

Highlights of Ethiopian History and Culture

HenokTadesse, Electrical Engineer, BSc
Ethiopia, Debrezeit, POBox 412, Mobile: +251 910 751339 / +251 912 228639
email: entkidmt@yahoo.com or wchmar@gmail.com

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Abstract

Ethiopia's history and culture was hidden for centuries from the outside world due to different factors and has not been known as it deserved to be. One of the factors is the fact that Ethiopia has been largely isolated following the decline of the Axum (Aksum) civilization around 700 A.D. Unlike most ancient civilizations, the history of Axum is unknown in the mainstream and some historians are surprised when they somehow learn about it and wonder why they had not learned about it in the universities. Ethiopia has a rich history of at least three thousand years. Its prehistory, the Aksum civilization and the last one thousand and three hundred years of its history are fascinating. Thanks to the internet, Ethiopian history and culture is increasingly being known today, overcoming past prejudices and biases. This is good not only for Ethiopia, but also for many who are interested in history, culture and religion. It is good for Ethiopian history particularly because, as can be seen from Youtube videos and articles on the internet, it will help in the systematic exploration and documentation of Ethiopian history by genuine historians and talented amateurs around the world. Certainly, there are a lot more people who have never heard about Ethiopian history before. This note is meant to help anyone interested to *discover* and explore Ethiopian history and culture for themselves.

Ethiopian history and culture was largely hidden for centuries from the outside world due to different factors and has not been known as it deserved to be. One of the factors is the fact that Ethiopia has been isolated from the outside world following the decline of the Axum (Aksum) civilization around 700 A.D. Axum was one of the great civilizations of the ancient world, along with and on a par with Persia, Rome and China. Yet, unlike most ancient civilizations, the history of Axum is unknown in the mainstream and some historians are surprised when they somehow learn about it and wonder why they had not learned about it in the universities.

Ethiopia has a rich history of at least three thousand years. Its prehistory, the Aksum civilization and the last one thousand and three hundred years of its history are so fascinating that many people see it in disbelief as bordering on 'myths'. Yet these 'myths' are so supported overwhelmingly by archaeological and other evidences that some have described it as 'a seamless fusion of facts and myths'.

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anyone interested to *discover* and explore Ethiopian history and culture for themselves. It is meant only to inform, not meant to be rigorous at all. It may also reflect my own views.

Ethiopia's prehistory and antiquity (origins) is little known to professional historians and anyone trying to explore it finds it to be shrouded in mystery. Mainstream theories about Ethiopia's prehistory and antiquity are not accepted by, and are unknown to, many Ethiopians because these theories are biased or prejudiced. The only credible source one can hope to gain a glimpse of Ethiopia's antiquity is the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, according to which Ethiopians are the children of Kush. Ethiopia is the first country to be mentioned in the Bible, in connection with the river Ghion (Nile or Abay) , and this proves that ancient Ethiopia is largely the same place known as Ethiopia today. This disproves theories that ancient Ethiopia is not exactly the same Ethiopia today.

There are credible claims that Enoch, author of the now famous Book of Enoch, was an Ethiopian. The evidence is that the only known authentic and oldest Book of Enoch is the one written in Geez language, Ethiopia's ancient language now limited to church services only. Melchizedek, King of Salem, was an Ethiopian. The Bible also mentions that the wife of Moses was an Ethiopian. I have heard some church fathers saying that, based on quotes from the Bible, the Magi (Sebe'a Segel , in Geez), who paid tribute to Our Lord Jesus Christ, were all Sabeans /Ethiopians. The story leading up to the Magi goes as far back as Adam.

The well-known Ethiopia's history begins with a story in the Bible about Queen of Sheba visiting King Solomon of Israel around 900 B.C. That episode resulted in the conception of Minilik I, and started a new chapter, the beginning of the Solomonic Dynasty that would rule Ethiopia for the next three thousand years. The coming of the Solomonic dynasty to Ethiopia was accompanied by another great history, the Ark of the Covenant. The 'lost' Ark of the Covenant has been in Ethiopia for three thousand years now. To many, these claims are fascinating and to some they are tales rather than history. Yet, for Ethiopians (particularly Christians) they are real.

Additional evidences of the connection between Queen of Sheba and King Solomon are the heritages of Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Jerusalem. The Falasha (Beta Israel) were the Jewish community that lived in Northern Ethiopia for thousands of years until recently. These were descendants of twelve thousand Jews who accompanied King Minilik I and the Ark of the Covenant to Ethiopia. The story is that, as written in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church book Kibre Negest, Minilik I , at the age of twenty two? , went to Israel to visit his father King Solomon. Minilik I came back to Ethiopia with the Ark of the Covenant and with about twelve thousand Jews including priests. The ruins of the palace of the Queen of Sheba can be seen outside Aksum in Yeha.

Minilik I was the first king of the Solomonic Dynasty. This dynasty has ruled Ethiopia for three thousand years, except for an interruption of about three hundred and seventy years after the fall of Axum, during which the Zagwe Dynasty ruled. King and Saint Lalibela was one of the kings from the Zagwe dynasty. But I have also heard contradicting information that the Zagwe Dynasty also was Solomonic. The story is that not only the Queen of Sheba but also her maid conceived a child and that is the line of Zagwe Dynasty.

The Solomonic Dynasty brought about civilization, the Axum civilization, that lasted nearly one thousand years. Axum was one of the great kingdoms in the ancient world. As one of the surviving written

evidences from the ancient world, the Persian Prophet Mani, who lived in third century AD, commented that Persia, Rome, Axum and China were the four world powers of his time.

At the peak of its power, Axum ruled over lands as far as the present- day Yemen and Somalia. One evidence can be found in the name of the capital Mogadishu itself, which comes from the Geez word “ Meqdes “, meaning temple. Axum had a formidable naval power consisting of about five hundred ships.

The monolithic stelae that can be seen sanding in a field in the small town of Axum are a ‘living’ testament of this forgotten ancient civilization. How those large structures (the largest weighing five hundred tons, now has fallen down) were carved out from a single stone, how they were decorated with such precision, and how they were transported and erected is, like the prehistory of Ethiopia itself, shrouded in mystery. Excavations at Axum have uncovered golden coins, household goods, and other artifacts.

After flourishing for about one thousand years, Axum declined and eventually fell. The fall of Axum was due to a changing geopolitical situation, the rise of Islam in the Arabian peninsula.

The history of Ethiopia after the fall of Axum is another chapter. Ethiopia was isolated from the rest of the world for about one thousand years and became an inward-looking country. As one author put it, ‘During the last one thousand years, Ethiopia forgot and was forgotten by the world’.

Despite loss of its world power status, Ethiopia’s history during the last one thousand and three hundred years is also rich and fascinating. The stories of internal struggles to the throne, the kings, the nobility and the struggles between them, struggles between ethnic groups such as the Amharas, the Oromos, the Tigreans, the battles, struggle against foreign powers, foreign relations, the churches, saints, medieval society, and the dynamics created by all these can be fascinating.

I should mention the role of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Ethiopia’s history by saying that, as is always said, the history of Ethiopia and the history of Ethiopian Orthodox Church are just two sides of the same coin. Ethiopia is the only country in the world that worshipped the One Abrahamic God in the Old Testament and also accepted Christianity. Ethiopia accepted Christianity not in the fourth century, as is usually said, but in 34 AD, just one year after the crucifixion of Our Lord Jesus Christ ! Along with Israel, Ethiopia had been awaiting the coming of the Messiah for thousands of years, when the rest of the world was in the dark.

Just to give some high lights from the post-Axumite era, a Jewish queen known as Yodit Gudit (Yodit the evil) came to power and eventually ended the already weakened kingdom of Axum. According to Ethiopian Orthodox Church, she ruled Ethiopia for forty years. Yodit came from the Flasha, the Jewish community we already mentioned, who did not accept Christianity. She burnt and destroyed countless churches, monasteries, ancient manuscripts. The five hundred ton obelisk lying broken on the ground at Axum was due to her.

Another milestone in the history of Ethiopia was the influence of the Arabs. In the sixteenth century, Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi, known as Gagn Mohammed (“Mohammed the left-handed” in Amharic), moved from Harar to central Ethiopia to overthrow the Christian kingdom. A great battle took place at a place known as Shimbera Kure. There is no place known by this name today, but it is said that it was around the place known as Wonji in eastern Shewa. It is regrettable that no one knows the exact place of this significant battle today and that no historian has tried to study this battle as it deserved. It was a war between Christians and Muslims, but was not literally a religious war; it was part of the long standing struggle for power and control between different groups.

Supported by the Turkish Empire, Gagn Mohammed won the battle, but could never capture the Christian king. Mohammed’s superiority is attributed to the modern rifles he obtained from the Turks. Mohammed controlled much part of Ethiopia, burned countless churches, monasteries, manuscripts, beheaded countless priests and monks, converted many Christians to Islam by force.

He was defeated after thirteen years by the Christian kingdom who eventually gained support from the Portuguese. Mohammed was killed and his soldiers retreated back to Harar. The history of the Muslim city of Harar, an ancient walled city, is also interesting, adding color Ethiopia’s colorful history.

Harar had its own values and traditions different from the central Christian kingdom. It is this diversity that adds color and dynamics to Ethiopia’s history. The major players, the Amharas, the Tigreans, the Oromos, and the Muslims all had their own values and traditions. Ethiopia is home to more than eighty ethnic groups. The source of this diversity is Ethiopia’s independence, which helped to preserve the identities of various ethnic and cultural groups.

Then the Zemene Mesafint (Era of the Princes) ensued between mid -18th and mid19th centuries. This was the era when the Solomonic kings were powerless, reduced to mere symbols. The kings were there only because the people would not accept a non-Solomonic king. The history of this era is also interesting, with the many feudal lords struggling among each other for power.

The Wikipedia article ‘ Zemene Mesafint’ has described this as follows.

... It was a period in which the Emperors from the Solomonic Dynasty were reduced to little more than figureheads confined to the capital city of Gondar.

.... The lords constantly fought against each other for aggrandizement of their territory and to become the guardians of the kings of kings in Gondar, the capital of the empire at the time. The monarchy continued only in name because of its sacred character. This nominal but divinely ordained monarchy preserved the dynasty from actual extinction.

During this era, Ethiopia was very weak, vulnerable to foreign powers that were about to encroach on its borders. The Zemene Mesafint was brought to an end by King Tewodoros, who defeated all the land lords, came to power and united Ethiopia once again.

King Tewodros was succeeded by King Yohannes. By this time, foreign colonial powers were already eyeing Ethiopia. Ethiopia had always been under constant internal threats and the external threat of Islam, and now became under the threat of colonialism.

Ethiopia was also under the unique threat from Egypt, which was neither a colonial power, nor had (I think) religious ambitions to convert Ethiopia to Islam, unlike the Turks. There had been a unique connection between Ethiopia and Egypt for nearly one thousand and five hundred years, and this was connected to Christianity. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church was ruled by patriarchs coming from Egyptian Coptic Orthodox Church until the mid-twentieth century.

Another unique connection between Ethiopia and Egypt was due to the river Nile, which has become an international issue today. The relation between Ethiopia and Egypt was always strained for thousands of years, and intriguingly, this tension cannot always be explained as related to the river Nile alone and there is something unknown to it. For example, Egypt has long been encroaching upon the Ethiopian Orthodox Church heritages in Jerusalem, which is not related to Nile in any way. Even today, the popular view is that Egypt has always conspired against Ethiopia.

The time of King Yohannes was when the Egyptians decided to execute their ambition of controlling the source of the river Nile, which is in Ethiopia. In two separate battles known as the Battle of Gundet and the Battle of Gura, Yohannes crushed the technologically superior Egyptian army.

Another great milestone is the history of the Battle of Adwa (Adowa) in 1886. Weakened by the Zemene Mesafint, Ethiopia was in a precarious position, considering the looming danger of European colonialism. Even worse, between 1888 and 1892 a great plague known as Kifu Ken (meaning, Evil Day) hit Ethiopia and killed about 90% of its cattle. The plague also led to famine and a third of the population was also wiped out by the disease and famine. Some historians say that this was planned and was a precursor to the Battle of Adwa. Italy had brought a handful of infected cattle from India and introduced them to Eritrea and from there the disease spread to the rest of Ethiopia. One historian has described this by saying that perhaps the first biological weapon ever was used against Ethiopia by Italy.

As planned, Italy began encroaching on Ethiopia's borders, moving from its holds in Eritrea. King Minilik II, who succeeded Yohannes, was wise enough to amass rifles from European powers long before the Battle of Adwa. He was aware of the looming dangers posed by European colonialism. But at the final moment, Minilik was at a crossroads whether to confront a technologically advanced European power or to surrender Ethiopia's three thousand years independence.

Minilik, and particularly Empress Taytu, bravely decided to confront Italy and called on all Ethiopians to defend their country. Ethiopians from every tribe and culture answered Minilik's call as one man. They sensed (and, as many Ethiopians believe, by Divine intervention) a new and real danger to their country. Men, women, young, old, priests, monks, children, donkeys, horses, ... marched from different parts of the country towards Adwa, about 1000km from the center. It was as if the entire nation moved to Adwa. The internal feuds were all forgotten or suspended.

Ethiopia decisively defeated Italy at the battle of Adwa in 1896. Minilik's victory was a complete victory and was not only a military one. Minilik excelled not only in military strategy, but also in intelligence and diplomacy. Particularly, the role of Empress Taytu and Minilik's agent, Basha Awualom, can never be forgotten.

Ethiopians believe that there was a divine intervention. Many have witnessed, including Empress Taytu and Italian soldiers themselves, that they had seen Saint George killing the Italians.

Some historians would like to make up excuses for Italy's defeat, such as the difficult terrain. If this was the case, then it was ironical that Italy marched with arrogance not only into a physical landscape it was not familiar with but also into a cultural landscape it was ignorant of. They were ignorant of the sophistication of Ethiopians.

The Battle of Adwa was a climax. The victory of Ethiopia repelled the danger to its three thousand years history of independence, and also marked the beginning of the end of the colonial era. Its effect would reverberate for many decades to come, particularly among blacks in Africa and worldwide.

From the perspective of Italy, it was deeply stinging. The humiliation was unbearable. For Italy, Adwa left a stain on its glorious history. Italy came back forty years later to Ethiopia for a second war to restore its reputation. Italy mobilized all her resources as a nation to invade Ethiopia in 1935. Despite the vast numerical and technological superiority of Italians, the Ethiopians presented significant resistance and then Italy threw away the rules of the game and used mustard gas on Ethiopians. During their five years occupation, Italians carried out many atrocities. They burned countless churches, monasteries, killed monks, priests, civilians, women, children, and destroyed priceless heritages. Even with all those resources, they managed to control only a third of the country. After five years of occupation, Italians were expelled by Ethiopian warriors, supported by the British army. The history of Ethiopian warriors' guerrilla fights during those five years is a source of pride for many Ethiopians even today. Those five years produced many heroes such as Dejjazmach Geresu Duki, Dejjazmach Belay Zeleke, Colonel Abdissa Aga, to name but a few of the well-known. What is significant is that those heroes come not from one but from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, reflecting the unity of Ethiopians at Adwa once again.