

Testimonies

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Hailé Selassié: a testimony for reappraisal

The events since a long time underway in the whole Horn of Africa, and which so far do not seem to have laid any foundations for a solid future, give rise to a few reflections on the recent historic past, when that area, always of difficult balancing, enjoyed a certain stability, despite having always been difficult to balance.

The uncertain and worrying news from these countries are the cause of deep bitterness, especially for those who have known them well for long periods of their lives, with the consequent accumulation of sacrifices and satisfaction, for those who have appreciated and loved both the underlying generosity of the local inhabitants, with their sense of fatality and resignation, and whose grievous weaknesses and faults they have suffered and excused, and the historical values of two thousand years of both splendid isolation and backwardness.

Perhaps we should accept the inevitability of certain historical events, such as the end of Hailé Selassié's "ancien régime", without excessive regret. However, this does not prevent us from considering matters detached from ideological positions and sentimentalism, with reflections connected to particular situations and events that were not completely unpredictable even at the time. Many years have passed, and I think it is time to re-examine the matter, especially now that the disaster of recent years has clarified everything. The time has come for a reappraisal of the figure of Hailé Selassié, Emperor of Ethiopia from 1930 to 1975.

I will try to achieve this perceptively, drawing on the direct testimony of many years lived "in proximity" to the Emperor. My intention is to add a few details to the personal story of Hailé Selassié and to contribute in some way to correcting the distorted interpretations of the early years following his death and the successive silence with its unequivocal significance, yet without presuming to pass historical judgments outside the scope of my testimony.

I will attempt to do so by reordering my memories and experiences, good part of which are connected to the work in which I was engaged as an independent professional in that country during those years. Indeed, this is one of the aspects of my relationship with the Emperor that I most valued: in 23 years of collaboration, he never expected me to become a member of his court, nor limit my work to the projects of his empire alone.

When a regime falls, plundering often ensues, discrediting its leading figures, independently of their merits or shortcomings. I felt great indignation when the media - especially that of the West - took possession of the main figures overthrown by the Ethiopian Revolution of 1974-1975, picking on the figure of the Emperor in particular, carelessly and shallowly divulging information that was for the most part false and manipulating the events, according to pre-established theories, in keeping with the fashion of the times. A representative example is the book entitled *Il Negus* by Polish writer Ryszard Kapuscinski¹, which aims to recount the fall of the Empire - which it does in fact very effectively - but whose first part is actually strewn with malicious gossip and squalid rumours extorted from turncoat and braggart lackeys and courtiers, which not even the Fascist propaganda had the nerve to divulge in 1934.

1. Gradual progress

During the early 1970s, after frequenting the Emperor for two decades, I was increasingly persuaded that it was unlikely that Ethiopia, or more precisely, the Horn of Africa – a heap of ethnic groups with exasperated rivalries, in perennial conflict – could have been led towards progress in a better manner than was being achieved by the Emperor. He was acting with insight and wisdom, but also with the necessary gradualness imposed by the huge difficulties involved in detaching his people from the millenary traditions to which they were still strongly bound. Ruling a country like the old Abyssinia with ambitions of recovery and modernisation was certainly no easy feat.

From its upland stronghold, Ethiopia proudly defended its privileges, from the Aksumite Kingdom of the second and third centuries AD and the encounter with Christianity in the fourth century, to the invasion of the Galla and the struggle against the Muslims in the sixteenth century. Nonetheless, contact with the rest of the world remained rare and sporadic up until the nineteenth century, when the opening of the Suez Canal led to the intensification of European attention and attempts at penetration, especially by the French, British and Italians (as reconstructed by Angelo Del Boca in his book *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale*)². These were accompanied by the multiplication of political and trade expeditions, missionary visits, conflicts and clashes, friendly and stormy relations, provocations and alliances, ventures and flops, pressures and tricks, massacres and vendettas, and scientific, technical and healthcare projects. This situation continued up until the construction of the Djibouti-Addis Ababa railway and the brief period of Italian occupation.

On the whole, in substance, Ethiopia (those lands roughly comprised within the current boundaries that did not, however, include the Ogaden and the territories of the Galla in general until the reign of Menelik II), had remained closed in obstinate – and often blind and xenophobic – isolation, in a whirl of continuous, deep divisions and irreconcilable hatred, which alternated with fleeting reconciliations and brief periods of peace. The chaos continued until the advent of the great restorers of the nineteenth-century Ethiopian monarchy: Tewodros II, Yohannes IV, Menelik II, followed by Empress Zauditu and finally Hailé Selassié I. After this, the Empire started again to assume the more organic aspect of a confederation of kingdoms and feudal provinces, although the influence and power of the great regional leaders vis à vis the Crown authority remained extensive and decisive.

It is, thus, natural that it was very difficult to adapt the peripheral and central structures of the State, the despotic power of the Rases (princes) and enormous influence of the Church, the traditions, ancient laws, writings and customs and, in substance, the “mentality of the peoples”, to the new times of great and rapid development of the twentieth century. These aspects were aggravated by the many ethnic groups (Amhara, Oromo, Tigray, Dankali, Eritreans, Somalis, Nilotes) and religions (Coptic Christians, Muslims, Falashas, Animists, etc.) in a vast, poorly connected and uneven territory, with the Rift Valley, which crosses uplands of 2,000-3,000 metres of altitude, medium lands and lowlands, down to the 120 metres below sea level of the Dankalia region. The administrative structure of the Empire was constituted by thirteen regional governorships – in addition to Eritrea that was added later – whose strong and varying regional autonomy depended on the political influence of the local Rases, in spite of the discord surrounding Eritrea’s misfortunes. With regard to this, I would like to make a digression: we should not be too surprised today if in 1952 Hailé Selassié was persuaded by a sort of practically unanimous referendum, to send his permanent envoy to Eritrea (Ras Andargatchew Massai), who officially called himself “Representative of HIM in Eritrea” for ten years.

The decision to modify Eritrea’s status, making it a province of Ethiopia, was a more serious matter and the source of many negative consequences. It was achieved by the legalistic sleight of hand of a surprise vote of the Eritrean Parliament, which

immediately appeared to have been contrived by the second representative, General Abiye Abebe⁴, with the approval of the Organisation of African Unity and the silent approval of the United Nations (heedless of Resolution 390, which should have assured Eritrean independence).

The reason for this was to secure Ethiopia a definitive outlet to the sea with the ports of Massawa and Assab (where indeed, the majority of the regime's construction work was concentrated during that ten-year period). Nevertheless, it also served to incorporate a region that was distinctly more advanced in terms of industrial development in relation to the rest of the country. However, this was probably the Emperor's greatest mistake.

Indeed, it marked the start of the first guerrilla attacks in the western lowlands. The Emperor and his third representative in Eritrea, Ras Asrate Kassa, would have wished to contrast this phenomenon with great economic growth in the lowlands themselves, rather than with anti-guerrilla warfare. On more than one occasion, whilst preparing plans for social centres (organically located in large and more heavily populated Muslim areas), with normal schools and agricultural colleges, rural villages, hospitals, mosques, etc., both men complained of and defined in harsh and sarcastic words the intemperance of the soldiers, whose independent anti-guerrilla operations, studded with abuses of power and massacres, had fuelled the population's hostility and increased the ranks and activities of the guerrillas, to the extent of provoking the creation of an authentic army of liberation from the oppression of the Ethiopian "foreigner".

However, even during those years (1960s) in which I credited Hailé Selassié with the highest possible skill in the art of governing (and, it seemed to me, without being conditioned by my collaboration with the regime and the ensuing work) and those that followed, I increasingly feared the moment in which he would no longer be. Indeed, I was shocked by a casual episode that revealed to me how differently a certain section of the Western intellectual class felt about him. Not even the accumulation of appraisals which continued to reach him by recognised bodies, certainly did serve to lessen the surprise. The episode is marginal but significant, and concerns one of the many interviews with heads of state conducted by Italian journalist Orianna Fallaci. We talked very amiably for a couple of hours. However, I remember the outcome of the encounter in her closing words to the Emperor: "You speak very persuasively and effectively, but your words don't convince me". I also remember my impassioned reasoning, which I nonetheless expressed calmly, in response to her provocations, such as "Hailé Selassié is another despot and tyrant!".

However, according to multiple and reliable old-epoch reports⁵, all predating 1930, Ras Tafari Makonnen had already shown remarkable qualities and intentions as regent, and was credited with "wisdom and acumen", "natural kindness and spirit of justice", "patient indulgence", "steadfastness and energy with a broad and unerring vision of the real and deep needs of his Nation", and "intuition for the appreciation of the various interests of his Country".

On the international scene, "he had, already as regent, started to develop a completely new policy of foreign presence, purposely demolishing the centuries-old barrier, which enclosed Ethiopia in its static feudal barbarism, by means of the country's entry to the League of Nations". He drew up "well-planned designs of domestic development" within a "single wide-reaching programme". "As the most authoritative and heeded advisor of Empress Zauditu, he became the arbiter of the fate of the large landowners, whom he appointed, transferred, dismissed, exiled and imprisoned as he liked. However, he always performed these tasks with great sagacity, moderation and caution, maintaining a skilled balance and avoiding direct clashes with the most powerful Rases, wherever possible, and solving the thorniest questions and introducing the most radical reforms". "He surrounded himself with the most advanced members of Ethiopian society who had lived and travelled abroad: progressives and nationalists whose importance had gradually grown in the presence of the regent's firm and capable long-

term political action". All of this was aimed at "opening the spirit of his fellow countrymen with a far-reaching – but of course, gradual and systematic – plan of reform for the millenary and backward Empire, which he had already courageously commenced when heir to the throne with the purpose of reducing the powers of the great landowners and concentrating the absolute power of the State in his own hands".

And how could this man with sharp vision, yet a serene and always with a "slightly melancholy-tinged, immobile, and hieratic" look, have tackled with this immense task aimed at improving the human condition of his people, if "firm energy" had not been another of his humane qualities? Moreover, Father J. B. Coulbeaux in his *Histoire Politique et Religieuse de l'Abyssinie*⁶ declares that "L'Abyssin aime un roi autocrate, généreux, magnifique même, mais maître absolu de ses munificences, despote et facilement tyran. S'il chante et célèbre les largesses royales, il accepte aussi, comme décret divin, irréfragable et juste, toute décision de son courroux, même capricieux, fou ou cruel. Ce que dit le Roi, le Seigneur l'a dit. La personne royale est presque divinisée par l'origine théocratique attribuée à la Dynastie salomonienne. C'est un culte mêlé de respect, de crainte servile et de vénération. On fait devant le Prince, les mêmes prostrations que devant les autels!".

2. The failed decentralisation

Consequently, not everyone viewed the Emperor's works and behaviour in the same light: on the contrary, opposite opinions could exist even in those days.

Some people tended to emphasise the formal aspects and rituality of the court, the granting of lands and benefices to faithful and "meritorious for the Crown" figures, the distribution of small change to the poor, instead of far-reaching social reforms. Above all, the inadmissibility of dissent. Substantially, the Emperor was accused with wielding power as it had always been exercised in this part of the world: in an autocratic manner, backed by an oligarchy, with an accentuated propensity for paternalism. All these aspects could be disturbing for outsiders from democratic countries who had the chance to observe him or approach him. Even if, leaving aside the Constitution and Parliament – perhaps because he was by now satisfied and certain of the strength of the structure and more inclined to dedicate himself much more to his "African Dream" – he had actually made an attempt at decentralisation. Indeed, during the Sixties he issued a decree, which was widely published by the local press, in which he strictly ordered all those who administered the country, from ministers to civil servants, to assume their own responsibilities without any longer awaiting his orders and directions. However, this was in vain! After just a few weeks the verandas and gardens around the audience room of Menelik's Ghebi palace, where Hailé Selassié worked and held morning audiences, were once again crowded with ministers, deputy ministers and provincial governors, anxiously waiting to be summoned to explain their problems to the Emperor and leave the responsibility for the decisions up to him. Custom and tradition were so well established that everything returned as it had been before.

On several occasions during those years I found myself participating in those morning meetings, having been summoned amongst the many notables for the examination of some project, and I often ended up being caught up to a slight extent in their chatter. This was not always innocent; on the contrary, it was a well-known fact that these matinée sessions provided the backdrop for the concoction of sly plots and second-degree conspiracies aimed at the downfall of current competitors, without ever involving the unquestioned figure of the absolute ruler, at least not in those days. Voices were kept low, in commenting certain events or arguments of technical or economic aspect and awaiting to hear the palace minister or his assistants call the names for entry to HIM's study.

During those moments, I was unable to stop myself from reflecting – with a certain degree of indulgence and a hint of sarcasm - on that strange ritual that had been repeated for decades, or perhaps centuries. All things considered, perhaps even the Emperor, despite being increasingly distracted by internal problems and concentrated on his inter-african dreams, and notwithstanding his proclamation of decentralisation, was to a certain extent an accomplice of that ritual and satisfied with those incessant recourses to his judgement, which actually continued to consolidate his position of absolute power.

However, for me the man was an ascetic, albeit one with a strong practical sense in internal politics with a few concessions to Machiavellism laced with a likable sense of humour (“vous connaissez mes gents”). In situations that promised to be difficult to resolve, he often repeated the words, “Enfin, nous sommes de passage sur cette terre”. And he ended up covering more general and vague problems, which interested the whole of Africa.

The sensation that could be perceived during the last years of his reign was one of a general loss of lucidity and the attenuation of that characteristic promptness with which he formerly grasped matters. It was clear that his thoughts were straying ever further from the practical problems of rule, to immerse themselves in utopian dreams that regarded the very uncertain future of the continent.

The 23 years that I frequented him and worked for him are full of significant episodes, observations and anecdotes. I propose to order my memories by dividing them into short chapters, and will do so by running through the list of works that I designed⁷ (the job orders of which were either promoted by or directly connected with Haile Selassie himself or his ministerial organisations) in order to form an opinion regarding a certain way of thinking and acting and, as far as possible, to interpret the Emperor’s political and social thought through the projects realised.

They are memories regarding first-hand testimony of events that, I believe, I always experienced whilst maintaining an objective critical attitude, without being conditioned or prejudiced, and without the presumption, I repeat, of wishing to judge historical processes or situations of the dimensions and complexity of those of postwar Ethiopia and forward.

I am confident that I had enough occasions of this nature to enable me to know the Emperor sufficiently well. This is because during the direct discussion regarding the formulation of a project (social requirements, location, practical aspects, dimensions, appearance, cost, etc.), it is almost always possible to penetrate the most reserved aspects of the client, and in this case of the man and the politician.

I have asked myself several times why a person who enjoyed excessive reverential respect from his countrymen and collaborators even of high rank, and foreigners too, frequently revealed his ideas and thoughts – sometimes highly confidential – to me. I hazard a guess that I, as a reserved person, open in relations with others, but never curious about the internal politics of the country, and in addition being a foreigner (Italian!), considerably younger than himself, must have appeared to him such an innocuous figure as to allay any worries of reservedness. Perhaps he also confided in me because he liked and respected me, and maybe because he thought that I could perceive the logical depth of his reasoning, without any hidden purposes. Or perhaps simply because he needed to vent his feelings.

Amongst the many projects realised in the various sectors during the early Sixties (educational, healthcare, social, religious, industrial, residential, tourism, military, town planning, communications and restoration), two large and evidently monumental complexes were particularly prominent and open to criticism, to the point of being labelled “works of the regime”, more than any others: the African Hall⁸ and the City Hall⁹ in Addis Ababa.

3. The “works of the regime” and their monumentality

The choice of the location, dimensions, multipurpose nature, architectural appearance and the monumentality of the two buildings were intentional. This was not due to fantasies of grandeur on the part of the architect, but rather to the intention to make an impression on public opinion, with clear aims. During our first meeting to discuss the project, Hailé Selassié roughly told me, “It is necessary to show people that it is possible to construct grand buildings here too, by erecting a couple of high-profile structures. It is not their complexity or size that matter, but the maximum possible use of home-produced materials, in order to shake our wealthy middle class (which keeps its money under the mattress) from the inactivity that also binds it in the field of construction, and stimulate it to invest its assets also in building to make this ‘great village’ a city and a true great capital”. It was in this spirit that the two monumental complexes were designed and built between 1959 and 1964.

The accuracy of this provocative intuition, whose implementation played on the sensitivity and pride of “his people”, was demonstrated during the following decade by the individual ventures of wealthy aristocrats and thriving property companies (of which those with mixed Italian, Ethiopian and Eritrean capital were the most numerous). These projects considerably widened the free market of premises for public and commercial concerns and housing. Demand for the latter increased impressively during the same period, due to the ambition of the native population for a new and more prestigious lifestyle and to the needs of the veritable army of officials of international organisations – in particular UNECA (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa) – which established their headquarters in the city during those years. Addis Ababa soon began to assume the form predicted by the Emperor. One day it would become a metropolis and Africa’s moral capital.

Confirmation of this ambition I received when the Emperor paid a daytime visit to one of the building sites during the final stage of construction. He insisted on climbing to the roof floor and walking to the edge of an overhang 40 metres above ground, which offered a complete view of the city. Here he started to point out and list to me all the various new complexes that were gradually emerging from the sea of eucalyptus trees and corrugated iron roofs of the old *chica* houses, and those that would follow. He spoke with evident satisfaction and such dreamy emphasis so as to forget our precarious position, for when he turned around to re-enter the attic, he started to cross diagonally an area of very thin provisional boarding.

It was a matter of moments: I instinctively grabbed his arm brusquely, and then just as instinctively let it go, paralysed by the movement of the boards with every step he took. It was only his very light weight that enabled tragedy to be averted. Moreover, we were alone, without any witnesses! And as if that weren’t enough, this episode occurred only a few weeks after the unsuccessful attempted coup d’état in which the press and radio had hypothesised foreign involvement.

However, these memories take me back to other episodes regarding the Africa Hall. Little more than a month remained before the date scheduled for the International Conference (December 1959) that was to be held at Africa Hall. The Emperor’s first visit to the site took place on the Monday following the Friday of his return to Addis Ababa, where he was given a triumphant, emotional and spontaneous welcome (those who saw the people even the humblest and poorest ones kneel at his passage along Churchill Avenue, will never forget the sight). His return alone was sufficient to restore order in the city following three days of crazed uninterrupted shooting. On this occasion, he again climbed to the top floor and reached the edge of the front terrace, isolating himself from his bodyguards. He then asked me to pay great attention, saying, “Je suis dans vos mains”. He proceeded briefly to explain that, as I was well aware, the date of the conference had already been fixed and the 32 African heads of state summoned. He was anxious that the work might not be finished in time for the event. He added that this

would have been disastrous for Ethiopia's image on the world scene. The way in which he expressed his concern to me, very openly and humanly, could not have failed to disturb me and make me fully aware of my responsibility. We tripled our efforts and imagination and managed to finish the building in time. The conference was held and was a great success.

Earlier still, my memories take me back to a dark afternoon of heavy rain, when he talked to me for the first time of creating a building to host the periodic meetings of the rulers of the various African countries: "The future of the African people is precarious unless we manage to unify their purposes and coordinate their aims". I also remember the successive examination of projects and models, the afternoon visits to the sites, and his enthusiasm regarding every detail right up to the last days of work. I recall the large marble plaques, in Amharic and English, placed on either side of the entrance to the Hall, which he read and then ordered the removal of the inscription (following the commemorative words and the name of the architect) listing the names of the minister and chief officials of the Ministry of Public Works responsible for the bureaucratic aspects of the project, with the phrase "Qu'est-ce qu'ils ont fait?".

The most curious and significant memory regarding City Hall, at the time of the attempted decentralisation, is connected with the presentation of the large model of the final design, which required the temporary construction of a dedicated room, for it was built on a 1:50 scale. Anxious to commence work, he enquired about the bureaucratic preliminaries and when I answered that the City Council had ordered the formation of a commission for the final decision, he interrupted me with bitter and cutting sarcasm: "Une commission? Vous êtes fichu dans un drôle de guêpier". Which tellingly revealed what he thought of it.

4. The education question

The cultural level of countries such as that inherited by Hailé Selassié was certainly extremely low and illiteracy was shockingly high. Education was chiefly entrusted to various foreign cultural and religious missions, which built and ran schools of different levels. A good proportion of the country's élite concluded their studies at foreign universities, often at the expense of the Crown. The State and local Church were mainly responsible for primary education, with inefficient schools scattered irregularly over the country.

Hailé Selassié was convinced that true progress, which had accelerated dizzily in the rest of the world since the end of the Second World War and his return to Ethiopia, could only be achieved by creating strong incentives for the education of the new generations, and demonstrated constant interest in this huge and urgent problem. Unfortunately it was not until 1967-1969 that a wide-reaching systematic national plan was launched, with the consultation of UNESCO. Eighty-two secondary schools were built, scattered throughout the country, especially in smaller towns, along with a university campus in Bahardar for the training of the necessary teachers.

Other schools had of course also been built and organised during the preceding years, particularly in Eritrea from 1952, but they had not managed to achieve any appreciable reduction in the illiteracy rate of the population, and were almost always located in important towns.

In addition to these primary and middle schools for boys and girls, army and air force training colleges, the Massawa naval academy for cadets, petty officers and sailors, schools for police and customs officers, business and vocational colleges were also built. The universities of Addis Ababa and Asmara were also extended and numerous cultural institutes and several good level foreign schools (especially French, American, British, German, Scandinavian and Italian) founded.

Each time that a development plan for the school system was drawn up, I witnessed the direct and deep interest of the Emperor, even in the details of design, organisation and construction of the buildings themselves, at least for those which I was commissioned to undertake. He was strongly determined to extending education at all levels, in the predictable but constantly repeated conviction that the progress of the country could not leave aside the cultural improvement of its people. The Emperor continued to expand this wide-reaching programme, even during the last decade of his reign, when students started to cause the Government, and the police in particular, trouble with protests, which eventually resulted in open rebellion to the "regime" in 1974.

5. Freedom of worship

The almost total lack of secularism during this period only served to confirm the Ethiopians' complete involvement with religion. Their participation, whether as Orthodox Christians (the most numerous group, approximately 15 million, present in Ethiopia since the fourth century), Muslims (present in Ethiopia since the seventh century), Falasha Jews, Catholics, Evangelists, Adventists, etc., was keen, with a calendar marked by unquestioned and very widely respected festivities.

The Emperor, of course, was also very religious, but possessed true conviction and did not need to feign in order to live up to the image required by his role. He was also a regular churchgoer and his court teemed with high-ranking Coptic prelates. Every now and then, in addition to the churches that the government built or contributed to fund, aiding promotion by various religious communities, Hailé Selassié would decide to build a church to fulfil some vow, either in Ethiopia or abroad, such as the new churches of Mount Bizen and Debre Sina monasteries and – if I recall well – one in Khartoum and another one in Latin America. In such cases, he did so at his own expense.

Each time that he wanted to realise one of these projects, he asked for a quick rough estimate of the cost in order to assess whether he could personally afford it. I remember him asking me for a pencil and jotting down calculations on several occasions, and sometimes requesting me to adjust the dimensions of the building. These details are not consistent with the claims of those who maintain that the Emperor possessed enormous personal fortunes abroad.

In short, he was deeply involved in his own religiosity far beyond what was imposed by his role in the inherited relationship between the State and the Church. Despite this, I believe that he always respected other religions, in a framework of a wise ecumenical policy, maintaining freedom of worship throughout the country, even when armed peace reigned between the various populations.

During the early years of Ethiopian presence in Eritrea, three mosques were constructed, which could jokingly be defined as "works of the regime", for they were promoted and donated by the State. These included two major ones, in Massawa (1952-1953) and Agordat (1956-1958). After having discussed and approved the projects, the Emperor did not disdain visiting the sites several times during construction, exchanging opinions with the Muslim religious leaders, and participating in the respective official inaugurations. In short, his behaviour in religious matters was complaisant and generous.

6. Nature and the works of man

My conviction that Hailé Selassié was constantly immersed in the problems of his country was confirmed when he shared his reflections with me whilst relaxing away from home in situations devoid of the usual ever-incumbent officialism (in sparsely equipped locations that promoted closeness with the person of the Emperor), usually at sunset at the end of a tiring day.

The growth in Hailé Selassié's prestige during that period aided Ethiopia, expanding its international relations and resulting in a series of increasingly frequent top-level meetings with the most important heads of state. The hospitality reserved for his guests was generally worthy of the traditions of his country and the rituals were exemplary. However, Hailé Selassié regretted that he could not show them Ethiopia's extraordinary natural beauties, along with the significant works that had been constructed during that period, such as the hydroelectric projects and important dams, which emphasised the country's progress. Above all, he would have liked to have illustrated its potential, for it would have aided the financial agreements that often concluded such meetings.

Unfortunately, visits to worthwhile places often had to be avoided because, organisational difficulties aside, they could not be reached by day trips for lack of suitable accommodation facilities. This led to the need to build some villas and lodges in locations that would also enable guests to enjoy and also appreciate the works of man in splendid settings with an enchanting climate.

However, the need for these "bases" was not restricted to purposes of political tourism. The buildings also served for the periodic visits of the Emperor and his staff to the various provinces for administrative reasons, for meetings with the peripheral populations and the direct thorough examination of local problems.

These various requirements led to the creation of a systematic plan that hinged on the three existing palaces of Addis Ababa, Asmara and Massawa, which were restored, renovated and extended. The two latter structures had been inherited from the Italian government, which had constructed that in Asmara and rebuilt the one in Massawa on the plan of a building erected during Ottoman rule. The new peripheral bases were reached from these three hubs.

Thus the Villa Malkassa in Sodore and the Tana Palace in Bahardar were designed, with strongly emphasised architectural features. However, the construction of these so-called "villas" fuelled criticism, according to which they eluded the purpose for which they were devised as instruments of foreign politics.

The systematic general plan, which was supposed to cover most of the country, proceeded in parallel with the far more important one for the creation and expansion of the nation's secondary airports, with an increasingly widespread network that was gradually covering the entire country. This was designed to act as an incentive to air travel for the peripheral populations, who were gradually assimilating this new form of transport. It was also intended for domestic and international tourism, which was growing healthily, stimulated by intelligent propaganda that enticed foreigners with "thirteen months of sun" (in reference to the Ethiopian calendar).

7. Industrialisation

Many negative remarks have been made concerning Hailé Selassié's relationship with Eritrea. I think that this is another area that requires correcting. I refer chiefly to the process of industrialisation of the country, in which Eritrea had a vital and privileged role,

even if some results and a moderate development were also achieved in some other areas of Ethiopia, however, no comparison with those of Eritrea.

The synergies between the drive, ability and imaginative business sense of the Italian community, the talent for specialisation and the efficiency of Eritrean labour, and the willingness of all the workforces to collaborate effectively, certainly constituted a decisive factor for the process that was underway. However, despite all these positive factors, the goal could not have been achieved without the perspicacious and farsighted economic policy enforced by the Ethiopian government. This featured considerable customs, tax and currency concessions and incentives of various types, which could even be considered to pamper Eritrean companies, favouring them excessively in respect to their foreign competitors, but which nonetheless extended the products of this Ethiopian New Deal to the entire country. "Il faut démarrer", the Emperor liked to repeat.

The radical economic transformation of the industrial production system was rapid, even for the other zones of Ethiopia that were considered depressed areas and had no tradition in this field. Nonetheless, self-sufficiency in terms of primary agricultural and industrial products was almost achieved in the space of just a few years. The boom continued incessantly and much capital flowed in from abroad for new ventures or for the expansion of existing ones (up until a few months before the revolution many factories had placed preliminary orders that would have doubled their machinery).

Those industries that used local raw materials were obviously favoured and encouraged. Indeed, "from raw material to finished product" was one of the more unimaginative slogans of several firms in a country that had hitherto been used to importing.

The production success was crowned by periodic exhibitions, such as the "Expo 1969" held in Asmara. This economic policy allowed the development of industries of all kinds, which gradually managed to cover the entire list of the country's primary needs.

8. The social sphere: housing, town planning, healthcare

The birth and growth of industries in towns and the surrounding areas produced a certain degree of well-being amongst the urban populations, whilst in the country this was restricted solely to the isolated areas with farms of various kinds, but chiefly to the larger ones, almost all of which produced raw materials for industrial processing.

One of the effects of the formation of an emergent class of workers was the demand for housing and the consequent generalised building boom that usually accompanies it in the private sphere. The new feature in this sector which was represented by major public intervention and was the result of a venture conducted in Addis Ababa, in which the Emperor showed great interest and enthusiasm, bore witness to the government's desire to improve the accommodation of civil servants and officials.

An entire district was planned (1964-1965), featuring 500 flats in multi-storey buildings with a modern layout. The design of the individual apartments was influenced by Hailé Selassié himself, who insisted on maintaining a link with the traditions of Ethiopian life in the form of the separation of the modern core of the flat from the bathrooms, by means of wide terraces that acted as courtyards: "Il faut donner le temps nécessaire pour assimiler graduellement habitudes de vie que sont au delà de la coutume", he commented. Furthermore, this interesting project was accompanied by a redemption scheme that operated by means of regular salary deductions.

The end of the work was marked by an interesting episode, which is worth mentioning. A certain amount of time had been required for the delimitation of the area for construction and the design and contractual plans. When everything was ready, a

meeting was called for the signing of the contract (even though the contractor was not present, it was important, according to the Emperor, to have the relevant ministers sitted around a table for the signature).

The Emperor was seated at the head of the table, with the Minister of Finance (Yilma Deressa) and the Minister of Public Works (Mahteme Selassie Wolde Maskal) on his left and me on his right. Following a brief introduction in the local language, the Emperor, visibly satisfied, placed the bundle of papers in front of the Minister of Finance. After a few brief words, the Minister of Finance placed it in front of the Minister of Public Works, who passed it back again to him with a few words. More words accompanied further movements of the papers: (the debate concerned who should sign them first as the contracting authority, whilst the other would have signed as guarantor, for both the technical aspect and financial surety. However, there were obviously more serious reasons.) The Emperor, although quivering, had not yet said a word, but suddenly turned to me and gestured with his hands as he pronounced the cutting words: "Voyez, voyez ce qu'ils me font!". He then leapt up and left the room. Two days later he summoned me with evident embarrassment (it was the only time that he used an interpreter) and excused himself for the mishap, aware of how much work the venture had cost up until that time, saying that he "couldn't turn it into a political affair".

This episode reveals how some degree of discord had already started to make itself felt in the teamwork game of the government, despite the continuation of complete formal subjection to the leader.

Town-planning schemes obviously represented the essential apparatus for the expansion of the towns and industrial network. Between 1966 and 1968, we implemented 42 projects for medium-sized towns, with an all-Italian team and financial cooperation. I had previously drawn up the plan for the area surrounding the City Hall in Addis Ababa (1964-1965), followed by that for Makalle, and then in 1972-1974 the general plan for Asmara, which was growing rapidly and was expected to reach 500,000 inhabitants by 2000. Actually the process of urban migration was accelerated by rural guerrilla warfare and consequently this figure, which was then calculated on the generous side, was reached in the span of just a few years.

Hailé Selassié dedicated particular attention to the general town-planning scheme for Asmara, asking lots of questions about it, discussing it with the Eritrean local authorities and expressing appreciation, while, in his half-serious manner, called my attention to watch out for some unspecified commission that had been mentioned during the presentation.

In the healthcare sector, one of the Emperor's first directives (shortly after the appointment of his representative in Eritrea, in 1953) was that regarding the construction of the Empress Menen Hospital, which was annexed to the city's existing general hospital. This was followed by the general hospitals of Massawa and Assab (1956-1958). Hospitals were also built in Agordat and Afabet in 1967-1968, and that of Assab was extended to twice its previous size. As it can be noted, almost all of these projects were in Muslim areas.

Other works that benefited the Muslim population included the deviation of the torrent that threatened the town of Archico, near Massawa, and the Zula Dam for the irrigation of the agricultural land farmed by the local peasants.

Even these ventures clearly show how Hailé Selassié's basic decisions were aimed at proportionately favouring the people of Eritrea (which boasted five hospitals) in respect to the rest of the Empire. This may have been because these decisions implicitly acknowledged the greater critical maturity of the people of Eritrea, or – more probably – due to subtle political calculation in anticipation of the future "unification by consent" of that region to Ethiopia.

Unfortunately, as far as I know, the healthcare system of the rest of the country was limited, rudimental and uncoordinated. It had been devised and rooted in tradition

and was entrusted to occasional and inefficient ventures that had to deal with widespread problems of privations and poverty, which were constantly exacerbated by adverse climatic conditions and the relentless advance of the desert in the northern areas of the country.

The Emperor's effective intervention spawned numerous other projects, part of which witnessed my professional collaboration. These included the renovation, extension and new layout of the ports of Massawa and Assab, and the transformation of the former naval base into an Academy for cadets, petty officers and sailors of the new Ethiopian navy, which resulted in 300 works over a twenty-year period.

In February each year, in the presence of the Emperor and numerous guests of various nationalities, the crews of the most important fleets with ships in the area – French, British, Indian (and sometimes Italian) and, believe it or not, Russian and American together – participated in a splendid event featuring contests of training exercises and joyful exhibitions.

9. Relations with Italy and the Vatican

In the Emperor's relations with Italy, I will never forget a particular episode that caused me a great deal of embarrassment. One afternoon I was summoned to Menelik's "Old Ghebi" palace and entered the old throne room, where the Emperor was in the company of other members of the government, who were invited to leave. I thus remained alone with Hailé Selassié, who after inviting me to sit on an armchair that he had personally drawn alongside his own, he proceeded to expound his problem, with surprising circumspection, punctuating his conversation with the words, "Je ne comprend pas votre gouvernement!!".

In short, he explained that he had for many years, and through the usual diplomatic channels – although not always with the enthusiastic support of his staff – allowed our two governments to understand how a developing country such as Ethiopia needed the backing of an economically and technically sound nation for the organisation of its development, and that his choice and his liking had fallen on Italy (the lira had just won a currency award). One of the reasons for this was that Italians, of all Westerners, had demonstrated, "comme vous bien savez", to be the best suited to collaborating and living alongside Ethiopians ("Italians are the only ones who reinvest their profits in the country, etc."). "Je ne comprend pas votre gouvernement", he continued to say with sadness, as he also diverted the conversation to encompass certain negotiations for demands that had not been satisfied, such as those for the return of the Aksum Obelisk.

In short, he invited me to see what I could achieve personally in this respect, avoiding the normal channels, also because he, the Emperor before his death, wished to meet Pope John XXIII, and he realised that he would never be able to satisfy this desire to visit Rome if he had not first been invited by the Italian government. Of course, I had no choice but to leave for Italy in order to expound and support Hailé Selassié's aspiration in various meetings at an appropriate level.

I rapidly managed to stir up interest and a few weeks later the Minister of Industry and Commerce, Luigi Preti, visited Addis Ababa with a delegation. There were numerous meetings, great enthusiasm, declarations of aims, and interesting and important plans of operation (included the Tana Beles project, which was recently resumed and partially implemented). Unfortunately, soon after the return of the Preti mission to Italy, the Italian government fell from power, taking all the initiatives with it.

Hailé Selassié only came to Italy on an official visit in 1970, when Pope John XXIII was already dead and Ethiopia too had put aside the dream of the "economic twinning" of the two countries.

10. Conclusions

These brief and circumscribed memoirs perhaps betray the wish for an aggrieved defence of the autocratic ruler and an attempt at a theoretical justification of his conduct in the social relations that existed in that particular society and during that unique period. Nonetheless, I have still tried to do my best, without hesitation or ambiguity, and not without a certain effort to free myself from ideological aspects and ideologies.

Between areas of light and shadow and also dissonance between consolidated disinformation and mystification, I believe that the truth is awaiting rediscovery, all the more so in the light of the events of the disastrous past 16 years, which have marked the destiny of Ethiopia (and Eritrea).

Would the fate of these countries, and the entire Horn of Africa, have been different and better if the 1974-5 revolution had not taken place?

Perhaps not, because the Emperor had no suitable successor lined up. However, it is impossible to believe that he had ignored the problem. Rather, he had preferred not to face it for mysterious reasons, in a rush of inordinate pride.

Or perhaps it would indeed have followed a different course, because, in spite of everything, the outlines of the gradual process of Ethiopia's development could have succeeded in following the path that he had traced (realism, gradualness, pragmatism, consensus, internationality), and be continued by other able men of goodwill, of which the country has no shortage.

The following announcement was made a few days ago: "Following long research, the remains of the Ethiopian Emperor Hailé Selassié have been discovered beneath the floor of the offices of the royal palace. The causes of death were never ascertained. The regime claimed that they were natural, but it has always been rumoured that the elderly Hailé Selassié was murdered. The remains will be exhumed in the presence of the Imperial family and transported to a church with all due reverence".

Arturo Mezzedimi

Rome, April 1992

Notes

- [*] For his activity in the service of Ethiopia, the Emperor awarded architect Arturo Mezzedimi three decorations (Knight Officer of the Order of the Star of Ethiopia, and Knight and Knight Officer of the Cross of Menelik II). However, he obtained the highest honour when the Ethiopian Postal Administration dedicated five stamps to his major works and the United Nations did likewise, with the issue of three commemorative stamps.
- [1] RYSZARD KAPUSCINSKI, *Il Negus. Vita e caduta di un autocrate*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1983
- [2] ANGELO DEL BOCA, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale*, 4 volumes, Laterza, Rome - Bari 1976 -1984
- [3] His Imperial Majesty
- [4] Both Andargatchew Massai and Abiye Abeba were the Emperor's sons-in-law. The changeover between the two representatives in Eritrea occurred at the end of 1959.
- [5] CORRADO ZOLI, *Cronache Etiopiche*, Ed. Sindacato Arti Grafiche, Rome, 1930.
- [6] JEAN-BAPTISTE COULBEAUX, *Histoire Politique et Religieuse de l'Abyssinie*, P. Geuthner, Paris 1929, volume II.
- [7] List of works accomplished by architect Arturo Mezzedimi for the Imperial Government of Ethiopia, mentioned or referred to in the essay:
- [8] *Africa Hall*, is the permanent headquarters of UNECA, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa. The structure, built in the span of only 18 months, was completed in February 1961. It covers an overall area of 75,000 m², with a usable area of 13,800 m², consisting of 3,600 m² of conference halls, 5,500 m² of offices and 4,700 m² of general facilities. Its main characteristic is represented by the "continuous spaces" of the internal layout. Ten years later, in 1971, work was commenced on a project funded by the United Nations to extend the structure, which was completed in 1975. It consists of a block of 800 new offices, a 6-storey building to house the huge library and other buildings for general facilities. This extension work added a further 130,000 m².
- [9] The *City Hall* is a structure covering 140,000 m² that was built between 1961 and 1964, as an integral part of the city centre renovation project. Its location is the direct consequence of the new course of Churchill Avenue. The structure features various spaces – the hall, boardroom, reception room, cinema-theatre, restaurant, 4 bars, library, and panoramic terrace – making it a social as well as an administrative centre.