

Strategic Symbolism in an Era of Resurgent Identity Politics

A look at the example of how Ethiopia's search for cohesiveness and growth reaches, of necessity, into its historical identity

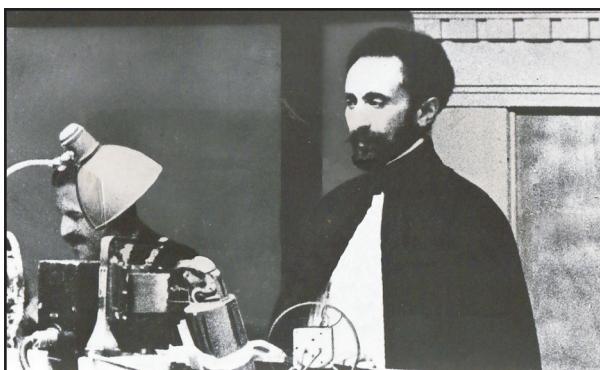
GLOBALIST POLITICAL TRENDS IN THE post-Cold War period have led to the vitiation of sovereignty for most nation-states, with the inevitable whiplash reaction of societies which seek to find, and assert, their historical sense of identity. Many seek identity security, the basis of the identity politics phenomenon which is challenging globalism.

This is an example of the historical pendular action in human geopolitical history which has been evident for thousands of years. And yet, with this first real challenge to the 21st Century globalists, it is being viewed with perplexity.

It has been two decades since I wrote the book, *Ethiopia Reaches Her Hand Unto God: Imperial Ethiopia's Unique Symbols, Structures, and Rôle in the Modern World*², with the profound assistance of His Imperial Highness Prince Ermias Sahle-Selassie Haile-Selassie, President of the Crown Council of Ethiopia. It is remarkable that interest in the book has grown with the years, rather than diminished. The book continues to sell.

Part of this is because we are witnessing a strong resurgence in the unique identity of Ethiopia and

Ethiopians. This is not just because Ethiopia is finally recovering from the cultural devastation of the coup of 1974. It is also related to the fact that the transforming global social environment is forcing many people around the world to become



Emperor Haile Selassie I at his iconic League of Nations speech in 1936. As he left the podium, he said: "Today it is us; tomorrow it is you."

conscious of their core identities.

We are, as noted, entering a period globally of "identity politics"; a time when people yearn to understand why they are who they are; why they are special; and what their

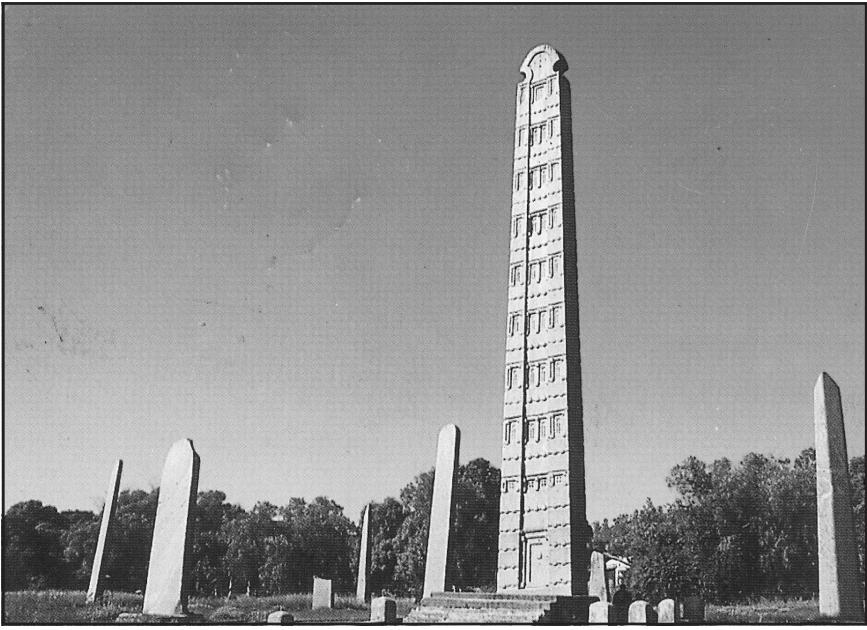
special relationship is with their geography. This introspection is neither accidental nor coincidental: it is a direct response to the threat felt to their identities by many people in the face of the globalism ideology which stressed the irrelevance of borders and nations. Bear in mind that this is quite separate from the mechanisms of the globalization of communications and trade, although these have helped foster the globalism philosophy, which is essentially an urban phenomenon in a world which is increasingly urbanizing and increasingly materialistic.

Identity is both visceral and psychological. It is the tool which builds the frame of logic in individuals and in societies. It gives a sense of self-worth, purpose, and legitimacy, as well as a sense of comprehension as to how people fit into their particular geographic surroundings, with understandings of the seasons, and what survival demands of them, individually and in a genetic sense. It gives group cohesion, and productivity.

I have described this as a "terroir relationship": the linkage between people and their particular geography. Of course urban societies de-

¹ This report was based on a talk given by the author to the US Library of Congress Hebraic Section of the African and Middle Eastern Division, in Washington, DC, on May 11, 2017.

² Copley, Gregory R.: *Ethiopia Reaches Her Hand Unto God: Imperial Ethiopia's Unique Symbols, Structures, and Rôle in the Modern World*. Foreword by His Imperial Highness Prince Ermias Sahle-Selassie Haile-Selassie. Alexandria, Virginia, 1998: The International Strategic Studies Association.



Some of the stelæ of Axum, an ancient seat of the Solomonic line, and home to St. Mary's Church, which houses what is claimed to be the original Ark of the Covenant.

velop their own “*terroir* relationship” with their concrete geography, and the urban sense of geopolitics has driven much of the globalist philosophy against the classical — or Westphalianist — sense of nationhood and national identity.³

Ethiopia still has one of the lower rates of urbanization in the world: some 17.3 percent of the population was urbanized as of 2015, one of the lowest rates in the world and well below sub-Saharan Africa’s average of 37 percent. But urbanization was growing in the country, possibly at an estimated 5.4 percent a year.⁴

For most Ethiopians, their sense of identity was rooted in a specialness related to the conviction that they were chosen by God, favored by God; that God had a special commitment to their welfare. This belief had more than three millennia of evolution, based on the union between King Solomon and Queen Makeda of Saba. And the belief system came into a civilization which, in biblical times, was already deeply established among the Cushitic Peoples. The union of King Solo-

mon and Queen Makeda introduced the Second Zion as a Jewish-dominated state, which ultimately began transformation to a Christian-dominated state in the Fourth Century AD.

[It is important to note that Ethiopia also has a special relationship with Islam. The Prophet Mohammed, having sent his family and followers to safety in Ethiopia from Mecca, bestowed a special significance on Ethiopia as a place for the coexistence of people of different faiths, but sharing national identity.]

The transition from a Jewish-dominated society to a Christian-dominated society did not diminish the power of the Solomonic imagery to help sustain the Ethiopian sense of uniqueness. If anything, the later introduction of Westernized education to Ethiopia, compounding during the 20th Century period of Emperor Haile Selassie and opening still further during the republican years, has only served to broaden the Ethiopian sense of specialness, given that it now also embraces not just the pre-Solom-

onic Cushite civilizations, but also the origins of modern mankind in the Rift Valley with the finding of the skeletal remains of *Australopithecus afarensis*.

But my brief today was to discuss issues of symbology relating to Imperial Ethiopia’s symbols, structures, and rôle in the modern world. And that, essentially, focuses to a large extent on the impact inside Ethiopia and on the outside world of what became the iconic Solomonic crown and its rituals and hierarchies. Certainly, the post-coup period in Ethiopia — that is, since 1974 — finds the country and its people in an entirely new global strategic context. Nothing ever returns to the way it was, which is why the potency of the Solomonic imagery is significant in that it continues to galvanize thought even though the Ethiopian society and the global context have become more complex, and the intellectual offerings have challenged traditional religions and beliefs, particularly with urban-centric and more materialistic logic.

But let me reiterate that as the world broadens — not just for Ethiopians but for everyone — there is a tendency to see a reactive search for core identity. It is a search for horizons, purpose, and uniqueness.

This sense of self-belief, sustained by the presence of an iconic bloodline — the Solomonic bloodline — in the face of all other adversity in Ethiopia over more than three millennia, was responsible for creating and sustaining a civilizational model.

This civilization, while not wealthy by world standards, provides a unique perspective on the entire question of the survival of social identity. Ethiopia’s special identity and mission was committed to writing as the national saga of the Ethiopic peoples in the form of the *Kebre Negast* (the Glory of Kings),

3 See Copley, Gregory R.: *UnCivilization: Urban Geopolitics in a Time of Chaos*. Alexandria, Virginia, 2012: The International Strategic Studies Association.

4 See, for example, *Ethiopia Urbanization Review: Urban Institutions for a Middle-Income Ethiopia*. Washington, DC, 2015: The World Bank Group.

possibly in the Sixth Century AD.⁵ This served to elevate the specialness of the people even further, sustaining them through great hardships.

Little wonder that the periods when Ethiopians were separated from their iconic sense of specialness — perhaps during the non-Solomonic Zagwe Dynasty between the 10th and 13th centuries, or during the fractured period of the *Zemene Mesafint* (the “Era of Princes and Judges”) from 1769 to 1855 — they lost some of their sense of purpose. And little wonder, too, then, that when Emperor Tewedros began the modern Solomonic period in 1855, the country regained some consciousness of its historical sense of mission.

Emperor Tewedros’ successor, Johannes IV, in particular, began building on the iconographic foundation laid by the mystical power of the *Kebre Negast* and the accompanying pervasive religious authority of the Orthodox Church. He, and particularly Emperor Menelik II, began building structures of authority around the Solomonic line, using symbols of the Crown’s authority to build the mystical connection between the Throne and the various peoples of the Ethiopian Empire.

It is possible that this began the most significant use of the symbols of authority of the Crown since the great totemic constructions of Axum, such as the famed stelæ, in the first millennium of the modern era.

The fact that Emperor Menelik so successfully routed the Italian invasion of Ethiopia at the Battle of Adwa on March 1-2, 1896 (*Yekatit 22-23*, 1889, in the Ethiopian calendar), was itself a rallying point for Solomonic and Ethiopian prestige. It was this event — in which the Emperor’s wife, Empress Taitu, played a rôle which was reminiscent

of the powerful and iconic Queen of Sheba — which started the chain of events which played out in bringing to an end the European colonial expansion in Africa. It was Emperor Menelik’s enormous victory — the first such victory by an African state against a modern European power — which gave Ethiopia the prestige and leadership to create the pan-African concepts; to eventually be the beacon of independence for the African colonies. It is absolutely clear that Emperor Menelik’s victory ultimately enabled Emperor Haile Selassie I in 1963 to create and host the Organization for African Unity (OAU), now the African Union, in the post-colonial period.

Indeed, no-one honed this use of symbols and intricate social hierarchy more than Emperor Haile Selassie, when he came to full Imperial power in 1930. Such was the prestige and authority of the Emperor and Ethiopia by late 1935, when the Italians again invaded the country, that it was the Emperor’s scalding words to the League of Nations which ended international hypocrisy over Italy’s blatant mis-use of arms. The League of Nations, in fact, was finished because it was so exposed as hollow by the Emperor’s globally-recognized address in June 1936. But this was to be followed by the fact that Ethiopia, with British assistance, achieved the first allied victory of World War II, when it drove the occupying Italians from the country in 1941. Ethiopians recovered, re-grouped, and re-asserted their Solomonic identity after that five-year interregnum in the dynasty.

From that point forward, the Emperor believed fervently in the philosophy of collective security, committing Ethiopian troops — particularly the Imperial Guard — to the United Nations force in the Korean War. The Ethiopians’ heroism and professionalism was greatly

praised and decorated by the US.

Emperor Haile Selassie’s enormous international stature had a profound and lasting impact on the world. The emerging black nationalist and pan-Africanist movements in the Americas, led by Jamaica’s Marcus Garvey, saw in Emperor Haile Selassie a figurehead and inspiration which led to the creation of the Rastafarian movement. It was the Rastafarian religion which was to play an important rôle in sustaining the iconic imagery of the Solomonic line after the coup of 1974. But it was the Emperor’s visits to the United States, starting in 1954 which were so inspirational to African-Americans that they provided an impetus for the US civil rights movement which gathered pace from that point onwards. This was addressed well in the 2011 book by Theodore Vestal: *The Lion of Judah in the New World: Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia and the Shaping of Americans’ Attitudes Toward Africa*.⁶

Emperor Haile Selassie consciously and fervently believed in the mission handed down to him and in his responsibility to build first the dignity and secondly the capability of the Ethiopian People. And to do this he stressed the mysticism of the historical authority of the Solomonic bloodline — which he codified into the 1955 Constitution’s stipulation on succession to the Throne — and in the respect he gave to the prestige of the authority of the regional and national hierarchies and offices, and to the importance of Ethiopia’s unique system of ranks, titles, and honors.

This was not merely to give authority to the Crown itself, or the *makwanent* — the upper nobility — or the *negusawi betasab*, the royal or imperial household; but to give everyone a sense of place within the hierarchy of the society. To give each person a sense of purpose and

5 See, particularly, Tiruneh, Gizachew: *The Rise and Fall of the Solomonic Dynasty of Ethiopia*. Los Angeles, California, 2015: TSEHAI Publishers, Loyola-Marymount University.

6 Vestal, Theodore M.: *The Lion of Judah in the New World: Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia and the Shaping of Americans’ Attitudes Toward Africa*. Santa Barbara, California, 2011: Praeger/ABL-CLIO.

dignity. It is significant that Emperor Haile Selassie simultaneously embarked on an ambitious, and almost helter-skelter dash toward Western education of as many Ethiopians as possible, perhaps without understanding that this introduced a competitive and less mystical thrust into Ethiopian society. It introduced a materialism which challenged the stoicism of the society, and which demanded the satisfaction of desires and ambitions at a pace which no emerging economy could satisfy.

There are many reasons why this fundamental contradiction which the Emperor introduced into Ethiopian society led to the coup of 1974, and the wasteland created by the Dergue which seized power. Some of this is addressed in Prince Asfa-Wossen Asserate's revealing book, *King of Kings*⁷, in 2015, as well as in Prof. Gizachew Tiruneh's important 2015 book, *The Rise and Fall of the Solomonic Dynasty of Ethiopia*⁸. But this clash of more than three-millennia of mysticism, nurtured and strengthened in isolation, and the materialism of the 20th Century external world which became unavoidable with World War II, also came to a head as the Emperor was ageing and without the succession base he had spent his life trying to assemble for the transition to the next generation. It also came as the great superpowers of the world — the United States and the USSR — were at a crucial point in their own titanic confrontation.

The technologies of that confrontation between the West and the Soviet *bloc* also coincided with the exhaustion of the Emperor and the rising demands of social expectations which the Emperor's education, modernization, and emancipation had set in train. The US, long a tacit guardian of Ethiopia in the post-World War II era, had improved its intelligence collection ca-

pabilities to the point where it no longer felt that it needed the electronic intelligence station at Kagnew Station, Asmara, in what is now Eritrea. While the US kept the station functioning until 1977, three years after the coup against the Emperor, Washington had made it clear that it was no longer interested in being the strategic partner of Ethiopia.

The USSR, on the other hand, had long invested in radicalizing the newly-educated youth of Ethiopia: the youth who the Emperor had so willingly thrust into the urban mainstream of international learning. The Soviet COMINTERN — the Communist International, the center of Soviet psychological operations, at that time run by master psychological warrior Boris Nikolayevich Ponomarev — created, in Moscow, a political propaganda publication to subvert Ethiopian youth. The Soviets named that publication *Keste Demena* (the "Rainbow From God"). This was a breathtaking theft of a highly-religious and particularly Ethiopian symbology about the special relationship which God had with the Ethiopian People. In Soviet hands, it was just one more tool to take Ethiopia's sense of specialness away from it. And this whole Soviet campaign struck a chord at the same time that Washington was neglecting the Emperor.

THUS, ONCE AGAIN, with the coup of 1974, Ethiopia seemed to have been robbed of its identity and purpose. The coup-masters destroyed — or seemed to destroy — in an instant the 3,500 years of Solomonic identity, and, for the next 43 years, it appeared that Ethiopia had seen all vestiges of its specialness erased.

They were just another poor African country.

But it is now clear that this was not to be.

There is now an unprecedented level of interest from Ethiopians inside Ethiopia, and in the diaspora, as well as among international scholars, as to why Ethiopia was so special, and what Emperor Haile Selassie did to raise its profile, unity, and sense of purpose. There is now a growing appetite among Ethiopians that they must either regain that identity or revert to very narrow, ethnic, or linguistic groupings. It seems that the trend favors the search for a path back to that Ethiopianness — which has a great sense of personal and group identity — as well as in re-discovering international prestige, rather than the difficult and isolating task of creating new personæ around ethnic and linguistic sub-groups.

What is significant is that considerable interest in the Ethiopian identity is beginning to resurge among the Ethiopian diaspora which has become a distinct grouping, virtually entirely within the urban areas of its host countries. We see the yearning for an ancient identity coming from diaspora peoples who have not been able to shake that sense of separateness from their new host communities. The maturing of expatriate Ethiopians, many of whom had become associated with Western values and education during the late Haile Selassie period, to the point where they begin the search for their origins has become profound. Unsurprisingly, for example, this has led to the fostering of important centers of enquiry into Ethiopian history and identity in Western universities, and at such institutions as TSEHAI Publishers⁹, at Loyola-Marymount University in Los Angeles.

Thus, the flame of the Solomonic line has been nurtured outside Ethiopia during the period of the interregnum. In much the same way, the

7 Asserate, Asfa-Wossen: *King of Kings: The Triumph and Tragedy of Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia*. London, 2015: Haus Publishing Ltd. First published in German in 2014 (Propyläen Verlag) as *Der Letzte Kaiser von Afrika: Triumph und Tragödie des Haile Selassie*.

8 *Rise and Fall*, Op Cit.
9 <http://www.tsehai.com/>

flame of Persia's Zoroaster has been kept alive by expatriate Zoroastrian and Parsi communities in their diaspora, largely in Canada, while Shi'a Iranian domination of Iran suppressed the traditional Persian identities.

What is significant, too, is that much of Ethiopia's iconic documentation has been kept secure, outside the country, at such institutions as the US Library of Congress.

And, for the time being, the very Solomonic Crown of the Ethiopian Peoples itself resides — with the Crown Council — in exile in the diaspora. Indeed, what has emerged in the 43 years of the interregnum since the coup against Emperor Haile Selassie — and it is important to note that it was, in fact, a coup by a small military group, and not a popular revolution — is that the diaspora of Ethiopians caused by the coup has become globally visible. Conservatively, there are some three-million Ethiopians living outside Ethiopia at present¹⁰, compared with only a handful of such expatriates less than a century earlier. And expatriates contribute as much as \$4.7-billion in foreign exchange remittances each year into the Ethiopian economy.

The Ethiopian diaspora represents a very distinct new profile of the nation in the international consciousness, but, equally, this group is now maturing and reflecting on what it means to be of Ethiopian origin. It is natural that some of the ethnic divisions in such a diverse society as Ethiopia are being reflected within the diaspora. But what has been interesting is the fact that Ethiopia's 60 or so ethnic groups appear to have, in the diaspora, largely identified primarily as Ethiopian, and only secondarily as members of the ethnic or linguistic sub-groups.

Much of this "unity in exile" is due to the overwhelming impact of historical symbols, including religion (although not all Ethiopians

are united behind the Ethiopian Orthodox Church) and language, and by the teachings of the *Kebra Negast* and the *Fetha Negast* (the Law of Kings), but also including the iconography which was so strongly promoted by Emperor Haile Selassie.

The time is now ripe, however, for these vital elements of Ethiopia's identity to be re-gathered in Ethiopia. We have recently seen the creation in Addis Ababa of the Meles Zenawi Library, to honor the recent and late Prime Minister. So it is fitting that the diaspora community and the Crown Council are now interested in the creation of a prestigious new center, the Haile Selassie I Library and Conference Center, to be built in Addis Ababa, as a location where the great learning and symbols of the Solomonic era can be brought together. With the creation of such an institution, much of Ethiopia's documentary and physical heritage could be brought home to the country, and gathered together from private collections. The Center could be a focus of research and learning on the lessons of the past 3,500 years, contributing to the continuation of what is, essentially, an unbroken chain of Ethiopian history, totally compatible with its evolution, modernization, and rising rôle in the world.

Such a library would actually fit well into the modern state structure of Ethiopia, and has already received private encouragement from various governmental leaders.

There is good reason for that support: the 3,500 year Solomonic history is the unbroken lifeline of Judeo-Christian civilization, even Abrahamic civilization, and it is the



Emperor Haile Selassie I: Ultimately, the iconic sagas of identity come to be embodied in the nature of their heroes.

heritage of all Ethiopians, including the Government of the Republic of Ethiopia. But it is also the historical bloodline — the lifeline — of the modern world as a whole, and as such, the library could attract significant international attention.

This does not in any way preclude discussion of pre-Solomonic Ethiopia or today's republican Ethiopia. It is about recognizing a totemic aspect of Ethiopian identity and its relationship with modern civilization.

What became clear, as I began to explore in that book we published in 1998, *Ethiopia Reaches Her Hand Unto God: Imperial Ethiopia's Unique Symbols, Structures, and Rôle in the Modern World*, is that Ethiopians have developed a unique cultural and civilizational position throughout history. It is true that this position lost momentum, briefly, during the current interregnum, but the sense of identity, built around not only physical iconography but also around the memory of Haile Selassie and his predecessors, is returning at a significant pace.

We are just at the beginning of this renaissance. How the Ethiopian People and Government use this revival of historical identity could well be strategically important.

It could well determine whether Ethiopia controls its own destiny; even if it remains intact. ★