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THE CROWN COUNCIL OF ETHIOPIA

HIS IMPERIAL HIGHNESS PRINCE ERMIAS SAHLE-SELASSIE HAILE-SELASSIE
PRESIDENT

Descendant of Solomon? “ETHIOPIA IS IN FACT STILL AN EMPIRE”

By Mark Wallet

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The last emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie or Ras Tafari, had a large and worldwide fanbase. After his reign, the country became extremely separated and divided, which is still the case to this day. That is why some Ethiopian monarchists suggest that a king or emperor should return.

If we can believe the written testimonies of Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski, the Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie (1892-1975) would start his day by listening to the reports of his spies. The night would bring “danger of conspiracies and Haile Selassie knew that whatever occurred overnight was of much greater importance than whatever happens during the day. During the day, Selassie could watch over everyone. However, at night, that was impossible.”

That is why the head of the information department, Solomon Kedir, would join the emperor by his side during the latter’s morning stroll. Someone who directly participated in this activity would inform Kapuscinski on how this would all unfold. “The emperor would walk through a lane and right behind him would be Kedir, who would go on talking and talking for ages. About whom had secretly arranged plans with each other and why they would be seen together. About whom conspiracies are made. About whether or not it should be labeled as a conspiracy.” Following Kedir would be a bunch of other people coming to inform the emperor about all sorts of secrets.

Conspiracies against you are one of the biggest dangers as a country’s leader, which is not necessarily unfair, because sooner or later they will probably face one. That was the case for Selassie in 1974, when a group of soldiers declared a coup and handed over power to Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam. The state of the Ethiopian people under the “Red Terror” regime was in fact not much better, but the idea of an empire was abolished.

For Haile Selassie, despite being removed from power, not much would change. He would stay jailed in his Menelik palace up on a hill outside the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa until his death one year later in 1975. Kapuscinski would quote later in his book *The Emperor* a message from the French press bureau AFP from February 1975 wherein it says that Ethiopian soldiers kept bowing down to Selassie up until his death, reminiscing back to “the best times of the Empire”. “Because of this Haile Selassie kept on believing that he was still the Emperor of Ethiopia”.

KING SOLOMON

Selassie, whose real name given to him at birth was Tafari Mekonnen, hardly knew any better that he was the emperor. He would reign over Ethiopia starting in 1930. He writes in his own autobiography published in 1937 that he felt as if the position of Ethiopia's ruler was calling out for him due to his claim as "descendant from Queen Sheba and King Solomon." Selassie was in fact a descendant from the so-called Solomonic Dynasty, which ruled over Ethiopia since 1270. The Solomonids had overthrown the previous Zagwe Dynasty in that year, using as appeal their descent from King Solomon. The Zagwe Dynasty was in power during the 11th to the 13th century and did not originate from an Israeli group.

This so-called alliance then with the Israeli rulers brings Ethiopians back to the visit to King Solomon by the Queen Sheba, which supposes then that the Kingdom of Sheba was located in what we know as today as Ethiopia. The Israeli ruler, Solomon, would have had relations with Sheba, who returned back to her kingdom pregnant. She would give birth to a boy, Menelik I: the first king of Ethiopia.

The authenticity to this story is disputable, as according to many historians, the Kingdom of Sheba would have been located in what is contemporary Yemen. However, this famous story has settled itself into Ethiopian folklore. An important reflection on that topic can be found in the medieval book ***Kebre Nagast - The Glory of the Kings***.

According to that book, Menelik I would go and once again visit Jerusalem and his father Solomon, before returning to his homeland in Ethiopia with the Ark of the Covenant. The tribes Dan and Juda would have also traveled with him. This would explain the existence of Ethiopian Jews, also known as the 'Beta Israel'.

"For the Ethiopian Emperors, the text carried the truth without question", said Gizachew Tiruneh, a political scientist at the University of Central Arkansas in the United States. Tiruneh has written a book and a few articles about the ***Kebre Nagast*** and the history of Ethiopian monarchs. He himself does not instantly send the story into the realm of fables. "It may have happened; we can't rule that out," he said via Zoom about the relation between Solomon and Sheba.

Tiruneh had asked the former patriarch of the Ethiopian-Orthodox Church whether or not he could see the Ark of the Covenant given to Menelik I in relation to the new book he was working on, to which the answer was: "No one can see it. The Patriarch told me that I could not see it; nobody has seen it including himself. We all have to have faith that it is there, the same way we accept the existence of God." The Ark is to be found in Axum, a city in the Tigray region. There is one priest assigned to its protection, who has to spend every single one of his days and nights next to the Ark. He is the only one allowed to see the case in which the Ark is located.

Based on the stories from the "Kebre Nagast", there was a lion to be seen in the heart of the Ethiopian flag for a number of decades with the exception of some interruptions between 1870 and 1974: the lion of Judah. After Selassie's fall, the lion would disappear from the country's flag. First the tiara on the lion's head, then the cross, then the animal itself. Now, at the heart of the flag, lies a star, which is supposed to represent the unity of all Ethiopians.

INTO EXILE

But what unity does it actually represent? "My heart breaks when I hear about the unnecessary slaughter of innocent Ethiopians," wrote Prince Ermias Sahle-Selassie Haile-Selassie last June during a statement regarding violence in numerous different Ethiopian regions. "We are now seeing the results of five decades of ethnic politics, five decades of dividing our people into smaller groups based on of our language, religion, or region."

For Haile Selassie's grandson, part of the solution lies in the effective restoration of an empire and its dynasty. Although Prince Ermias has in his own words said that he doesn't want to engage in politics, he

deems it “not political to remind Ethiopia that its Crown can help heal and unify the country, just like many times in the past.” Or: is it not time to bring the Empire to life again?

Prince Ermias wrote the statement as President of the Crown Council, which according to its website “functions as the Crown.” The Crown Council’s point of view is that the royal dynasty was in fact never abolished: Emperor Haile Selassie had never officially stepped down as emperor himself.

The strategic advisor of the Crown’s Council, Gregory Copley, points out that in the Ethiopian Constitution written in 1955, the Crown Council in fact does represent the Crown during the periods between two emperors. “The Crown never, in fact, left the Ethiopian People,” said Copley upon request.

The Crown Council was forced to go into exile for a couple of decades, but Copley sees more promising times ahead now that Prince Ermias can once again move freely around Ethiopia.

What is interesting is that the people who were behind the coup in 1974, the ‘Dergue’, indeed never abolished the royal dynasty. They imprisoned Haile Selassie but crowned instead by default his son Amha Selassie - this time as king, not emperor. Amha Selassie (1916-1997) would never recognize this decision.

Only in 1989 during a rather small ceremony in London would he accept the title of Emperor. With that came an impressive title: His Imperial Majesty Emperor Amha Selassie, Chosen by God, Conquering Lion from the Tribe of Judah and King of Kings of Ethiopia. He then received the authority to reconstitute the Crown Council, which he did in 1993.

RETURN OF THE EMPEROR

Copley emphasizes that the Crown Council is strongly in favor of the democratic right of the Ethiopian People to pick and vote for their own government - something that Emperor Haile Selassie already introduced. The form of government envisioned by the Crown’s Council is a constitutional monarchy - just like the Netherlands. For its introduction, however, it would require “overwhelming public acclamation”. That is the reason why Prince Ermias never took the title of Emperor but kept the title of President of the Crown Council.

Copley is actually very optimistic when it comes to the chances of a return of a monarchy. “There is a strong level of public support for the Crown, both in Ethiopia and in the diaspora,” claims Copley. “It is easy to see the level of respect for the Crown in days of public festivities or demonstrations, when a sea of Imperial Ethiopian flags, showing the *Moa Anbessa* (the Conquering Lion of Judah symbol) dominates the crown.”

Political scientist Tiruneh says that no polls have been made regarding the support for a monarchy in Ethiopia, but he wouldn’t rule out a recovery of support either. Tiruneh suggests that either way the majority of the clergy of the Ethiopian-Orthodox Church as well as the generation of people aged over 80 are in favor of a return of a monarchy. “Our fathers opposed the revolution,” he says. He also notices some support from “younger people that have good knowledge when it comes to Ethiopia’s royal history.” Tiruneh notes that support for a return to a monarchy differs by region. “The state of Oromia is for example very nonhierarchical. There are also regions with their own monarchs. But that doesn’t have to get in the way of a national emperor.”

What gives hope to Copley are the “ongoing and correct” relations between Prince Ermias and Ethiopian governmental leaders. There is also good communication with the Patriarch of the Ethiopian-Orthodox Tewahedo Church, who is also an advisor to the Crown Council. During conversations with all of these people, Prince Ermias talks about how “the Ethiopian People can find unity once again after decades of division under communist regimes.”

“The Crown and the Ethiopian Church are the great symbols of a unified Ethiopia,” says Copley. Ethiopian identity is in his opinion for “the overwhelming majority of Ethiopians” more important than their own ethnicity, language, religion and their habits.

Copley is convinced that an actual return of a king or an emperor would “add to the sense of stability and the prestige of Ethiopia in the international community. Ethiopia’s prestige and self-confidence as a nation were never higher than under Emperor Haile Selassie.”