

## **“African Redux” Michela Wrong**

Open Skies United Arab Emirates magazine  
May 2011

It's hard to find a photograph of Haile Selassie smiling, or looking anything other than gravely self-possessed. Even one of the earliest, taken when he was only eight, shows him gazing into the distance with tangible wariness, the sombre poise one would normally expect to see on the face of an adult.

But then, the boy who would become the Emperor of Ethiopia, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Elect of God; hailed in his own country as the 225th descendant of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon and worshipped in Jamaica as a deity, already knew he had been born into a violent and conspiratorial world in which the odds were stacked against a quiet life.

The fact that he lived to the age of 83, surviving court plots, foreign invasion, exile and coup attempts, is a tribute to the cunning and foresight of a sovereign who refused to let his guard down until senility finally descended, robbing him of both his famous aura and his wits. “Do not underestimate the power of Tafari,” an Ethiopian warlord once remarked. “He creeps like a mouse but has jaws like a lion.”

Those hungry for personal traces of the imperial life will find precious little on public display in the capital Addis Ababa. The former royal palace is now a museum located inside the university campus. The Emperor's neat bedroom and blue bathroom, surprisingly modest to contemporary eyes, is open to tourists. Visitors can also pay homage to emperor's remains, recovered from under the latrine where army putschistes buried him, which finally lie next to those of his former Empress in Trinity Cathedral. It's a decidedly modest showing, given the extraordinary romantic hold His Imperial Majesty, or HIM, held on the world's imagination, a spell that can in part be traced back to the five-century European legend of Prestor John, the story of a Christian king ruling over a magnificent kingdom somewhere in pagan Africa. But former Marxist rebel movements are rarely at ease with royal legacies, and today's Ethiopian government is no exception.

Tafari Makonnen was born in 1892, the son of “Ras” – the equivalent of “Duke” -- Makonnen, governor of Harar, a general who had fought with valour in the famous Battle of Adwa. Short, hawk-profiled, physically unimpressive, he used his seeming weakness to exploit the power struggles convulsing the empire, convincing jousting regional warlords they could easily control such a seemingly mild-mannered man. By 1916, he himself had been designated “Ras” and plenipotentiary heir to the throne, although nominal power rested with Empress Zewditu, daughter of Emperor Menelik II. When she died in 1930, the mantle passed to him and with it a new name: Haile Selassie, or “Power of the Trinity”.

Evelyn Waugh's account of the inauguration, on which he drew when writing “Scoop”, captures how surreal the Abyssinia of the day, in which squalid poverty jostled alongside gold-brocaded aristocracy, appeared to a sceptical visitor's eyes. “It is to Alice in Wonderland that my thoughts recur in seeking some historical parallel for life in Addis Ababa. There are others: Israel in the time of Saul, the Scotland of Shakespeare's Macbeth, the Sublime Porte.... But it is in Alice only that one finds the peculiar flavour of galvanised and translated reality, where animals carry watches in their waistcoat pockets, royalty paces the croquet lawn beside the chief executioner, and litigations ends in a flutter of playing cards.”

The incoming Emperor's agenda, launched even before he assumed supreme power, was reform. He had travelled widely in Europe and knew how far Abyssinia, marooned behind its mountain ranges, lagged the West in terms of development. Slavery was still legal, public hangings had been viewed until recently as entertainment, the life of the average peasant resembled that of a medieval serf. Haile Selassie was determined to set in place the building blocks of modernity: a new constitution, a two-house parliament, a national printing press, schools, hospitals, roads, electricity and telephone lines. The drive for change was rooted more in pragmatism than any real enthusiasm for overturning the status quo. “We need European progress only because we are surrounded by it. That is at once a benefit and a misfortune,” he commented. As historian Bahru

Zewde writes: "The new emperor cast himself in the role of an anti-feudal crusader. In actual fact, what he was doing was to reconstruct feudalism on a new and advanced basis, enhancing the political power of the monarchy and guaranteeing the economic privilege of the nobility."

He would have remained a figure of only sporadic international interest had it not been for Benito Mussolini. Itching to prove his militaristic credentials, bent on avenging the Battle of Adwa, Italy's Fascist dictator sent troops pouring into Abyssinia in 1935. In the eyes of his subjects, this was not to be Haile Selassie's finest hour. Abyssinian leaders were meant to stand and fight to the death. When the Emperor realised that his antiquated forces stood no chance against a modern military force which sprayed chemical weapons over warriors on horseback, he boarded a train for Djibouti and went into exile.

But the reaction abroad was different. In a famous speech before the League of Nations in Geneva, as Italian journalists jeered from the gallery, Haile Selassie presciently warned delegates of the dangers of appeasement. International morality itself was at stake, the principle of collective security - intended to prevent a repeat of World War I - had been brazenly violated with only minimal consequences for the aggressor. Anti-Fascist campaigners like Sylvia Pankhurst hailed him as a victim of shameful European hypocrisy and Time magazine nominated him as its 'Man of the Year'. A huge wave of public sympathy accompanied the Emperor as he moved with his family to the English spa town of Bath.

Word of his plight reached as far as Jamaica, where Ras Tafari, as the beleaguered head of a proud African country never till then subjected to the humiliation of colonisation became a vibrant symbol of black resistance to white oppression. The movement hailed Haile Selassie as Jah, or the living God. Blacks were God's chosen people, it ruled, and Haile Selassie would lead them out of Babylon - the tainted West - and back to Africa, or Zion, the birthplace of mankind, just as the book of Revelations had foreseen. Only around 200 Rasta families today live in Shashamane, on a plot of land the Emperor donated to followers wanting to repatriate to "Mother Africa", but reggae has spread the movement's beliefs across the globe.

In 1941, with World War II under way, Haile Selassie was back in Ethiopia, reinstated by British forces as they dismantled Africa Orientale, the empire Mussolini had briefly established in the Horn. Ever the realist, he immediately registered the new global configuration, in which exhausted European powers were being elbowed aside by the United States and the Soviet Union. As the Cold War loomed, he chose his side, offering to become Washington's trusted ally in return for the US agreeing to complete the task of modernisation the Italians had interrupted. American input in what had now been baptised Ethiopia would stretch from agricultural research to the establishment of Ethiopian Airlines. Crucially, a growing share of US aid would go on training and equipping the standing army the Emperor was determined should replace the roaming guerrilla bands of the past.

What Haile Selassie offered in return, in a region always seen as vulnerable to both Communism penetration and Islamic extremism, was steady leadership and stability. When fellow heads of state agreed in 1963 to establish the Organisation of African Unity, precursor of today's African Union, Haile Selassie ensured its headquarters were built in Addis. The organisation swiftly passed a resolution recognising the sanctity of Africa's colonial borders, calming Western fears of panafrikanism. With the passage of the years, that achievement has come to seem more questionable, with the foundation of modern Eritrea - once claimed as Ethiopia's 14th province - and the de facto independence of Somaliland, Puntland and a prospective South Sudan raising questions about the validity of the doctrine of *uti possidetis*, as it was called. But in the eyes of Haile Selassie's Western admirers, a visionary leader had secured dangerously fluid boundaries.

As the years passed, such admiration was shared by fewer and fewer Ethiopians. In 1960, Haile Selassie narrowly survived a coup attempt by his trusted Imperial Guard. It was a sign of what was to come. By the 1970s, the very social class that had benefited most from his reforms was chafing at the country's backwardness and outraged by the royal court's sangfroid at Ethiopia's repeated outbreaks of famine. Student demonstrations, teachers' strikes, peasant protests and military discontent became a regular characteristic of life. Said to have secreted billions of dollars away in Swiss bank accounts - rumours which were never subsequently substantiated - the increasingly distant Emperor now preferred foreign travel to time at home.

Critics of Ryszard Kapuscinski accuse the Polish writer of taking sweeping liberties with the facts in his book "The Emperor", producing an account of Haile Selassie's waning years that was more an allegory for despotism in decline than an accurate portrait. But Kapuscinski's account

finds strong echoes in the memoirs of former aides, who recall a manipulative autocrat, adept at playing off one genuflecting minister against another, nourished by briefings from a vast spy network as he grasped the reigns of power tightly to his chest. "Able to recall in detail long-forgotten errors, indiscretions, or admissions, Haile Selassie would coldly hang before the protesting dignitary the intricate tapestry of that official's past life and conduct from which the latter could only avert his embarrassed gaze," recalled John Spencer, an American legal adviser.

In a system of personalised command, everything depends on the mental faculties of the individual. As he entered his eighties, the Emperor's extraordinary grasp of detail was being diluted by Alzheimer's and he struggled to remember ministerial briefings or recognise visiting heads of state. "I had the sensations, still vivid today, that in leaving the private office, I was leaving the cockpit of a 747 after finding both the captain and the co-pilot unconscious," recalled Spencer after a last meeting. "How was the craft to keep flying?"

It did not. Within a day of that encounter, the Ethiopian army mutinied. Demonstrating the same cold-blooded instinct for self preservation he had shown in 1935, the Emperor tried to buy time by agreeing to the arrest of his cabinet ministers, most of whom were executed. The "Derg", a group of ambitious army officers, brought his 44-year reign to an end on September 12, 1974, rolling tanks into position around the palace. The leader before whom ordinary Ethiopians prostrated themselves was driven away in a Volkswagen Beetle as a clique shouted "Thief!" and "Hang the Emperor!" The following year, his death was announced. It was attributed to natural causes, but as an Addis courtroom was to hear more than two decades later, Ethiopia's last emperor was almost certainly strangled while under anaesthetic, a victim to the very forces of modernisation he had unleashed.

In many ways, the modern nation state of Ethiopia stands as the man's most fitting testimony. The giant at the heart of the Horn of Africa still regularly trembles on the brink of famine. The ruling party established by the rebel movement which trounced Haile Selassie's military executioners in 1991 pays only lip service to multiparty democracy, claiming 99.6 per cent in the last elections. But Ethiopia is also a magnet for excited business investors, a trusted strategic ally for the West and acts as respected spokesman for both Africa and the developing world at international conferences and in global negotiations. Much of the credit for that must go to the charismatic monarch who was determined to pull his country kicking and screaming out of the Medieval Age and push it into the 20th century. "The second, post World War II generation of Ethiopians was ungrateful," says Teshome Gabre Mariam Bokan, who once served as the Emperor's attorney general. "It thought life without Haile Selassie would be a bed of roses. But now people find themselves re-evaluating his legacy, and they deeply regret his passing."

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