrounding areas and later on stretching out to southern Ethiopia.

Before the missionaries' arrival, a distinguished European man motivated by very different interests, one could say even conflicting, had arrived to Harar. But, how could these men ignore each other being all Europeans and for more coincidence, French? "I did not know of his



Sculpture of Emperor Menelik II in the square which bears his name

whimsically starts to drop off towards the Awash valley, lies Ankober, the location the kings of Shewa chose as their capital. On top of a peaked hill, a semi-demolished wall recalls the rustic palace where Menelik was born on a day of August in 1844.

Shewa is a huge plateau that extends along the central part of Ethiopia. Its kings say that their genealogical lineage goes back to Emperor Lebne Dengel (1508-1540) who roamed the region escaping from the Muslim General Ahmed Grañ. Grañ's raids and the invasions of the Oromo tribes reduced the extension of the Empire

drastically. The future Shewa kingdom would stem from the bastion of Menz. Its first kings happened to be highly and exceptionally capable and lucky in terms of extending their power, first among the Amhara and then among the Oromo, until they were able to control a vast territory. They used to pay tribute to the Emperor, who lived in Gondar and who held purely nominal power. We are in the 18th and 19th century, a period that Ethiopians name “Era of Judges.” Taking advantage of the general chaos, the grandfather of Menelik, Sahle Selassie, adopted the title of king (*negus*) and there was no one who could object.

Tewodros crosses their path

The times of Haile Melekot (1847-1855), son of Sahle Selassie and father of Menelik, were different. In Gondar a man had appeared with the aim of turning the authority of the Emperor into something more than nominal power. That man was Tewodros. After subduing the nearby provinces, Tewodros entered Shoa in 1855. Haile Melekot took refuge in Ankober, where he died before Tewodros’ arrival. His men fled through the narrow passes in Bulga, taking Menelik, at the time an 11-year-old boy, with them. However, Tewodros caught them along the way and they had to hand him over. Menelik spent ten years in captivity with Tewodros in Magdala. The Emperor grew fond of him and he gave him his daughter as wife. He seemed submissive, but as the power of his master declined, the dream of escaping materialized in his head. One day it became a reality. The chronicles of the time narrate it as follows:

Menelik and his men appeared on the first day of 1887. Abdulahi went out and met them far from the city, in Chelenqo. They were literally swept away and Menelik continued victoriously to the city, which surrendered without a fight. That was the end of an era: Harar, though harmless in the previous centuries, was still the embodiment of the Muslim enemy waiting for the next movement of the Christian Empire. After its conquest, many Amhara Christians moved to the city: soldiers, settlers, civil servants, and so on. In the middle of Harar’s old centre the Medhane church was erected. Tensions and violent outbreaks could have been expected, but nothing happened. Quite the opposite happened: both the Harari people and the Oromo of the nearby lands would soon become loyal vassals of the Ethiopian Crown. A great deal of this achievement must be attributed to Ras Makonnen’s wisdom and equity. He was Menelik’s cousin and Harar’s first Ethiopian Governor.

An odd centre for a Catholic Mission

It would not have been normal for Catholic missionaries to look for such an ardent Muslim city to establish as the bridgehead for their entry in Ethiopia, but history—and providence—carry their secrets. Cardinal Massaia and his exiguous missionary group had to leave Ethiopia in 1879, after being expelled by Emperor Yohannes IV. For old Massaia, it was impossible to think of returning, but not for Taurin Cahagne, his assistant bishop and successor in the Vicariate of the Oromo. A year after having been expelled from Ethiopia, Cahagne was already planning his return.

with rifles were enough to protect it against sporadic attacks of the Oromo, whose only weapons were spears. Every afternoon, the five entry gates were locked and the keys were placed at the feet of the Emir. So, inside its walls, Harar, for three centuries to come, was able to preserve its own language as well as its own traditions.

With time, that city enclosed in itself became the symbol of inaccessibility and mystery for Europe. Not even its exact location was known. A legend said that no foreigner who entered the city would come out alive. For the famous orientalist Richard Francis Burton, who had already been to the Sanctuary of Mecca, that legend was more an encouragement than an obstacle. In 1885 he entered the city dressed as a Turkish merchant; he stayed for ten days and described it for the curious people of the West. Apart from the beauty of its women, Burton found it decadent and unworthy of attention.

In 1875, it was occupied by Egypt. Egypt was not able to retain it and abandoned the old city in 1884. Harar again became independent under the command of the Emir Abdulahi, who tried to reinstate the former Islamic Theocracy. His hatred against foreigners, as well as the slave trade that was flourishing there, provided Emperor Menelik with the excuse he needed to “restore order” in Harar before European powers would do so. He sent his emissaries to Abdulahi. They poured bags of grain before the Emir saying, “If you do not accept Menelik’s proposal, his soldiers will come here, as many as grains there are in these bags.” The Emir was not intimidated and replied equally expressively. He ordered a basket of very spicy pepper to be brought before him, poured it on the floor and said to the Ethiopian emissaries, “They shall come and we will burn their eyes with this powder.”

“Atse Tewodros woke up suddenly in the middle of the night chanting war songs. He woke up the guardians and told them: go and check if something was happening. They went to the edge of the cliff and when they returned they said: “Our Lord, there is nothing, everything is quiet.” The king went back home, but came out of the house another three times chanting war songs and posing the same question... At dawn one of the generals brought him the news: Menelik has fled from Magdala and is on his way home to his land”.

It was 1865 and Menelik was 21 years old. Tewodros had reasons to be worried. From all his possible enemies, the Prince of Shewa was potentially the most dangerous. In fact, back in his kingdom, it was not difficult for Menelik to be recognized as the apparent heir. His ancestors, especially Sahle Selassie, had gained the respect and love of his vassals, which played a key role. Shewa crowded around the newly returned king. As long as Tewodros would live, it was not about causing a stir, and Menelik decided to organize and enhance his kingdom, acquire weapons and establish contacts with European powers.

At the beginning of 1868 a distinguished character arrived at his Court: Cardinal Guillermo Massaia. He was on the way to his old mission among the Oromo people in the West, but Menelik did not allow him to leave Shewa thinking that Massaia could be useful as a link with Europe and as a political advisor. Around that date, the Kingdom of Tewodros was facing its final and dramatic end. The English column lead by Sir Robert Napier was headed up towards the Magdala fortress where the Emperor had entrenched himself. The crossing of the expedition through Tigray territories was facilitated by

the people, as well as their leader Kassa, for there was a sole desire in every corner of Ethiopia: that the tyrant be overthrown. On April 13th, Tewodros finally lost his life and his reign.

Already King, not yet Emperor

Upon Tewodros' death, three leaders of three respective regions proclaimed themselves Emperors or *Neguse Negest*. Among them was Menelik. However, the rifles given to Kassa by the English tipped the battle in favour of Kassa, who adopted the name of Yohannes IV. Menelik submitted without resisting and Yohannes allowed him to continue holding the title of *Negus*, or King of Shewa. A hidden hostility existed between the two during the 20 years Yohannes was emperor throughout which Menelik did not always play fair. Above all he was concerned with arming himself. So he established a friendship with the Italians, while Yohannes was fighting with them in Eritrea. And he did nothing to help the Emperor against the Mahdi of Sudan, which he should have regarded as common enemies.

While he left Yohannes on his own to solve his problems in the north, Menelik vented his ambitions in the other three cardinal points. He launched a series of conquest campaigns that by far doubled the size of the territory he had inherited from his parents. By strengthening his own position thanks to economic and human capital provided by the annexed territories, he was also trying to prevent the European nations from conquering the flanks of his



Date of the Duque, the entrance to the city of Harar

It was then, when 400 Portuguese commanded by Cristovao da Gama, son of the famous sailor Vasco de Gama, entered the scene. They joined the demoralized Army of the Ethiopian Emperor Claudius and managed to vanquish the Muslims next to Lake Tana, 1,000 kilometres from Harar. Grañ himself lost his life in the battle. It was February 22nd, 1543. From then onwards, Harar would never pose a threat to Ethiopia. Neither would Ethiopia be a threat to Harar, because both the Muslim and the Christian Kingdoms were invaded by the Oromo tribes and the bordering region returned to its semi-nomadic lifestyle. Only the city remained as an independent island, its focus on trade allowing it to become quite prosperous.

Nur ibn al-Wazir, Grañ's nephew, surrounded the city with a wall that would have hardly resisted a proper siege, but, luckily, no one attempted one. A couple of men armed

Surprisingly, and like a small miracle, the virtue of tolerance was suddenly born in the hearts of both groups alike. It is difficult to explain how the Christian conquerors did not discharge all their revenge against the centuries-old enemy city or why they respected its initial structure, establishing themselves in the outskirts, where a sort of outside Christian city was created, or how since from that time up to today, Harar has been an example of coexistence of two different religious groups, none of them, at that time, characterised by its open-mindedness.

History of an antagonism

If at some point in the past Harar was a Christian enclave, it was in faraway times and when Harar was only an insignificant village. Local traditions date its conversion to Islam back to the times of Prophet Muhammad. Throughout the Middle Ages, Harar was the base of the Muslim expansion towards the interior of Ethiopia and it gave rise to several kingdoms like Yifat, Fatigar, or Dawaro, which fought continuously against the Christian Empire. Harar is mentioned for the first time in Ethiopian history during the rule of Emperor Amda Seyon (1314-1344), the tireless Christian fighter. It is asserted that he arrived victorious at the city and deposed the Emir. Wars kept going on throughout centuries with different outcomes and they reached their peak two centuries later, when Ahmed ibn Ibrahim, known as Grañ, traversed Christian lands, destroying towns and burning churches and monasteries. Harar grew rich thanks to this bountiful loot. The Ethiopian Empire seemed destined to total surrender because of the attacks of the dreadful General.

domains. Jimma and Kaffa submitted in 1881; Arsi and the small reigns of Welega province were annexed in 1886. In 1887 it was the turn of Illubabor and the important Kingdom of Harar, towards the East. The most faraway regions, Ogaden, Bale and Sidamo were conquered between 1890 and 1893.

Yohannes did not see in good light this growing power of his “vassal,” but there was little he could do to avoid it. A final confrontation between the two was becoming unavoidable when Yohannes died suddenly fighting the Mahdist troops at the Sudanese border. Death freed him, possibly, from the humiliation of seeing himself replaced by his enemy. Menelik, wasting neither blood nor energy, could finally be crowned emperor. It was the year 1889.



Sketch of Menelik II with his wife Taytu

Adwa

For Italians, this short word meant disgrace for many long years. “I still feel the scar on my back, the shameful scar of Adwa,” writes the old D’Annunzio in 1935. That was precisely the year in which Mussolini’s armies crossed the Ethiopian borders in several points “to repair the shame of that defeat”. For Ethiopia, however, Adwa meant a place on the world map. Europe had the chance to find out where the African nation that annihilated a colonial army was located.

In 1889, Menelik and Italy had signed the Treaty of Wichale, according to which both nations committed themselves to “perpetual peace and friendship.” The document, written in Italian and Amharic, differed in a key word of article 17. While the Amharic version stated that Ethiopia “could” use the services provided by the Italian Government to establish communication with other European governments, the Italian text stated that Ethiopia “had to” use those services. Italy used the ambiguity to consider Ethiopia a protectorate and so communicated it to the rest of colonial powers. When Menelik realized the trickery, he hastily denounced the treaty and the relationship between both countries froze notably.

The Italians had already occupied Eritrea and they were very clear about their expansionist intentions towards the rest of Ethiopia. One day they decided to cross the Mareb River, which served as a border, and entered Ethiopia. That day Menelik’s people were ready to start a war campaign. Throughout the nation the Emperor’s proclamation was heard as follows:

There is a focal point where all this polychromatic spark seems to come from: the Muslim market. There is another market, big and disjointed, outside the city walls, called the Christian Market, but it lacks brightness if compared to the one located in the heart of the old Harar. Its centre is a small square surrounded by Arab-inspired porticos and from there it spills through every radial and transversal street to form an endless line in which small shops exhibit typical artefacts: canvasses, baskets, goldsmith works, and so on.

Unfortunately, there are other typical things in Harar which are less pleasant. Lying on the streets, badly covered by filthy rags, we find the hardened consumers of *khat*, the *khat*-addicted. They also exist in other Ethiopian cities, but in Harar there are so many that they have become a distinctive feature in the city’s folklore. As passers-by walk near them, they rebuke, beg, bless, curse or repeat refrains they have learnt by heart.

Harar—as I have said—is unmistakably Muslim. The two minarets of the main Mosque rise up like two guards, standing out above the roofs of the houses. Nonetheless, they accomplished their tasks as guards rather unsuccessfully, because, more than a century ago, in 1881 to be precise, a humble but daring Catholic bishop arrived and settled very close to them, almost at their shadow. They tolerated him. They also tolerated that, a few years later, an Orthodox Church, Medhane Alem would be erected in the centre of the city. Was it tolerance or an act of force majeure? Probably, it was the second. They could not do much, in fact, against the victorious Christian troops of Menelik that occupied the city in 1887.

Once on top, the road turns to the East and goes through the spinal cord of the mountain some kilometres more, through eucalyptus and coffee plantations. Finally, it arrives in Harar. Leaning against softly sloping hills, before the mountains start to drop off to become desert, Harar, the vigilant city, keeps watch over Dankalia to the north, over Ogaden to the south.

Harar “the walled city”

The Harar one finds as soon as one enters—I will describe it as I saw it in 1986 hoping that it has not changed much—is not the real Harar. In order to find the real Harar, we should walk for a while along a wide avenue flanked by trees and big estate buildings. We have to leave behind Ras Makonnen’s statue, his palace and the Military Academy, and cross Duke’s Gate, recently added to the five old gates, to penetrate the walled sanctuary. Then we have entered the real Harar. The Harar inside the walls is neither an Ethiopian city nor an African one. However, it is located in both Africa and Ethiopia. The thousand and one cobble-stoned alleys scattered amongst white-walled houses and flat roofs in the shape of balconies, take us to another world: to the Muslim Middle East.

Some cars drive around the old centre. They park or turn around in the main square, next to Medhane Alem Church. However, here cars are an anachronism in the opposite sense; they are almost a profanation. Pedestrians fit the landscape better: women come and go, up and down the entangled streets wearing colourful dresses, necklaces and varied bows, carrying colourful baskets on their heads.



Sketch of Menelik II, creator of modern Ethiopia

“Gather the army, may the drums be heard... Men of my nation, up to now I believe I have never hurt you and you have never been a reason of sorrow for me. Today the strong ones shall help with their strength: the weak ones please help me with your prayer, taking care of children, women and faith. But if you are negligent and you decide not to help me, beware. You will hate me because I will not fail to punish you.”

More than 100,000 men of war went to the north. The clash with the invaders took place in the hills near the city of Adwa on March 1st, 1896. The Italians had underestimated the ability of the Ethiopians in terms of organization and equipment. The fact that they were not familiar with the land caused them to make several tactical mistakes. The outcome was the almost total annihilation of 15,000 Italians, amongst the dead, injured and prisoners. According to the new treaty that would replace Wichale, Italy recognized Ethiopian sovereignty. On the other hand, Menelik accepted the Italian presence in Eritrea.

Peak and decline

From Adwa onwards, Ethiopia was able to enjoy a productive time of peace, quite rare in its history. Foreign delegations flourished in Addis Abeba. Apart from the already familiar delegations of Italy, France and England, new ones like Germany, Turkey and Russia settled in the city. Menelik bragged about his hospitality. The expenditure was relatively low; actually, the concessions

of the Afar region, where the sun is fire. Three million years ago the *Australopithecus Afarensis*, an ancestor of mankind, lived around that area. Donald Johanson, who discovered her remains, called her Lucy, simply because the Beatles' song “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” was very popular in those days and frequently heard in his camp. The Ethiopians translated the name into Dinknesh, which means “you are a wonder” (in regards to beauty, obviously). Experts have the hypothesis that due to the hardship of the habitat, the volume and complexity of the brain evolved. In fact, she probably had to “think” a lot, in order not to succumb to the hellish environment where she lived.

In the afternoon of the second day, we arrived in Dire Dawa, a city that was born thanks to the construction of the railway at the beginning of the 20th century. In Dire Dawa we have to leave behind train and valley to proceed to Harar. An old bus purrs, splutters and seethes to make its way up the mountains. The slopes are arid at the beginning but are slowly replenished with greenish plants as soon as we go higher. It is *khat* (or *chat*), the coca of East Africa. It is not necessary to get off the bus to have a closer look at the plant. A good half of the passengers carry a bunch in their hands. They select the most tender leaves and put them in their mouths and chew them indefinitely. When possible, they mix them with some sugar. The driver also chews *khat*. His teeth have become green and a juice of a similar colour comes out of the corner of his mouth and dribbles down his chin. Does this soft drug wake us up or put us to sleep? The facial expression of the driver is not the liveliest, but his eyes stare vigilantly at the winding road, which is enough to calm down the possible fears of the passenger.



A Street in the center of Harar

itself and a colourful mosque. The rest of the scenery was only miserable huts made of straw. We, the numerous passengers, thought we were melting, it was so hot.

The Ethiopian highlands were far behind us. The train had headed for the Awash valley towards the lowlands

made to each delegation were minimal and there was always compensation. The Emperor knew how to benefit from foreign experts in order to go about modernizing the nation. Though scarce and only in its capital, Ethiopia very soon profited from post services, electricity, telephone lines and the telegraph. With regards to the social development, Menelik took interest in the codification of laws, the abolition of slavery, education, and so on. However, more could have been done. He had taken a liking to weapons. The acquisition of weapons became his main concern and a good portion of his money was invested in it.

The last years of Menelik were dark and sad. Since 1906 he suffered from several cerebral infarctions and the first symptoms of paralysis appeared. In 1908 he designated his grandson *Lij Iyasu* his heir, but *Lij Iyasu* was still very young at the time. Towards the end of 1908, a new seizure paralysed him and left him speechless. The state of bewilderment in which he lived throughout the coming years spared him the pain of knowing about the intrigues incited by his wife Taytu and the ineptitude of those around him. But his mere presence and the possibility that he would at some point recover his mental abilities were enough to stop the three lions (France, England and Italy) from dividing up the nation.

Menelik's flame of life was extinguished on December 12th, 1913. After his death, the nation entered a period of confusion and uncertainty due to the erratic political agenda conducted by *Lij Iyasu*. In 1916 a coup dethroned *Lij Iyasu* while Ras Teferi Makonnen rose up as the new power figure. Firstly, Tafari was appointed plenipotentiary regent of Queen *Zewditu*. When she died in 1930, he became Emperor under the name of Haile Selassie.

Menelik was neither a pure and wild dreamer like Tewodoros nor the selfless and fanatical Orthodox warrior that Yohannes IV, his predecessor to the throne, was. Menelik fitted more the image of a western man, pragmatic and balanced. Even though he identified with Orthodox Faith and Ethiopian traditional culture, unlike Yohannes, he was tolerant towards the Muslims, Protestants and Catholics. Neither tribe nor religion were passport or obstacle in his Empire. Proof of this is the many Oromo who occupied positions of responsibility. Even if Menelik tended to be strict, sometimes even unfair and cruel, he was normally impartial and cared about justice.

Tewodros dreamed of an Ethiopia that would be united again, after two centuries of chaotic dispersion. However, his political approach divided the nation even more. But the path to unity had already started. Yohannes encountered a great obstacle upon his unifying attempt: Menelik himself. Menelik did not encounter this obstacle and Ethiopia under his command started to be united, as far as unity is possible within Ethiopia.

CHAPTER 10

HARAR, THE RIVAL OF THE EAST

Harar, regarded during several centuries as the fourth Islamic city, was during the Middle Ages the main enemy of Christian Ethiopia. Harar could have been the capital of a Muslim Ethiopian Empire had its most renowned General, Ahmed Grañ “the left-handed” triumphed over the Christians. However, he was finally defeated by them in the “Year of Grace” of 1543. As a zealously Muslim city, no one could have ever foreseen that Harar would end up being, after its conquest in 1887 by Menelik’s army, an example of coexistence of the Cross and the Crescent Moon. Oddly enough, it also became the gate through which, in the 19th century, Catholic missions would enter southern Ethiopia.

My first and, up until today, only visit to Harar was in 1986. As means of transportation I chose the classic train that connected Addis with Djibouti. The 500 kilometres between Addis Abeba and Dire Dawa, the closest station to Harar, should have taken us 12 hours, but that was not a lucky day and it took us 32. The torrential rains had dug a sinkhole below the railway and it had to be filled. After that, the locomotive encountered other problems. It stopped for hours unending in a small station where the only concrete buildings were the station

CHAPTER 9

HAILE SELASSIE I, THE LAST LION OF JUDAH

The actual sovereign—and almost owner—of Ethiopia for fifty-eight years (1916-1974), Haile Selassie I clung to his legendary titles with the same fervor with which he embraced his modern reforms. He wanted to reconcile the past with the present, but he only managed to reach halfway: he was in power too long and the world was moving too fast for him. His rule ended with the traumatic culmination of an era. However, one day Ethiopian history will acknowledge—as it has already begun to do—what Haile Selassie, notwithstanding his mistakes, did for his nation.

At what point did the dynamic, cautious and enlightened Emperor cease to be so and become an anachronistic old man, tied to the ghostly palace protocol and indifferent to the gloomy misery of his people? Oriana Fallaci, the sharp and almost merciless Italian journalist, interviewed Haile Selassie in 1972. A few days earlier, she had seen him in Gondar riding slowly in one of his super luxurious cars while throwing one-birr bills (Ethiopian currency equivalent at that time to half a dollar) to the crowds of beggars, who shoved, trampled, and ripped each other's rags just to get hold of some bills. Facing this scene, the Emperor smiled benevolently, whi-

le Oriana's soul revolted. The interview with him was a failed attempt at reaching an understanding between two people coming from completely different galaxies.

"Your Majesty," Oriana burst out, "what do you feel when you distribute alms to people? What are your feelings when you are faced with so much misery?"

"Rich and poor have always existed and always will." This was his answer.

Indeed, to Haile Selassie everything seemed clear, written, eternally fixed; and he, the King of Kings by God's eternal will, possessed the key to the explanation.

"What will happen when you die, Your Majesty?"

"Ethiopia has existed for three thousand years. Our dynasty has ruled since the Queen of Sheba met King Solomon and a son was born of their union. A King is not indispensable, and besides, our succession is already ensured. There is a Crown Prince and he will reign when we are no longer there. That is what we have decided and so it must be."

"But, how does Haile Selassie view death?"

"What? View what?"

"Death, Your Majesty."

"Death? Who is this woman? Where does she come from? What does she want from me? Enough, go away!" And he threw Oriana out of his presence. Two years later (1974), the Emperor or his heir no longer reigned.

However, Haile Selassie had not always been the decrepit man of archaic manners that Oriana Fallaci interviewed. Despite his bodily insignificance (he was short and thin), he had had a human stature and even an intimidating external appearance. "He is the only man I have ever seen," says the biographer L. Mosley, "who could

and his archaic regime unless they wanted to revile it? Who would mourn for him? Nobody would, had it not been for the fact that the new revolutionary reality was soon proved more disappointing, difficult and cruel than the previous one. To the extent that the name of the unnameable came back to circulate in the hearts and, hesitantly, on the lips of many Ethiopians.

The location of Haile Selassie's remains was revealed after the fall of the Derg and was exhumed on February 16th, 1992. Until a solemn funeral could be celebrated and the Emperor could be buried in a dignified way, he was put in a coffin and temporarily deposited in the crypt of Baata Mariam church, next to the tombs of Menelik II, Taytu and Zewditu. His remnants, along with those of his wife Menen Asfaw, now lie in separate solid and austere tombs, located on the left side of the presbytery, inside the Holy Trinity Orthodox Cathedral, which Haile Selassie himself had ordered to be built.

the dethroning order. He thanked them and said that the army had never let him down. Then, they ordered him to get into a small Volkswagen Beetle, he who had been so fond of Rolls Royces. “What? Should I travel in this?” he complained. But he got inside the car. He survived a short year to these events living in a small house in Menelik’s old *Gebbi*. On August 28th, 1975, a note with very few lines appeared in the main newspaper of revolutionary Ethiopia reading: “Yesterday, the former Emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie I, died. A blockage on his circulatory system due to thrombosis was the cause of his death.”

Out of the diverse versions circulating at the time of the Derg about the death of Haile Selassie, the most idyllic one, but also the most improbable, was that he died a natural death believing himself still Emperor. After the Derg’s downfall, the worst suspicion was confirmed: Mengistu and his people did not have the patience to wait for his natural death. He was murdered, apparently, by suffocation with a pillow, and was secretly buried under the floor in a room of the imperial palace.

Haile Selassie Street, in Piazza, was renamed Adwa Street. Haile Selassie University also changed its name to Addis Abeba University and the first page of thousands of books, showing the Emperor’s photograph, was torn from all of them. The speeches of the new rulers referred to a horrible feudal past, without pronouncing the name of the one who had become the unmentionable. Ethiopia had just left behind something that immediately turned into a remote past. Ethiopians had made, as people said, a leap into the future. Huge hopes filled the hearts of millions of peasants at the first measures taken by the revolutionary government. Who would remember the old Lion of Judah



Haile Selassie I, the last descendant of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba

come forward to push a vehicle in the middle of the mud without ceasing to instill, through his sweat, an imperial halo.” The League of Nations trembled the few times that diminutive man mounted the rostrum to speak. They shivered not with fear of his tanks, but at the upsetting logic and the moral power of his arguments. When, I insist, did he change? It was not all of a sudden. Rather, we would argue that his final stage was nothing more than the evolution to the maximum of his innate talent for ruling. Those qualities are exactly the ones that make a sovereign a charismatic leader in youth; in maturity, a despot; and in old age, a grotesque megalomaniac.

The patient, clever young man

In 1887, Menelik II appointed Governor of Harar his cousin Makonnen, the most reliable of the *Rases*, or lords of his Empire. Makonnen blended the most traditional nationalism with a strong desire for progress, something unusual in these lords. In 1889, he travelled to Europe. Back in Harar, he opened up his province to European influence, while keeping, at the same time, the favor of the Harari people, Muslims who were expected to be hostile to the Empire. Ras Makonnen’s son, Tafari, was born on July 23rd, 1892 in the mountain village of Ejersa Goro, where the Makonnen family would seek refuge from the heat of the city of Harar. Tafari’s childhood was relatively peaceful. At the age of four, Tafari’s custody was granted to the Catholic mission, while his father left to fight in the battle of Adwa against the Italians, contributing decisively to the victory of Adwa.

In February 1974, the unrest reached its peak. The 4th Army Division, located in Addis Abeba behind the train station, rebelled and started to control the development of the events. Soldiers went out and carried out orders on behalf of the Emperor without knowing exactly who gave the instructions. The “creeping coup,” or progressive coup d’état, had begun. One night they arrested the Prime Minister and almost all the members of his cabinet. Detention of politicians, dignitaries and people close to the Emperor followed. The palace was deserted. The Emperor was silent and allowed them to do as they pleased. One day, he began to wear his military uniform and to take his marshal stick in order to make people believe that everything happening was under his absolute control. Not even with these tricks could he calm the overflowing waters. In June, something more was revealed about those who were behind the orders given. It was the Derg, or the Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces, which was composed of 120 members whose identity remained anonymous. The summer of 1974 was a kind of cat-and-mouse game. The Derg dismantled all the institutions one after another and Haile Selassie gave his approval and signed. At the end of August, there was no one left in the palace, except for the Emperor and a humble manservant.

His turn had to come and so it came. On the night between the 11th to the 12th of September, which in Ethiopia was the first night of the year, he was told to watch something on television. He obeyed. It was Dimpleby’s report, *The Hidden Hunger*, which alternated sequences of people dying of starvation in Wollo with images of the Emperor feeding his dogs on silver trays. On the morning of the 12th, several officers arrived at the palace and read

compared to the Ethiopian past. But the outside world was changing much faster and the distances between the two were increasingly greater. In addition, over time, the old Lion of Judah grew tired and became disappointed with the reforms. He got tired of pushing his retrograde Rases, jealous of their feudal privileges. On the other hand, he also had a growing number of personal privileges to defend. His absolutism, his wealth and his taste for luxury increased over the years. Why change anything? “It has always been like this, it will continue to be like this ...” He had promoted education and culture, and now the students were the most agitated ones, those who were causing more and more problems. Better, then, less education and more discipline. Better to cultivate estrangement, obscurity, self-devotion ... so that nobody would want to challenge his power.

The endpoint

Although discontent was always on the rise, nobody would have thought that it would break out irreparably. A little patience and the venerable old man would go on his own to the grave. However, the events unexpectedly developed at an accelerating pace. This was mainly due to the famine suffered in the provinces of Wollo and Tigray between 1972 and 1974, resulting in 200,000 victims and about which only through Europe could the Ethiopians find out. The BBC reporter, Dimbleby, disclosed the famine in Europe with the documentary movie *The Hidden Hunger*. A series of chain protests came one after the other: students, taxi drivers, soldiers ...

If we are to believe the biographer Mosley, the Harari boy was already sure from the age of seven that one day he would succeed the respected Menelik to the throne. As a royal descendant, that possibility existed, although it was a remote one for him. There were other candidates with a better title and position. However, he prepared himself, he studied, he was curious ... He was a fragile and sweet child with a calm and, at the same time, confident look on his face. Oriana Fallaci could not imagine that the old man in front of her had ever been a child, had ever been young before and had ever disobeyed. So she asked him about it. “We do not understand that question,” replied the Emperor. “Of course, We have been a child, a boy, an adolescent, an adult, and finally an old man. Our Lord the Creator made Us like everyone else. Maybe you wish to know what kind of youth We were. Well, We were a serious, diligent, obedient youth. We were sometimes punished, but do you know why? Because what We were made to study did not seem enough and We wished to study further. We didn’t want to waste time on games.” Then, Oriana ended with a not very coherent conclusion: “Actually, Haile Selassie was already old at birth.”

The child Tafari did more than study. He was, among other things, a good hunter and a skilled horse rider. At the age of eleven, he was taken to Addis Abeba for the first time before Menelik. The Emperor liked him, but not his wife, Taytu, in whom Tafari aroused a strong aversion. This would have very serious consequences for him. Ras Makonnen died in 1906 and, that same year, Menelik suffered his first stroke. Taytu took advantage to remove Tafari from the province of Harar, where he had succeeded his father as governor. When the Emperor regained his

health, he realized the many dangers threatening the young man. He summoned him to the palace to protect him and so that he would learn the art of governing by his side. The last year that Menelik could rule the country with full use of his faculties was 1906. The seizures recurred, turning him little by little into a shadow of a man, with a clouded mind, interrupted by increasingly brief intervals of lucidity.

Years of intrigue and cabals followed, in which the lonely and helpless Tafari had the opportunity to use the weapons available for him: cold calculation, the full control over his feelings, dissembling, and patient waiting. Menelik would have wished to nominate him as heir to the throne, but he was well aware that this meant putting him in greater danger. Since Tafari would not have any support for facing the ambitions of Taytu and the Rases. The Emperor appointed, instead, his grandson Lij Iyasu, born of his daughter Shewaregga and the powerful Ras Mikael. He could not find a more incompetent candidate. Four years younger than Tafari, Iyasu was still a child when he was named Menelik's successor. He was just a kid, but an arrogant and corrupt one. In December 1913 when Menelik finally died, Iyasu was seventeen years old and nobody seemed able to put an end to his eccentricities. Between him and Tafari, there was a hidden animosity that dated back to their childhood. Iyasu sent him to Harar as governor, perhaps to keep him at bay. However, later when Iyasu began to ally himself with the Muslims and moving in the area of Harar was in his interest, he made Tafari return to Addis Abeba. By doing so, he was hastening, without realizing it, his own downfall.

Ethiopia was running into uncertainty and chaos and Tafari was the man on whom everyone pinned their hopes

that black eve of the Second World War. In 1941, England, who had gone to war with Italy, decided to do something to put his imperial guest back on the throne. A column of troops, accompanied by the Emperor, entered through Sudan in the region of Gojjam to join the Ethiopian guerrilla forces. At the same time, an army was coming from Kenya and another was attacking in the north from Eritrea. The Italian resistance collapsed and the Emperor was able to enter Addis Abeba victoriously on May 5th, 1941, five years and three days after he had left.

A Reign that was far too long

Ethiopia was once again a sovereign nation and Haile Selassie its Emperor. He still had the old mission of reforming and modernizing the country, a task that he again undertook by using the tool that had proved to be his strength: international diplomacy. Ethiopia became one of the founding members of the United Nations, signing side by side with England, the United States and the other allied states. Later, in 1963, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), of which he was a great promoter, was born. He managed to establish its permanent headquarters in Addis Abeba. Then, there were his mediations in international conflicts and his travels. The Emperor travelled constantly and indefatigably, less, perhaps, for the purpose of his job than for escaping the national reality.

In fact, Ethiopia was not improving in the same way as the Emperor's name, which had been gaining international recognition by leaps and bounds. Indeed, he had undertaken reforms that symbolized a major step forward

impossible anyway. On October 3rd, 1935, the Italian troops crossed the border from Eritrea and invaded the nation. The Ethiopians fought back, but it was a lost war. The Emperor knew this very well; nevertheless, he wanted to go in person to the north to reconstitute the already almost disbanded army and to give encouragement with his presence. This was of little use. In Mai Chew, the last remnants of the Ethiopian resistance were swept away. Haile Selassie returned to Addis Abeba, where the Council of Ministers urged him to leave the country. On May 2nd, 1936, slightly before the Italian forces cut the railway line, he took the train from Addis Abeba to Djibouti, en route to his exile. On July 30th, at the headquarters of the League of Nations in Geneva, he addressed the organisation with a speech that has gone down in history:

“I, Haile Selassie I, Emperor of Ethiopia, am here today to claim that justice which is due to my people...The problem submitted to the Assembly today is a much wider one. It is not merely a question of the settlement of Italian aggression. It is the very existence of the League of Nations. It is the confidence that each State is to place in international treaties. It is the value of promises made to small States... In a word, it is international morality that is at stake.”

Perhaps Haile Selassie was never as great as that day. Another paradoxical greatness was the following four years he lived in the English city of Bath in semi-seclusion and with economic constraints. Fragile, silent, full of dignity, he never begged for anything and never gave a bit of anything. He was the personification, the pathetic image of the right of the weak that was so cynically violated on

as the best candidate to replace Iyasu. Only he seemed to be unaware of this. But he was not. Behind the scenes, Tafari was making his calculations and pulling the strings. He knew he was young, and that he did not have his own troops at his disposal. Each Ras had their own army and sought their own benefit. Today they would use him as a key man, but tomorrow they would try to get rid of him. Tafari was alone, as he was light-years ahead of all those feudal lords. He, educated, refined and modern, represented change and reform, while the lords stood as tradition, if not as pure ambition and brute force. They feared him and he could not do without them.

Rising towards the peak of power

On September 29th, 1916, the discontent against Iyasu finally took the shape of a coup d'état. The Patriarch excommunicated him for having converted to Islam. An official faction declared Iyasu deposed, proclaiming Zewditu, daughter of Menelik, as Empress and Tafari as plenipotentiary regent and heir to the throne. A brief but bloody civil war ensued, as a result of which the supporters of Iyasu and his father Ras Mikael were annihilated. Tafari then began his game of chess to neutralize the greedy Rases that had brought him to power. He did all this with great skill, using the power of some lords to subdue the others. Tafari used to avoid staining his hands with blood; he just cornered, isolated or, at most, imprisoned people. Many plots were hatched against him, but they were all aborted. The Empress Zewditu was also pushed onto the periphery, becoming a permanent brake on the Regent's reforms. On

a regular basis she used to involve herself in intrigues with those likeminded Rases.

Tafari was not just another conspirator, the luckiest and the most cunning of all. He had plans for Ethiopia: bringing modernization in all fields: justice, administration, the army; yet, holding off the Rases was not the same job as getting them enthusiastic about the reforms. In fact, they would be a dead weight, difficult to drag along during his reign. As a way out, Tafari chose to build an image abroad and to seek international recognition for him and his nation. In 1923, Ethiopia joined the League of Nations. This happened despite the reluctance of some countries that considered Ethiopia as a barbarian country where raw meat was eaten and slavery was given free reign.

Zawditu finally died on April 2nd, 1930. Tafari delayed his own coronation several months in order to appropriately prepare for the celebrations. He wanted to invite as many foreign delegations as possible so that the event had international dimensions. He tried his best to clean up the capital, which still showed the pitiable condition of an African village, with large agglomerations of thatched huts. A few kilometers of hastily-flattened roadway allowed for the Regent and his magnates to display their brand-new cars purchased in Europe. The ceremony took place on the 2nd day of November. Tafari was crowned by the Patriarch as “the conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Elect of God, Emperor of Ethiopia, named Haile Selassie I.” For several days the soldiers and the masses of the capital stuffed themselves with local beer and raw meat in the back rooms of the old palace of Menelik, as far as possible from the sight of the foreign guests.

Already seated at the top of power, Haile Selassie could undertake further constitutional reforms. The people formally went from being a moving property of the Rases to subjects of the State, a change that made very little difference to the actual situation of the citizens. Not much more difference did the “granting” of a written constitution make either. This was the first of several such constitutions that Haile Selassie introduced for the nation, none of which could restrict an inch of the monarch’s absolute power.

The bitter taste of exile

When all the dangers seemed to have disappeared from the horizon and no menace threatened his throne, then a serious tragedy was about to strike down on Ethiopia and its young Emperor. The attack came this time from an officially allied nation, Italy. Mussolini wanted to avenge the ancient defeat of Adwa (1896) at the hands of Menelik. Furthermore, he was seeking to have “an Empire in the sun.” The Italian invasion of the wells of Walwal (Ogeden) in December 1934 alerted the Emperor to the motives of Il Duce. However, he still had full confidence in the League of Nations as well as in the support of England with which he had special bonds of friendship. He believed that international law ensured by “civilized” nations would work.

Unfortunately, this was not the case, since Mussolini did not care much about international law, and neither the League of Nations nor England wanted to intervene in order not to jeopardize a peace that would prove