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Making the Case for Ethiopian Civilization

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“Aunt Sally she’s going to adopt me and civilize me.”
From *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*,
by Mark Twain, 1967, p. 487.

Introduction

The word “civilization” is defined by scholars and commentators in ways that are too general and imprecise. To some, it is a concept that implies sophisticated and refined life. Mark Twain’s Huck Finn, a wayward youth, enjoyed free-spirited and unkempt life in the bushes and could not stand joining the society of learning, family, church, community and state. What Huck dreaded in fact is the exact definition of civilization given by scholars such as Matt Melko. According to Melko, civilization represents a “large and complex culture, usually distinguished from simple culture by greater control of environment, including the practice of agriculture on a large scale and the domestication of animals” (Melko, 2007). Melko further elaborated his definition to include an “autonomous society” with “internal integration”, religion, writing, central government and societal order in the form of stratification.

Perhaps no group of scholars has devoted more attention to the articulation of civilization than the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations. Beginning in the late sixties when Matt Melko and Roger Westcott embarked on classifying civilizations to the present, the Society is actively engaged in narrowing the definitional “boundaries of civilizations” (Melko, 1987, p. 23). Other scholars before
them have wrestled with the definition of civilization. Melko refers to them as forming "the greater paradigm" in line with Thomas Kuhn's formulation of currently dominant theories being eclipsed by new theoretical formulations known as paradigms (Melko, p. 1; Kuhn, T. 1962). Among these oracles of "the greater paradigm" are Toynbee, Spengler, and Kroeber. From these luminaries, Arnold Toynbee is regarded as an analytical master. However, the praises accorded to his labor are overshadowed by pesky criticisms for his failure to articulate the definition of civilization. He is also faulted for the thematic contradictions that he seemed to have tolerated in his vast work. "Toynbee's approach to history became anathema in Britain and in continental Europe it was received with little enthusiasm" (Krejci, J. 2004, p. xiii).

This study broadly analyzes the scholarly endeavor undertaken to define and constitute the term civilization. The specific criteria used as indicators of civilization will be highlighted to consider whether Ethiopian civilization meets the standard of that definition. The theoretical approaches that were marshaled to define civilization will be summarized first. The study defines Ethiopian civilization in terms of "boundaries" and focuses on modern Ethiopia and its civilizational heritage to argue that the Ethiopian tradition of state, cities, and cultural attributes such as indigenous alphabets, and architecture characterized by "gigantism" testify to this constituting a unique civilization.

Defining Civilization

Ever since the onset of decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s, African states such as Ethiopia were taken up as topics in the field of modernization and development. Modernization being the condition of "being modern", it connoted economic progress and political civility (Inkeles, A., 1984, pp. 70-77).
According to Cyril E. Black, development means economic progress, acquiring the means for manipulation of the environment and harnessing natural surroundings for the betterment of society (Black, C. E. 1966). He goes further in describing modernization as employing scientific means for acquiring industrialization through differentiated techniques of production by the application of advanced sciences and technological means.

Another dimension of development is the ability of states to create civil institutions with effective administrative capabilities. If states have mastered the art of extracting resources, distributing benefits in accordance with legal and constitutional rules, adjudicating disputes justly and fairly and submitting their authoritative legitimacy to the evaluation of their citizens, then they will have met the condition for modernization and development. Political scientists seem to say that this is the ultimate level of civilization (Easton, D. 1967; Coleman, J. 1966; Pie, L., 1967).

Samuel Huntington elaborated political development as the process of institutionalization of administrative skills; conflict resolution, which he called “adjudication”; and system capacity to absorb recruits, which he called mobilization (Huntington, S. P., 1968). In the 1990s, scholars and institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the United Nations started using the term “civil society” to mean political groups organized for political participation. A key characteristic of civil societies is maximizing civility in political participation by peacefully reconciling disagreements. In similar manner as “modernization is being modern,” political civility also means being civilized in political and social interaction as well as in market exchanges.
Scholars in the fields of politics and economics preoccupied with development and modernization theory long sidestepped the study of civilization, leaving historians, sociologists, and anthropologists to dominate the field. Most of the conventional definitions of civilization address historical processes and temporal evolutions. Historians, too, have not formalized a precise and uniform definition of civilization. Some define civilization as reflected in the tools of sharing knowledge, particularly writings. Others define civilization as the formation of metropolitan centers of specified population sizes (Quigley, C. 1979; Davidson, B. 1987). Others include the above and add developmental features such as technological progress, state institutions and public works and administrative systems (Wheeler, 1956).

Regardless of the divergent definitions, all agree that civilization is the accumulation of administrative, technical, and cultural values with the flexibility to introduce changes that would ensure enhancement of citizens' lives. When those values are graced and refined as cultural and institutional expressions of respected societies, they become an identity of a particular civilization, such as Egyptian, Greek, Persian or Roman civilizations. The material and aesthetic values they bequeath to their future generations, regardless of economic, military, or political setbacks, remain inherent values of those societies.

Developmentalists considering political and economic modernization appear to define the broad outlines of civilization. To them civilization is utilitarian. Technological achievement liberates the peasant farmer and orients his quest for prosperity as coming from industrial production. Ultimate civilization is reached in the post-industrial stage where "the affluent society" will harvest abundant riches garnered from the soft labor to be found in the service industries.
Whereas historians explicating civilization will be more detailed with secular and sacred topics in the evolution of societies, developmentalists emphasize the technical aspects of politics and industrialization. Historians, sociologists, and anthropologists, for example will look at civilization's roots and trace the birth, evolution, reach and decay of civilizations. Developmentalists tend to be exited with cut-off points in praise of new civilizational advents. Eisenstadt's analysis of Japanese civilization and the ways he framed his analytical focus and approach provides a clear instance of this: He said:

A short comparative foray on some of the major dimensions of change, namely on the extent to which structural, institutional changes, the crystallization of new types of institutional formation, the reconstruction of centers and collectivities, and the development of new organizations and roles were related to the construction of new types of legitimation and new symbols of collective consciousness and identity as the developed in some major Axial civilization and in Japan (Eisenstadt, S. N., 2001, p. 457; Emphasis mine).

Not to deny the merit and usefulness of this approach; the problem that I see in the transformational approach is that it tends to discount the civilization that gave rise to the newer civilization and to its supporting attributes. It is too committed to technical development in favor of the paradigmatic approach, which tends to be stark, scientific, impersonal, and ambivalent to sacred and historical legacies such as patriotism, as well as ancestral contributions to ensuing civilizational experiences. Developmentalists among whom Eisenstadt holds an esteemed place, would rather recreate or sanction newer and younger civilizations,
forgetting the timelessness and the emotional values of old civilizations.

Samuel Huntington’s pessimistic appraisal of civilizations is another example of this. His views on African civilization are influenced by the advent of Islam and European colonialism. Basing his arguments on such assumptions, he states: “The north of the African continent and its east coast belong to Islamic civilization” (Huntington, p. 47). Looking at this statement from the secular and utilitarian perspective, particularly as an inspiration for a new geopolitical strategy, Huntington makes sense. However, he had to erase the pharaohs of Egypt and their successors in the Christian era in order to substantiate his thesis on the “Clash of Civilizations.”

When he used Islam as a starting point for analyzing Middle Eastern countries and the impending “clash” with Western civilization, Huntington needed to take into consideration this point: In Islamic societies such as Egypt or Iran, Islam is not all there is to the wellspring of their civilization and nationalism. Islam inspires them as a vehicle for expressing their political aspirations in the contemporary world. When history, legacy, heritage, and national pride are at stake, Huntington’s base of argument, which used Islam as a context, falls short of explaining the full range of Persian civilization as it does also for Egypt. The pharaohs of Egypt and the great lawgivers of the Persia of yesteryear, such as Cyrus the Great and scores of other historical figures, inspire passion and pride in their progenitor’s soul and mind. The same is true with other civilizations. For instance, Huntington notes that “Ethiopia constituted a civilization of its own.” He makes this conclusion by taking into account Ethiopia’s millennial history and longevity; this appears to
negate his perspective of the birth, evolution and decay of civilizations.

At the height of its fervency, Islam assaulted North African civilizations. Islam also challenged Ethiopia and further limited its power by occupying the Red Sea coasts and rendering Ethiopia the landlocked state that it had become ever since the seventh century of our era. In spite of these setbacks, the ancient elements of Ethiopian civilization that were contemporary to ancient Egypt and North Africa prevailed. Ethiopia navigated through waves of Islamic jihad to retain its civilization (Trimingham, S. J. 1962). From the sacred point of view advanced by historians, Ethiopia’s pride in its classical civilization is warranted. From the perspective of utilitarian and secular analysis, Ethiopian pride in the longevity of its civilization is meaningless as long as its institutions are too fragile to capitalize on their past and deliver Ethiopia from the vicissitudes of endemic poverty.

This study will take the convergence point of history and developmental studies to describe Ethiopian civilization. The central thesis states that Ethiopian civilization meets the historians’ definition of civilization. It also meets the standards of political and economic development with an institutionalized set of administrative, trade, and commercial systems/infrastructures. Poverty aside, Ethiopia has been bequeathed by its past legacy a unique civilization complete with all the attributes of mature civilization. They include a plenipotentiary state reigning over globally recognized borders, literacy, architecture, an administrative system, public works, self-sustaining commercial and trade outlets by sea and land and a potent military power with which to safeguard its civilization (Phillipson, D. W., 2000). The glory of the Ethiopian state has long faded, but the residue of its greatness is reflected in Ethiopia’s history, culture,
alphabets, religion, and the highly refined languages of the peoples of Ethiopia.

The Boundaries of Ethiopian Civilization

Ethiopian civilization is not static. It evolved over the centuries in intellectual scope and geographical range. Ethiopia in the distant past shares some civilizational values, but is not the same for early medieval or modern Ethiopia. The Ethiopia of Nubia and the Ethiopia of Abyssinia share some commonalities, mainly trade and military interactions. Their ethnographic commonalities are also strong, as can be seen from the following analysis. In the remaining section, the analysis provides broad context for the overlapping reach of the Egyptian, Ethiopian/Nubian and Ethiopian/Abyssinian civilizations. Their proximity would seem to have necessitated frequent contact that may have resulted in regional integration or inter-civilizational assimilation. It did not happen that way. Egypt increased its contact with the Mediterranean civilizations more than it did with its southern neighbors. The African attributes of its indigenous civilization melted away. Persian, Greece and Roman influences diluted the Egyptian-African and when Islam came in crashing with burning fervency and single-minded dogma, Egypt not only was Islamized, but also Arabized, far removed from any African or European identity. The gradual erosion of Egyptian civilization and its subsequent extinction is described by Trimingham as follows:

Christian Africa was abandoned to its faith. Egypt remained a Christian country for a long time with Muslims as the dominant ruling minority, but through the machinery of the state, the church was slowly strangled and more of her peoples were absorbed into the new religion until in the course of time Egypt became a Muslim state with the
Christians the subject minority they remain to this day (Trimingham, J. Spencer, 1965: 42).

Nubia, too, after it was pushed out of Egypt, retreated into a sulking mood. After staggering for a few more lackluster Christian revivals, it fell victim first to Ethiopian domination and subsequently to the same Islamic surge that had extirpated Egyptian civilizations.

The Ethiopia of Nubia

In terms of geographical range, Ethiopia in the mind of scholars is a "remote part of the world", whereas its center of civilization, the northern highlands of Eritrea and northern Ethiopia is less than 500 miles from the Egyptian center of civilization, Upper Egypt. The term "Ethiopia" itself is a Greek word used to describe a person with sun-burnt face. In Cosmas’s book, the editors equate the term Cush with Ethiopia and further note the word Ham, the father of the Egyptians and Ethiopians "means adust, and has reference to the dark sun-burnt complexions of the Ethiopians and Egyptians, of whom Ham was the progenitor" (Cosmas, p. 36).

Using religious texts to define historical events may reflect intellectual laxity. On the other hand, if religious texts prove timeless in defining and reconciling empirical realities with religious texts, they can only enrich our view of the past world. To this extent, several Biblical references to Ethiopia are similar to current attributes of language, scripts, architecture, and physical features of the peoples defined in the Bible and modern Ethiopians.7

The word Ethiopia is first mentioned in the Bible as part of the region connected to the Garden of Eden. The King James Version of the Bible names the four rivers watering the Garden of Eden and states, "And the second river is
Ghion: the same is it that compasseth the whole land of Ethiopia” (Genesis Chapter 2: 13). The world Gihon is still used today in Ethiopia to refer to the valleys from where the Blue Nile originates. King David in one of his psalms declares that “Ethiopia shall stretch her hands unto God” taking into account that the region called by the same name was a familiar stamping-ground of the Israelites, Moabites, Egyptians and even as far north as Assyrians and Persians (Breasted, 1909, 537—561). The Prophet Jeremiah speaks of an Ethiopian eunuch named Ebed-Melech who served in King Zedekiah’s court and how he saved the Prophet from sure death at the hand of his accusers. The word Ebed-Melech in the Ge’ez (Ethiopic) language is a compound noun in which Ebed means servant and Melech means ruler. Abd el Malik in Sudan and Gebre Amlak or Gebra Nigus in Eritrea and Ethiopia is a common meaning “servant of king or ruler.”

In his broad analysis of Egyptian civilization, Breasted is less impressed by the contribution of the Ethiopians to that civilization (Breasted, 2001, p. 561). He views the Ethiopians as intruders and spoilers and their stewardship of Egyptian civilization as illegitimate. When he points out that the Nubians/Ethiopians had masterminded far greater flowering to that civilization, he appears to contradict himself. His negative rendition of the Ethiopian dynasties is also contradicted by biblical accounts of King Zerah, the Kushite, hailing from Napata in Nubia, invading the Southern kingdom of Israel with an army of one million men plus six hundred horse-drawn chariots. Zerah mobilized impressive military might against the Southern Kingdom of Israel. His forces were defeated by the numerically inferior Israelites.

Subsequently, Ethiopia’s fame faded as did the Egyptian splendor over which they reigned. Like their predecessors,
Ethiopian rule over Egypt ended with the decay of the royal lineage that had lost its vision. The Assyrians, the Israelites, the Greeks and the Romans took their turn to rule over Egypt and their contribution to that civilization pales in comparison to that of the Ethiopians (Mokhtar, G., pp. 131-140). What is apparent is that Egyptian civilization progressed under the Egyptians and Ethiopians more than it did under the custody of extra-African plenipotentiaries such as the Assyrians, Greeks, or Romans. The twilight of the Ethiopian rule over Egypt is described by Breasted. "... the Ethiopian kingdom slowly collapsed and fell to pieces, its northern districts were absorbed by wild hordes of the Blemmyes who pushed in from the east; while in the south it was succeeded by the Christian kingdom of Abyssinia, which rose at the sources of the Blue Nile [Ghion] in the fourth century AD and assumed the name of it is ancient predecessor" (Breasted, p. 561).

The Ethiopia of Abyssinia

In view of the historical evolution of civilizations, can we make a case for Ethiopian civilization? Does Ethiopia meet the standards of having a civilization of its own germinated in its soil, constituted with a viable central state, cities, religion, architecture, and uniquely indigenous cultural attributes such as language, alphabets and architectural artifacts? The answer to these questions is in the affirmative and the following analytical descriptions of these indicators so corroborate. The same challenges and threats that destroyed Egyptian and Nubian civilizations were also directed against Ethiopia. The manner with which Ethiopia withstood and overcame those challenges, this paper argues, is a testimony to the viability, resiliency, and uniqueness of Ethiopian civilization. The remaining section focuses on the civilization of modern
Ethiopia, and on the state, people, religion and culture as essential components of Ethiopian civilization.

The State

The African and the Arabian side of the Red Sea coast were open frontiers for African and Arabian adventurers and colonial trailblazers from both groups. Paleographic studies indicate “parallel examples” of the developmental process on the two regions. The African side, modern Eritrea, Ethiopia, Eastern Sudan, and Somalia had the benefit of long lasting contact with Nubia and Egypt. Yuri Kobishchanov observed:

At the time of its appearance (end of the II century AD) the Axumite Kingdom had two large states at its neighbors: Meroe in Nubia, Saba in Southern Arabia. Both were in a deep decline and shortly thereafter collapsed altogether. The Roman Empire also was experiencing a crisis caused by its enduring struggle with another world power – the Persian Empire. Rome needed Axum’s help in its struggle with the Persians. Rome also called upon Axum to protect its ships from attacks by pirates and to protect the boundaries of Egypt from the inroads of the Beja nomads. (Kobishchanov, pp. 37-38).

Egyptian and Greek seafarers crisscrossed the Red Sea coast where large ports such as Adulis, in Eritrea were established. Documents relating to King Ezana, the first to declare Christianity as a state religion of Ethiopia, use the name Ethiopia to describe his empire which included all of Abyssinia (Ethiopia and Eritrea), Western Arabia, Sudan, and Somalia (Contenson, H. D. 1981, p. 343). The seat of Ezana’s throne was modern Eritrea and the northern province of Ethiopia, Tigray. While Axum in Tigray was his capital, his trade and commerce capital was the Eritrean
coastal town of Adulis. Northern Tigray, the whole of Eritrea as far as eastern Sudan, and the eastern Red Sea coast were immediate administrative centers.

At the height of its power, around 360-380 AD, a well-established Ethiopian state seated at Axum in Northern Ethiopia traded with China, India, Persia, Greece and Rome (Mokhtar, G. 1981, pp. 214-223). Its political and economic interactions with these powers were formal, in accordance with the protocols of imperial powers of equal status. It had its own gold and coin currencies minted in Axum in multiple denominations (Chittick, N. 1989, pp. 179-185). In other words Ethiopia, hailing from Africa, earned in its own right the respect of its contemporary powers in Asia and Europe. Its powers increased when it embraced Christianity. As one of the most zealot upholders of the faith, Ethiopia positioned itself as champion and defender of Christianity in the 4th century AD.

The People

The Blemmyes, the Agaw, the Shao, the Oromo and the Kunama are said to be the indigenous inhabitants of the region now known as the Horn of Africa, stretching north up to the eastern coast of Egypt and south to Somalia (Levine, D. 1974, pp. 33-39). Just as the term Ethiopia was a Greek word given to describe physical attributes of ancient Ethiopians, the term Abyssinia is also an Arabic word describing physical attributes of the inhabitants of modern Ethiopia and Eritrea. Abyssinia is a derivative of the Arabic word Habash or Habshay (male) Habshyeet (female). It is a term used to describe a people and province in southwestern Yemen from where the Semitic inhabitants of Eritrea and Ethiopia had migrated. The term Abyssinia can also be translated to mean “of mixed race or blood” or “half-caste” in its most
disparaging tone, as the Arabs had meant it in latter days (Budge, E. A. 1928, xvi). Until the Arabs coined this term, the people of the region identified themselves as Ethiopians (Smith, S. 1964, p. 431).

Another term specifically applied to describe the migrants from southern Arabia is Agazian (plural). This term has two meanings. One way of interpreting the term is: aggressive wanderers, movers, frontier pushers. Another meaning is one whose language is Ge’ez. Hence Agazi (singular) means one engaged in learning and speaking the Ge’ez language. Agazi is a person who has learned to speak Ge’ez, the ancient language of Eritrea and northern Ethiopia. Today Ge’ez is the worship and ecclesiastical language used at church ceremonies.

The Ethiopia of Abyssinia is an amalgam of the indigenous inhabitants of the Horn mentioned above, and the Agazians who crossed the Red Sea from Southern Arabia and settled in Eritrea and northern Ethiopia. Scholars sometimes refer to the Agazians as “Semiticized” Ethiopians. The term most scholars use to describe those who crossed the Red Sea to settle in Eritrea and Ethiopia and imposed their form of political and economic administration is Sabeans, a name associated with ancient Yemen and southern Arabia. The Sabeans intermarried and intermingled with their hosts to become the Abyssinians of today (Rossini, C, 1928; Ullendorff, E. 1973).

In addition to these groups, there had existed a sizeable Jewish community known as Falasha. They are a branch of the Zagwe group who were concentrated in Eritrea, Tigray and Begemidr. The Zagwe seem to have abandoned Judaism and maintained tenuous existence as converts to Islam and Christianity. Some from their group, the Zagwa and the Adkeme Milga, have settled in the Eritrean province of Serae.
since the 13th century. Those who remained loyal Jews, the Falasha, had remained in a few enclaves around Tigray and Begimider until the state of Israel started airlifting them in the 1980s during Operation Moses.

The Faith

In stark contrast to Egypt and Nubia, Ethiopia managed to fend off external assault and sheltered its millennial old civilization, keeping it as authentic as it had received it in the fourth century before our era and earlier (Ullendorf, E. 1976). At the earliest stage of the country’s existence, Judaism competed with paganism as the country’s cultural foundation (Ullendorf, E. 1949 and 1956). The time and manner of its introduction is not conclusively established, but Judaism was practiced to a credible degree of authenticity.

Christianity appeared in the mid fourth century of our era. As an element of Ethiopian civilization, Christianity served as a force for inspiration and for national cohesion in a highly diversified and multiethnic society. Edward Ullendorff describes the religious features of Ethiopian civilization as follows: “In its peculiar indigenized form, impregnated with strong Hebraic and archaic Semitic elements as well as pagan residue, Abyssinian Christianity had long become the storehouse of the cultural, political and social life of the people” (Ullendorf, 1976, p. 93). All cultural elements in terms of language, family structure, community practices, manners of worship and modes of economic activities of the peoples of Eritrea and Ethiopia are deeply influenced by religion.

Christianity entered Ethiopia around 330 AD, during the reign of the great Ethiopian ruler, Emperor Ezana. The bishop who introduced the faith was Abuna Frumentius, who was ordained by the Alexandrian Monophysite Patriarch Athanasius the Great. Ever since then, the Egyptian Coptic
Church and the Ethiopian Church remained united until the 1950s. The bitter theological conflict that emerged after the Council of Chalcedon in 451 regarding the nature of Christ resulted in some Monophysite monks escaping the Byzantine Empire and seeking shelter in Ethiopia. Among them, the TesAtu Kidusan (the Nine Saints) and the Tsadkan (the Righteous), had the greatest impact on the country. The Nine Saints expanded Christianity to the southern region of the Kingdom. The Tsadkan, remained in the north where they built churches and monasteries in Eritrea and Tigray, laying the foundation for a religious culture of intense zealotry (Tamrat, T. 1972).

Emperor Ezana was a contemporary of Constantine the Great. His embrace of Christianity enhanced Ethiopian stature among its contemporaries. With the embrace of Christianity came historic diplomatic and military accomplishments. Edward Gibbons begrudgingly admired Ethiopian civilization and said: “Christianity has raised that nation above the level of African barbarism, their intercourse with Egypt and the successors of Constantine had communicated the rudiments of the arts and sciences; their vessels traded to the isle of Ceylon and the seven kingdoms obeyed the Negus (King) or superior prince of Abyssinia” (Gibbons, E, Volume 11, p. 152).

Gibbons’ disparagement of Africa notwithstanding, it is true that enlightenment came to Ethiopia earlier than is the case for most European and African states of the time. The Axumite Empire was a competent imperial realm rich in trade and commerce. Emperor Ezana, perhaps the first African empire builder since Hannibal of Carthage, extended his rule up to northern Sudan on the northwest and as far as Southern Arabia on the east.12
Ezana continued the tradition of greatness that had existed since the fourth and fifth century BC. During his reign, Ethiopia continued to flourish in trade, faith, and military might. It secured the respect and recognition of its contemporaries as a defender of the Christian faith when Christianity was under severe attack in the Arabian Peninsula. In 523, when the “Judaized” King Dhu Nuwas of the Himyrites persecuted Christians in Arabia, the Byzantine Emperor, Justin I, implored the Ethiopian ruler, King Kaleb, to intervene on behalf of the Christians. The Ethiopian King obliged and fulfilled the mission in 525, delivering South Arabia from the heavy hand of Dhu Nuwas (Ullendorff, E. 1973, p. 53).

The advent of Islam did not present any threat in its first contact with Ethiopian society. When the Prophet of Islam, Mohammed, was trying to establish Islam in Arabia, he faced persecution from the local people. As the persecution of the Muslims increased in Arabia, Mohammed sent some members of his family and relatives for safety and protection to Abyssinia. The king of Ethiopia not only defended the refugees against their enemies, he also allowed them to practice their faith (Ullendorff, pp 54-55). For this generous gesture, the Prophet is said to have reciprocated the kindness by prohibiting jihad against Abyssinia. The Prophet’s prohibition did not last long. The northern and eastern frontiers along the seacoast came under constant Islamic attacks shortly after the Prophet’s death. The repeated jihad against the country seriously impaired the kingdom’s ability to maintain its contact with Europe and Asia (Trimingham, J. S. 1965, pp. 33-65).

Even though Islam scored initial victories against Christian Ethiopia by limiting access to the sea, its impact on the social fabric of Ethiopia was minimal. By the
seventh century, when Islam was on its most fervent march, Ethiopian Christianity had developed and institutionalized its own version of worship and identity equally laced with its own brand of fanaticism. An amalgam of Talmudic, New Testament and local practices had equipped the Ethiopian psychic with impregnable dogmatism and holy zeal for God, country and king. The fervency with which the ecclesiastic class, the royal houses, and the people embraced Christianity rendered other faiths, particularly Islam, relatively weak and ineffective in their proselytizing missions. The clergy, both priests and monastic monks preached the Gospel, but also embraced the Old Testament in its entirety as an infallible word of God. As the first Ethiopian ruler to embrace Christianity, Emperor Ezana set a standard of conduct for future kings and rulers whose primary qualification for the throne was fervent faith and loyalty to the Coptic Orthodox faith (Kamil, M. 1964, pp. 56-59).

Islam’s aggression against Ethiopia had monumental consequences. First, from the beginning in the sixth century to 1137, the Axumite state was weakened and seriously diminished in energy to mount a decisive victory against Islam. Second, the occupation of the Dahlak Islands, off the Eritrean coast, cut off Ethiopia’s access to the sea. Third, repeated attack by Muslims from the north, in addition to the southeastern coast attacks, weakened Ethiopia’s dedication to its ancient center of civilization in Eritrea and Tigray. The term mereb milash, meaning beyond the Mereb River, was coined at the end of the sixteenth century to deemphasize Eritrea’s affinity to Ethiopia and identify it as a distant territory outside the purview of the Ethiopian state. This was an involuntary development, a result of diminished vision and zeal for the ancient civilization.
Internal disorder was so severe that groups of humble status and comport now started defying the Imperial power. Islamized Beja tribes from the northern part of Eritrea besieged the state, cutting it from its old relationship with Nubia and Egypt. In the eighth century, a warrior queen from the Zagwe Jewish faith rose and attempted to destroy Christianity and restore Judaic faith in the country. In an apparent reaction to the repeated attempt by Ethiopian rulers to forcefully convert the Zagwe Jews, Queen Judith mobilized her people and waged a campaign of destruction of churches, monasteries, libraries, holy shrines and massacred large number of the clergy.

Resurrection of the State, Culture, and Literature

Salvation came to Ethiopia in 1137 when a Christian Zagwe dynasty rose and rehabilitated the country and the faith (Tamrat, 1972). The Zagwe Dynasty brought back a new vitality to Ethiopian civilization. In addition to spiritual renewal, they championed rebuilding of churches and monasteries to a bigger and spectacular level. Their church building program was comparable in complexity and aesthetics to the period when the Axum Obelisks were built between the first and third century AD. The awe-inspiring monolithic churches of Lalibela and Yeha stand as testimonies of their dedication to artistic excellence and to the faith.

Literature in Ethiopia was at a high level of development even in the time of Ezana. The Ethiopic scripts are indigenous, with little or no outside influence. Scholars indicate there may be some Sabean structural similarities, but not functional commonalities. One scholar observing the Ezana inscriptions stated:

The inscriptions reveal genuine eloquence, religious feeling and a free use of complex conceptions.... The
vocalized Ethiopic alphabet so closely reproduces the phonematic system of Ge’ez that it is inconceivable than any but an Ethiopian could have been its creator. This alphabet, with the addition of some signs, has been in continuous use in Ethiopia till this day and is generally regarded as the outstanding achievement of the Aksumite civilization (Kobishanov, Y. M. 1981, pp. 393, 399).

August Dillmann expressed similar approval of the Ge’ez (Ethiopic) language and alphabet. He stated:

Originally one of the manifold dialects into which the Arabic-African branch of the Semitic tongue split up, though one of the noblest among them, it gained, through the tribe by which it was spoken, the position of being the leading speech in the kingdom starting as it did from the country of Tigre and its chief town Axum, and keeping pace with the development of the kingdom, while the modes of speech native to other tribes in the land lived on alongside of it merely as vulgar dialects. Farther, by means of the numerous writings, chiefly of Christian contents, which were speedily composed in it, it became bound up in the most intimate manner with the life of the Church and the whole culture of the people. In this position it maintained itself, as long as the center of gravity of the kingdom remained in Tigre and Axum. (Dillmann, August, 1907:1-2).

The renaissance under the Zagwe rule reignited creativity and national feeling. The Ethiopian heartland was evangelized with churches at every village and monasteries throughout the frontiers and remote forests. The Zagwe rule continued until 1270 when the throne was usurped by Emperor Yekunno Amlak, an Amhara pretender from the frontier south claiming a birthright to the Solomonic Dynasty from whom the Zagwe were accused of usurping power.
The Ominous Decay

The year 1270 is a watershed in Ethiopian civilization. It inaugurated a southward orientation of the state, abandoning the northern heartlands of Ethiopian civilization. The Ge’ez, the language of Habesha “par excellence” gave way to the Amharic language, a frontier language heavily influenced by Southern Ethiopian languages with close links to Tigrinya and Ge’ez (both Agazian languages) as an official language of the state (Ullendorff, p. 121). Ethnic politics dawned in Ethiopia, leading to the current decay of Ethiopian civilization and fragmentation of society. The empire was now effectively pushed away from its geographical center and civilization.

The empire was organized for war, its court turned into an army, and its capital into an armed camp. The monasteries of Debra Hayq and Debra Libanos, the little world of religious communities on the islands of Lake Tana, became schools of missionaries whose task was to consolidate Ethiopian power in the conquered pagan lands of Shoa and Gojam. A new route to the sea through Zeila, to supplement the long road north to Massawa, became a major goal of Ethiopian policy (Fernandez-Armesto, F. 2001, p. 259).

The Solomonic Dynasty of Yukuno Amlak that had replaced the Zagwe Dynasty never contributed to any element of Ethiopian civilization. They never built anything of value but engaged in frantic defense against foreign intrusion. They managed to hold the political identity of the state, but they were not effective custodians of the civilization that was bequeathed to them by Ezana. A few of them, particularly Amade Zion (pillar of Zion) 1314-44 and Zera Yacob (from the seed of Jacob) 1431-1468, tried to reverse the precipitous decay of the empire, but they were not able to steady its stagger. In 1529, Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim,
a fanatic from the southeast of the country, a region that had been a constant source of jihad, rose up, ordained himself as Imam and invaded Ethiopia with the explicit purpose of Islamization. With the sustained support of Turkey, he almost succeeded. When it appeared that Ethiopia was on the verge of Islamization, Portugal heard Ethiopia’s plea for help and sent a force of 400 fighters under the command of Christopher da Gama, a brother of the famous explorer. After massive destruction of churches, monasteries, manuscripts, and wholesale massacres of resisting Christians, the country was saved to retain its timeless civilization (Abir, M. 1980, pp. 100-112).

Conclusion

Ethiopia’s influence continued beginning from the 4th Century BC to the rise of Islam in the 6th century AD. By the 19th century things began to change. First colonialism, then the quest for modernization, intruded and attenuated the indigenous foundation of Ethiopian civilization. In its historic and indigenous attributes, Ethiopian civilization covers more areas than the current political map of the modern Ethiopian state. Now that Eritrea, the heart and soul of Ethiopian civilization is politically separated, the character of Ethiopian civilization may be characterized as still in the process of evolution. Whether the evolution is to lead to degeneration or to the recovery and revival of this great civilization is difficult to tell.

In recent years, Ethiopian rulers invoked the urge for modernization to rehabilitate Ethiopia’s ancient civilization. Successive rulers of modern Ethiopia do reminisce about Ethiopia’s past greatness. Invariably, they look at secular modernization as offering the best hope for the resurgence of the country. They focus on utilitarian dimensions of
civilization, forgetting the sacred attributes that had earlier, at its birth, energized and pushed the Ethiopian state to a shining civilization.

Endnotes
1 The International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations has taken up the challenge in the elaboration of civilization. There is no consensus as to the definition of civilization yet, but the Society's recent focus on diversity of civilizations and their commonalities can be inferred from its 2007 conference summary (http://www.wmich.edu/iscsc/civilization.html) viewed on May 5, 2008.

2 Yuri Kobishchanov states that Ethiopian monuments and architecture, characterized by "gigantism," indicate an indigenous creation (See Kobishchanov, Y, Axum, The Pennsylvania University Press, University Park and London, 1979, pp. 1-30).

3 David Wilkinson's criteria as to what constitutes a civilization emphasizes a geographically circumscribed state with its own state, cities, architecture and cultural attributes such as alphabets and arts, (Wilkinson, David, 2007).

4 Huntington, Samuel P. Political Order in Changing Societies, New Haven, NJ: Yale University Press, 1968. Huntington's work is about the political evolution of states via modernization. Nonetheless, the indicators used in defining civilization inform Huntington's theme in this particular work. See the analytical contrast between Chapter 2 and Chapter 4.


6 In 1976, the Iranian Majlis (legislative body) changed the national calendar in favor of an old one that that starts with the reign of Cyrus II the Great whose reign began 2,535 years
before (see, George Lenczowski, Iran Under the Pahlavis, Hoover Institute Press, 1976, pp. 50-83).

7 Ullendorff, Edward, Ethiopia and the Bible, London, Cambridge University Press, 1984. Ullendorff’s account of Ethiopian heritage and the Bible states that Judaism was one of the major faiths of Ethiopia, covering the length of the western and eastern coast of the Red Sea including Arabia, Ethiopia and Sudan.

8 In broad outlines, Basil Davidson notes that ancient European kingdoms were free from status consciousness when it came to their African contemporaries. “In the broad period of AD 1500 to 1600”, European interaction in trade and diplomacy “rested, emphatically, on a mutually accepted equality of power” (Davidson, B., 1994, pp. 42 and 56).

9 Two numerically dominant groups that are an integral part of the indigenous inhabitants who had escaped dilution with Semitic blood are the Oromo of Ethiopia and the Somalis. The Oromo are not incorporated in the literature on Ethiopian civilization. They are cast as 16th century intruders to Ethiopia even though there are no grounds for dismissing them as part of the ancient peoples of the region, fellow cohabitants of the ancient Egyptians just as the Nubians and other races such as the Belemmys are (Asmerom, Legesse, 1973).

10 Tarki Ethiopia, Eritrea Ministry of Education. The date for this book cannot be deciphered due to wear and tear, but it was produced during the British Military Administration of Eritrea which lasted from 1941-1952.

11 Judaism seems to have been accepted as a faith by the indigenous Kushitic population in the pre-Christian era and not by virtue of the people being of Jewish heritage (Ullendorff, E. The Ethiopians: An Introduction to Country and People, Cambridge, Cambridge Press, 1973, pp. 93-100).
12 This statement is based on Gibbon’s observation of Ethiopia’s global reach as far as Europe and Asia. Gibbon states of Ethiopia’s international influence, “their intercourse with Egypt and the successors of Constantine had communicated the rudiments of the arts and sciences; their vessels traded to the isle of Ceylon and the seven kingdoms obeyed the Negus (King) or superior prince of Abyssinia” (Gibbon, E, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Volume 11, p. 152).

13 It is not clear whether Dhu Nuwas was a convert to Judaism or a Jew by birth. The Arabian Peninsula, including South Arabia, was populated by Jews. Judaism and Christianity were the only established faiths in the region. Other faiths were no more than regional cults and superstitions.

14 The first Ethiopian monastery is called Debra Libanos. It still exists in southern Eritrea. The Debra Libanos mentioned in this quote is located in Shoa, south central Ethiopia and is a newer imitation of the old one (Tamrat, T. Church and State in Ethiopia, Cambridge, Cambridge University press, 1972.

References:


____ *Africa In History: Themes and Outlines*, New York, the Macmillan Company, 1965.


Kobishchanov, Yuri M., *Axum*, University Park, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979


