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Duality and Duplicity in Euro-Ethiopian historical relations

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I wish to thank the organizers of this seminar for having invited me to present a brief comment on the history of Euro-Ethiopian relations, a theme that usually tends to pull Portugal out of the shadows of its relative insignificance.

Suffering the professional condition of an anthropologist (a class that understands little of diachrony and chronology), I believe I can be excused by my fellow historians and by the general public, for beginning my comment on the ancient Euro-Ethiopian relations, by bringing to memory the short period in the late fifties and early sixties of the last century when the *Estado Novo* (or “New State”, which we in Portugal now call the Ancient Regime) and the government of Haile Selassie ephemerally tried to develop diplomatic ties, based on a mixture of political pragmatism and historical romanticism.

From the late thirties onwards, the *Estado Novo* favoured the publication of a good number of books relating to the Portuguese and Jesuit presence in Ethiopia, in the 16th and 17th centuries and intellectual interest in Ethiopia was thus raised in Portugal. From the mid 1950's, a Portuguese diplomatic legation was established in Addis Ababa, and Ethiopian issues became relatively frequent in the Portuguese press. Two interrelated kinds of report were then given precedence:

- 1) Those on the historical diplomatic and military alliance with Ethiopia, which, it was presumed (without any consideration for factual evidence) led to an architectural heritage of Portuguese influenced monuments, in the Gondar region;
- 2) Those on the, then contemporary, presence of a “Portuguese community”, or to be more precise, “Portuguese-Indian community” in Ethiopian territory, which could be a pretext, in the Portuguese government's perspective, for instigating the migration of “Portuguese Indians” to this country, in the face of the imminent Indian invasion of the Portuguese colonial possessions in the west coast of that subcontinent.

At the moment when the independence of African societies had become a hot issue on the international agenda, and Portugal began feeling an intensifying pressure in relation to Angola, Mozambique and other possessions, a state visit of Haile Selassie to Portugal was carefully prepared. The Ethiopian sovereign expressed the romantic wish of travelling from Massawah to

Lisbon in a Portuguese ship, as if in an inverse re-enactment of the ancient route that had led Portuguese diplomats, clergymen and soldiers to the Ethiopian Highlands, but unfortunately no ship could be made available. He thus flew to Paris, where he held seemingly important conversations with General De Gaulle, and then sailed to Lisbon from the port of Bordeaux.

His visit to Portugal, in July 1959, was given the same attention as that of the young Queen Elizabeth the year before, the protocol of both being quite similar: dramatic military reception at the Square D. Pedro IV, stay at the Queluz palace, visits to important monumental sites in Lisbon, etc. Additionally, Haile Selassie was given the rarest honorary status of “General of the Portuguese Army” and was made to visit a number of army installations and watch a few military exercises (the message of this show of power seemed clear: the Portuguese government looked for a close alliance with Haile Selassie, just as the political face of the African continent was about to change radically, but it was prepared to defend its possessions by force, if need be).

I should stress the induced similarity of Elizabeth’s and Haile Selassie’s visits: in the Portuguese perspective, clearly expressed in the news reports, the country’s old alliance with the country of Prester John was, in the context of Portuguese-African relations, to be viewed as analogical to its ancient alliance with Great Britain, as its European relations went.

As you may guess, I’m slowly arriving to the matter about which I’m supposed to talk: ancient Euro-African relations... Still, I beg you to bear with me a while longer on the rapport between Salazar and Haile Selassie. Just as Professor Merid Wolde Aregay and Ato Girma Beshah were preparing to travel to Portugal in the context of a newly agreed bilateral cooperation programme, Nehru ordered the invasion of Goa, which originated the exodus of part of the province’s elite to Africa, but not necessarily to Ethiopia (the number of Goese here actually dwindled, and dropped almost to zero in 1975); at the same time, new independence movements in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau began their guerrilla activity against Portuguese colonial interests. This put increasing strain in Portuguese-Ethiopian diplomatic relations, since Haile Selassie was being compelled to align with most African governments, both at the OAU and at the UN, in the condemnation of Portugal’s colonial war and of Salazar’s stern refusal to consider the principle of immediate and unconditional right to self-determination.

By then, the official mood towards Ethiopia changed dramatically in Portugal, from what we can gauge from the reports and opinions published in the tightly controlled press and in internal documents of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The motifs of the old castles, of the “Portuguese community”, of the sacred crusading alliance, and of the “land of Prester John”, vanished completely from the vocabulary that was used to describe Ethiopia, and were replaced by

increasingly negative remarks towards the country, its people, the state of its development, the unsanitary conditions of the capital, etc.

Being born in the year when Professor Merid and Ato Girma arrived in Lisbon, I do not remember any of this. Still, I took an interest in collecting testimonials about these issues, in reading the newspapers of the time and in flickering through declassified official documentation. Still, I wouldn't say I was surprised by such sudden rhetorical change of perspective towards Ethiopia, or by the choice of themes to express it. After all, what seemed to happen during the ten years that lasted the brief surge of diplomatic and intellectual interest about Ethiopia in Portugal, from 1954 to 1964, was a caricatural repetition of what I already knew had happened in an earlier period that lasted from late 15th century to the mid-17th century.

The historical contexts are obviously different and greatly incomparable. But what I would like to stress here is the historical weight of the rhetorical mechanism that allows for the extreme expression of dual, contrasting perspectives in regard to the same national subject. Let us take a leap back in time, to the late 12th century capital of the Holy German Empire, the probable locus from which the famous *Letter of Prester John of the Indies* stems. There and then, the context, and the prevailing ideology, was both of deep anti-papal millenarism, and of preparation for the second crusade. That forged letter was a very powerful intellectual proposal that in a way is a primordial source for later Christian European imperial ideas of world hegemony. Very simply put, the imaginary writer and narrator of the text was a supposed Christian Indian ruler of immense power and wealth, who was, like Christ, a king of kings and a humble priest; he proposed an holy alliance with western rulers to conquer Jerusalem and vanquish Islam. The *Letter* became very popular throughout Europe and we can find versions of it in Latin, English, French, Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, German, Italian, as well as in Hebrew and in different Slavic languages.

The earliest identifications of Ethiopia with the land of Prester John derive mainly from Southern European travel books, cosmographies and nautical charts, of early fifteenth century, specially those from Italy, Balears, Aragon and Catalonia. Prester John was supposed to rule over a large stretch of Eastern Africa and to have his capital near the sources of the Nile. But, by then, his power and riches, as well as the purity of his Christian faith, started being matters of interrogation: it was said he was a Nestorian and that his subjects, if not himself, were *nigrorum* – that is, they were “black”.

In 1441, during the Ferrara-Florence ecumenical council, a number of Ethiopian monks were interrogated by Vatican authorities about “Prester John” and his land. The European inquirers wanted to make sure that the Ethiopians were indeed subjects of the Oriental sovereign that the *Letter* described. Interestingly enough, the monks confirmed most of the ideas the Europeans had about Prester John's kingdom. The association of Ethiopia with Prester John became firmly

established in the 15th century and so, when Portuguese kings set out on their discovering crusade along African shores in the direction of India, they clearly sought to reach this East African Prester John of the Indies in order to establish an alliance that would permit the completion of the medieval project: to conquer Jerusalem from the Moslems – or at least, in a later, more practical, perspective, to hold ports in the Red Sea in order to counter Turkish naval strength in what became a crucial sea route for Portuguese commercial interests: the Indian Ocean.

In the 1540's, an important transformation occurred in the way European minds viewed Ethiopia. The publication of Francisco Álvares book narrating the trials of the first embassy ever sent here by a Western country, and the involvement of Portuguese military in the deadly fight that opposed the Christian sovereigns of the Highlands to the Lowland Adalis, symbolize a radical modification: the Ethiopians of "Prester John" could not longer be considered superior or even equal military and diplomatic partners, and, with the war raging in Europe between Protestants and Catholic anti-Reformers, the issue of what was seen as the Ethiopian heretical faith tainted by Jewish-Islamic customs led to the Jesuit project of converting "Prester John" to Catholicism, which meant imposing the spiritual authority of the Roman Pope over Ethiopians. During the ensuing decades, the game that developed between Jesuits and Ethiopian rulers was that of, shall we say, mutual blackmail: the formers' promised military and technological help from Portugal or India was conditioned by the previous conversion of the latter, but also vice-versa.

With the expulsion of the Jesuits, in 1634, another, darker, view was stressed in their writings. Prester John had never been an Ethiopian, they said, and - I quote from the unsympathetic words of Father Manuel Almeida:

"Now that the beams of the holy faith of Rome have illuminated [the Abyssinians], they have been so soon blinded by the great brilliance of the light that one almost loses hope of their ever seeing it again with open eyes... [May] the whole world ... know that this nation is the strangest monstrosity that Africa, the mother of monsters, has bred in her remote and savage jungles..." (Prologue, ed. Beckingham and Huntingford, 1954: XXXV).

This fall of Prester John was not everlasting. He soon rose from the ashes of the pyre onto which the Jesuits had hurled him. From late seventeenth century onwards, French, English and German literary and philosophical imagination went on nourishing the mythical fascination of Europe towards the Ethiopian Prester John, thus renovating its image to the extent that, during the infamous 19th century "scramble for Africa", it was possible for European imperial powers (young Italy notwithstanding) to not only allow Christian Abyssinia to retain its independence but even let her expand and build the empire that Prester John never actually had before.

One final word, to say the following: most international relations between countries or blocks of countries are, as we all know, based in kaleidoscopic games of mutual make-believe, in which duality and duplicity are two essential ingredients; as such, diplomatic relations between Europeans and Ethiopians naturally fall within the very wide pattern of ethnocentrism and suspicion. Still, they (or shall I use the personal pronoun “we”?) have been playing this ritualized game together for so many centuries that it has become an important part of our common historical heritage. Of course, this game - which we could call *the Masquerade of Prester John*, where our respective identities are continuously being mirrored - has gained distinctive perverse contours that led to deeply ingrained postures: be it of the patronizing, civilizational, “giver”, kind, on the part of (frequently competing) European countries, be it of the adaptive, self-centred, “receiver” type, on the part of Ethiopians.

European centres of power like Rome, Paris or London, have, in the last half-century, been substituted by Washington, Moscow and more recently Beijing as privileged partners of Ethiopian governments. This may a fortunate trend that helps free Euro-Ethiopian relations from much of their historic perversions. In this respect, it is my hope that one day I will no longer be the recipient of that old, rich, ambiguous, and insulting expression: *farenj*. Of course, it is also possible that in the future, instead of “you”, Ethiopian children will begin calling me “E.U.”.

Addis Ababa, May 4th, 2005.