Imperial Legitimacy and the Creation of Neo-Solomonic Ideology in 19th-Century Ethiopia
Monsieur Donald Crummey

Citer ce document / Cite this document:

Document généré le 26/06/2017
Imperial Legitimacy and the Creation of Neo-Solomonic Ideology in 19th-Century Ethiopia*

Scholars have devoted considerable attention to the role of ideology in modern societies. Starting with the history of Western Europe since the 18th century, they have expanded their investigations into the wider world (Shils & Johnson 1968; Geertz 1964; Lichtheim 1967). There is considerable agreement that ideology is a powerful force in the contemporary world and that its analysis requires subtlety and sensitivity. Geertz has strongly articulated this case, and in his studies of Indonesia he led the way in demonstrating how it might be realized. However, in spite of his working with a deeply historic culture, Geertz shares the view that ideology is peculiarly a force of the modern world, and he has little to say about its historical functioning in the societies he has studied. This is the task taken up in the present paper with reference to Ethiopia and the latter half of the 19th century.

Geertz (1964: 63) notes that ‘The function of ideology is to make an autonomous politics possible by providing the authoritative concepts that render it meaningful, the suasive images by means of which it can be sensibly grasped’. This function was no less important in a pre-capitalist polity than in a contemporary one. The notion of ‘truly traditional systems’ in which ‘the partipants act as [... ] men of untaught feelings’ (ibid.) is mythic. All pre-capitalist polities required support. Ideologies in such a context consisted of a vaguer stock of ideas than is the case with modern ones. Moreover, they were largely latent under normal circumstances, but could play a powerful role in times of change and stress. No less than modern ones, pre-capitalist ideologies were manipulated by

* An earlier version of this paper was presented at a conference on the political economy of Northeast Africa, Michigan State University, Apr. 1983. I am grateful to Getatchew Haile for a number of fresh insights and comments on the revised version.
political actors; but equally they constrained their users and imposed limits on their actions.¹

Ideology provided the stock of symbols and concepts which allowed political rulers to communicate with a mass following, and which allowed that following to identify with, and in some sense participate in, the polity. Those symbols supplied the means for overcoming formidable problems in communication—both geographic and social: in the Ethiopian case, a mountainous environment compounded the difficulties of maintaining rule in the absence of a developed bureaucracy; furthermore between the King of Kings at the center and the mass of his peasant and herder subjects in the provinces there lay powerful groups of nobles, clergy and gentry. To bridge these groups and overcome topography Ethiopian rulers resorted to primary symbols drawn from the stock provided by an inherited ideology consisting primarily of regnal names, slogans and occasionally pregnant actions or ceremonies.

Ethiopia’s Historical Ideology

Ethiopia’s inherited ideology was a zionist one, embodied in a book called the Kebrä Nāgāst, ‘Glory of the Kings’.² This work legitimized Ethiopia’s rulers by making them the descendants of King Solomon’s union with the Queen of Sheba and also legitimized the country and people of Ethiopia by making them the successors of Israel and the Jews. God effected this succession by allowing Menilek, son of Solomon and Sheba, to remove the Ark of the Covenant from Jerusalem to Aksum, where it has since dwelt in the ancient church of St. Mary of Zion.³ Through possession of the Ark, constantly rebaptized through the Eucharist which their priests perform on its replica, the tabot, present in each parish church, the Ethiopians have the symbol of God’s election. Levine (1974: ch. vii, 1975) has pointed out that the Kebrä Nāgāst legitimated also the social order for which it provided a broad charter. This zionist ideology is that of a hierarchical society, Semitic in speech and Christian in religion. From its basic story, and from the Bible on which it generously drew, the book offered a rich stock of symbols and images to buttress authority and supplied in the church, the institution which embodied the nation’s Christian character, a touchstone of authenticity.

¹ For stimulating reflections on ideology and history in Africa, see Hamilton 1987.
² Budge 1922. For useful comments, see Shāhid 1976.
³ For a fascinating account by the only person known to me who claimed to have seen this relic, see Sap’rīchtan (1871, 11). From the Ethiopian side, see the details in Annales... 1903-1905.
The *Kebrä Nāgäst* received its definitive form in the 14th century, although it may have been written as early as the 6th. By the later 19th century the Solomonic ideology derived from it had had five hundred years of practical expression. This lapse of time produced another stock of precedents and examples upon which the founders of the modern Ethiopian State could draw.

As Ethiopia entered the second half of the 19th century it faced formidable political challenges: its national institutions had collapsed following conflicts in the 1770s, provincial nobles had fully eclipsed the royal court and the central authority in the Church, and in the 1830s external powers appeared on the scene, first the Egyptians, and later the Europeans. The country’s aspirant national rulers needed to find a legitimate basis for their authority. Force of arms could create only the material pre-conditions for such an authority. To create its spiritual foundations aspirant rulers resorted to a neo-Solomonic ideology.

This ideology drew heavily on fundamentals of the *Kebrä Nāgäst* and secondarily on historical precedent. A simple return to Solomonic thought was precluded by two closely related factors. This body of thought had suffered with the eclipse of its last embodiments, the Gondärine kings, moreover, strict Solomonic thinking dictated succession through the male line only—a claim none of the 19th-century aspirants could make (Budge 1922: 147). Firstly they needed a new principle of legitimate descent, and they found it in the bilateral practice of their society at large (Hoben 1973). Secondly, as active warlords, they abandoned the historic Solomonic practice of ritual seclusion. And thirdly, they revolutionized royal marriage customs. The medieval Solomonids had practiced structured polygyny (Taddesse Tamrat 1972: 269-275). Dramatically to distance themselves from the corruption of the later Gondärine era and at the same time to capture the allegiance of the Church, the 19th-century neo-Solomonids adopted the marital customs of the clergy: a strict monogamy sanctioned by the Holy Eucharist. These three innovations persisted until the end of the monarchy in 1974.

We will explore ideology and the legitimation of imperial authority in later 19th-century Ethiopia through a focus on three major, and one minor, rulers of the era: Tēwodros (r. 1855-1868); Tāklā Giyorgis (r. 1868-1871); Yohānnes (r. 1871-1889); and Menilek II (r. 1889-1913). We will do this by considering, in both their correspondence and chronicles, those rare passages in which they made explicit claims to legitimacy, and by looking at the primary symbols and images which they evoked through their choice of regnal names, titles and slogans.
The Neo-Solomonids: Téwodros, Täklä Giyorgis, Yohännes, and Melinek

Ethiopia’s would-be rulers of the later 19th century saw themselves engaged in reconstruction.⁴ A recurrent phrase in their communications is abbatoché, ‘my fathers’, by which they meant their ancestors as imperial rulers. They preferred the title negusā nāgāst, or ‘king of kings’, a title found in Aksumite inscriptions (Haberland 1965: 28). It distinguished them sharply from their rivals and predecessors of the era anterior to the restoration of the kingdom and which was known as the Zämānā Māsafent, or ‘Era of the Princes’.

Rulers of the Zämānā Māsafent had styled themselves in ways that reflected the social framework within which they held power, a framework which was hierarchical and feudal, dominated by a landed nobility. Titles commonly drew on the element re’es or ras (literally ‘head’, but by extension ‘chief’), and took such forms as: re’esā māsafent, re’esomu lā re’usan, re’esā re’usan, re’esomu lā mākwannent, and re’esā mākwannent.⁵ The additional elements here, māsafent and mākwannent, refer respectively to ‘princes’ or upper nobility, and to ‘nobility’. The titles can be rendered as ‘chief of the princes’, ‘chief of chiefs’ (in a variety of forms), and ‘chief of the nobles’. Their aura is one of primus inter pares. Occasionally, the rulers of the Zämānā Māsafent resorted to the title negus, or ‘king’. Three northerners deployed the epithet Sābāgadis, negusā alam (1827);⁶ Webē, negusā Tegré (1849) and negusā Ityoppya (1850);⁷ and Ali, negusā Häbāsha (1849).⁸ Occasionally the rulers of the southern province of Shāwa also evoked the title: Sahlā Sellassē, yāShāwanna yāYefat negus (1840); and Bāshad Werād (more commonly known as Haylā Mālāhot), negusā Shāwa (1849).⁹ The pattern of titles suggests that in the 1840s and 1850s there was a growing interest in reviving royalist tradition. This interest was overtaken by the rise of Téwodros.

4. For the best general introduction to the period, see Rubenson 1976.
5. For use by Wäldä Sellassē, see British Library, Additional Manuscripts (henceforth BL/AM), 19, 343, fol. 4, 17; by Ali, see Bibliothèque nationale, Manuscrits éthiopiens–Abbadie (henceforth BN/MEA), 272, fol. 17v; and by Wēlē, see BN/MEA, 254, fol. 79. The British Library letters have been published as Letters v, ii, and iv in Appleyard, Irvine & Pankhurst 1985. I owe my access to this material to the generosity of Prof. Sven Rubenson of Lund University, who allowed me the use of his private collection and to whom I feel much indebted, and of the Research Board of the University of Illinois, which supported my stay in Sweden. Much of Rubenson’s material relating to the first half of the 19th century has been gathered in a recently published volume (Rubenson, Getatchew Haile & Hunwick 1987).
6. BL/AM, 19, 343, fol. 42v.
7. Ministère des Affaires étrangères (Paris), Correspondance politique (henceforth MAE/CP), Massaouah I, fol. 287; and Public Record Office, Foreign Office (henceforth PRO/FO), 1/7, fol. 343.
8. PRO/FO, 1/6, fol. 71.
9. The first is reconstructed from the English translation in Isenberg & Krapp
Téwodros (r. 1855-1868)

Téwodros was the first ruler to attempt to recreate the empire. His influence on his successors was profound. In a number of areas he laid down lasting precedents. His fundamental claim to legitimacy was religious. He claimed divine election, and tried to demonstrate it by support for the Church and conformity to its norms. He also referred to his imperial predecessors, whose title, negusā nāgāst, he adopted. Finally, he abandoned the practise of royal seclusion and established the pattern of an open monarchy. His successors followed him in all these respects but not in the apocalyptic tendencies which he also revealed; and, noting the difficulties which he encountered on dynastic issues, they paid rather more attention to these.

Téwodros rose to power through the military subjugation of his rivals in the early 1850s. He was crowned in February 1855 (Rubenson 1966). In a letter to Queen Victoria in 1857, he referred to himself as ‘a child of Christ’; a more elaborate explanation came five years later in a second letter to Victoria when he introduced himself as ‘chosen by God in oneness and threeness and made to rule by Him’, and further specified, in the body of the letter, how ‘my Creator lifted me out of the dust, gave me strength and placed me over the kingdom of my fathers’. This claim was repeated yet again in 1866 when he introduced himself as ‘the creature of God and his slave, son of David and Solomon, King of Kings Téwodros of Ethiopia’. That these imperial slogans were by no means solely for export appears not only from the chronicles but also from their use in other contexts. Unfortunately, no original edicts survive, nor do samples of internal 19th-century correspondence. However, we do have many examples of land grants and deposits of imperial property in church treasuries. One of the latter, made in July 1865, described the king as ‘His [God’s] creature, His slave’ (Pankhurst 1978: 114-115).

Téwodros made his boldest claim to divine election in his choice of regnal name. His given name—Kassa—was a common one. By calling himself Téwodros he invoked a popular, apocalyptic tradition, embodied in a work known as the Fekkarē Īyāsus (Apocryphes . . . 1909)

(1843: 250-251); the latter is found in PRO/FO, 1/5, fol. 302. Getatchew Haile has drawn my attention to a letter of Sahlab Sellassé to Queen Victoria dated Ter 1835 Ethiopian calendar [= Jan.-Feb. 1843] in which several distinct phrases occur (PRAETORIUS 1879: 492-493).
13. For their use in a chronicle, see Zānāb (1902: 5, 9, 15, 16, 18; 1942).
which described the end of the world in terms of moral depravity and social collapse. This situation would be redeemed by the appearance of a leader called Tewodros, who would restore order and rule in peace (Rubenson 1966: 49-51). The name therefore gave a highly programmatic and apocalyptic meaning to divine election.

Tewodros’s successors followed his claim to be God-chosen. Their language was less colorful and poetic than his. They used the stock phrase, *seyumā Egzi'abehér*, ‘elect of God’, but the meaning was similar, and they had his precedent to build on, where he had had none.

The claim to divine election, and to devotion to God’s service, had to be expressed in deeds connoting support for the Church and meaningful to peasants as well as to the learned and powerful. In the mid-19th century the Ethiopian Orthodox Church faced fundamental problems: factions disagreeing on christology had developed within it during the preceding two centuries (Crummey 1972: ch. 11); regional political forces had aligned themselves with these factions and had undermined the national institutions of the Church. This had left the bishop, by custom a Copt, isolated and weak. Support for the Church thus meant restoration of the office and authority of the bishop. Tewodros expended great energy, and presumably considerable resources, to this end, and laid down lines of institutional and doctrinal policy which were successfully pursued by his successors (Crummey 1978).

Tewodros also demonstrated his support for the Church through espousing its doctrine on marriage. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church teaches the norm of indissoluble monogamous unions, and has succeeded in imposing it only on its clergy. For as long as we can discern, the Ethiopian laity has practiced customary marriage outside of canon law. These customary marriages tend to be unstable as the high rate of divorce and re-marriage indicates. The Ethiopian ruling class was conspicuously lax in its marital habits. Noblemen commonly maintained concubines and often elevated some of them to a status approaching that of their principal wives. Unmarried women of royal and aristocratic standing lived openly with their lovers. As already noted, Ethiopia’s medieval rulers practiced a structured polygyny, and at least one major clash between Church and State, during the reign of Amda Šeyon (1314-1344), centered on marital practice (Taddesse Tamrat 1972: 116-117).

Marriage was related to public morality and public morality had political meaning in the mid-19th century. Tewodros’s chronicler attacked the decadence of the period and claimed that God had raised up a king who hated lewdness, lying and adultery, who feared God and married one woman.¹⁴ A less official source (Conti Rossini 1947: 409),

¹⁴. *Zānāb* 1992: 4-5. The ethos of the period, with its attacks on ‘prostitution’, is confirmed by the Catholic missionary de Jacobis, who was in Gondār during a
even closer to the event, described how in 1854 the then Däjazmach Kassa
gathered the clergy and enjoined them to be faithful to their calling.
Immediately afterwards he proclaimed himself negus ('king') and on the
next day, a Sunday, he wedded his consort in an indissoluble church
union by taking the Holy Communion with her. By these acts, Téwodros
shaped the closest possible association of religion, sexual morality and
political rule which proved a lasting precedent, one that reinforced the
religious foundation of monarchical ideology in Ethiopia, and helped shift
it away from strict notions of dynastic legitimacy.

Téwodros, by adopting the title of negusä nágäst on his coronation in
February 1855, laid claim to the entire inheritance of Ethiopian imperial
rule. He put the title forward in his first imperial letter, and in all
subsequent ones, and on his seal styled himself as Negusä Nágäst Téwod-
ros zāltyoppya, ‘King of Kings Téwodros of Ethiopia’.15

At first Téwodros may have tried to distinguish himself from the
immediately preceding rois fainéants by leaving to them another imperial
title, asé or haśé. When he proclaimed himself king, five months before
his coronation as emperor or negusä nágäst, he instructed people, ‘Don’t
say haśé’.16 His own chronicle, the one written by Däblära Zänäb (1902),
reserved the use of asé for members of the older line. However, whatever
Téwodros’s own preferences, both contemporaries and posterity titled
him asé, and land sales registered during his reign frequently refer to him
by this title.17 The chronicles composed after his death use asé, and so
did succeeding emperors when they referred to him in their letters
(Wälä Maryam 1971: 7; Yäté Téwodros Tarik 1956: 12; Getatchew
Haile & Macomber 1981: 4). The claim to the title of negusä nágäst
brought with it more imperial baggage, notably an additional title.

The past provided a rich store on which the neo-Solomonids could
draw, but it did not bind them in all details of statesmanship. Their
predecessors had practiced seclusion. We have a description of this
practice dating to the 1520s, and we know that it persisted into the
18th century (Beckingham & Huntingford 1961, I: 303-305; Berry 1976:
161-167). The Gondärine monarchs were more open than their prede-
cessors, but when appearing in public they still took care to mask their

---

15 Téwodros to Delahaye, the French consul at Massawa, 1847 E.th. cal. [= Sept. 1854 to Aug. 1855], fol. 85, BN/MEA, 184; Pankhurst 1973: esp. 203; Rubenso
son 1965: esp. fig. 5. Téwodros used two different seals, the second one not
appearing until 1857, but the slogan on both is the same: Téwodros to Said
Pasha, 13 Nov. 1857, Egyptian National Archives, Bahr Bera, C 19, no 71.
16 Conti Rossini 1947: 409. Téwodros had at least one member of the old line
at his court, and treated him with honor (Wälä Maryam 1971: 39).
17 British Library, Orient (henceforth BL/O), 604, fol. 7v, 19v, 638, fol. 246v, 248r,
734, fol. 285v, 765, fol. 155v, 777, fol. 19v, 280v; but for negus Téwodros, see also
BL/O, 777, fol. 18v, 19v, and 280v.
face and upper body. James Bruce (1790, III: 271 sq.; IV: 65-67) described an incident in 1770 in which accidental breach of this custom was punished by death. Tévodros and his successors abandoned this practice, exposing themselves fully to their subjects, although with varying degrees of liberality. Tévodros even though he surrounded himself with pomp and train was freest (Krapf 1860: 455-458; Stern 1862: 56-57; Dufton 1867: 96-98).

Although Tévodros sought legitimacy by reference to the imperial past, to the ideology which had supported it, and to the religion on which that ideology drew, sooner or later dynastic issues had to arise. The Kebrä Nəgäst specified that the rulers of Ethiopia would be sons of Solomon and Sheba in the male line (Budge 1922: 147). This had taken on a specific meaning when at the end of the 13th and beginning of the 14th centuries a regional dynasty from the province of Shāwa had established itself as the true Solomonids. Henceforth all subsequent claimants had to prove their connection to this dynasty in the male line.

Tévodros ruled for eight years before the issue came to the fore in 1863 though it was not completely new at that time. Our earliest reference to Tévodros’s claim to Solomonic descent comes from the missionary Stern. In a book recounting his travels in Ethiopia in 1860, Stern (1862: 63) reported that the king’s father was ‘... a reputed scion of Queen Sheba’s royal line’. The casual character of this reference is disarming. The earliest Amharic sources, contemporary with the reign, completely ignore the question, suggesting it was a minor matter, a judgment confirmed by a late chronicle comment that the emperor’s mother ‘was said to have descent from the line of kings’.18

When the dynastic issue emerged, it did so not strictly as an issue in itself, but as a dimension to aspersions on the emperor’s social origins. Moreover, previous accounts which have focused on dynastic legitimacy have confused cause and effect. The available evidence suggests that questions of Tévodros’s dynastic legitimacy did not undermine his rule, but rather arose in response to a worsening political situation in the early 1860s. By then his attempts to subjugate the regional nobility had suffered serious frustrations and his attempts to unify and re-build the Church had equally brought fresh conflicts. Opposition was mounting, and it was in this context that in 1863 Tévodros issued a major edict concerning his origins.

Tévodros issued this edict to the European community at Gafat and opened it with the title of King of Kings, noting that he was a ‘creature and servant of the Trinity, chosen and made to rule by It...’.19 He then

19. The original of this edict is in Amharic. The only version available to us was published by Guillaume Lejean, a French traveler and consul, in Le Tour du Monde in 1863. I quote from a photocopy of the French text from Rubenson’s private collection.
IMPERIAL LEGITIMACY IN ETHIOPIA

rehearsed Biblical history with special mention of the anointing of Saul by Samuel, and the succession of David and Solomon. Téwodros pointed out that Solomon and the Queen of Azèb begat Menilek, king of Ethiopia, and then claimed that all the kings from Menilek to the ‘dynasty of the Gallas’ were unworthy. But when God chose him, all his compatriots said: ‘The river has dried up, there’s no water left in its bed’; and they insulted him because his mother had been poor (see also Stern 1862: 63). In response to this charge he made two statements: firstly, that the renown of this father had extended to Egypt; and secondly, that both his father and his mother ‘descend from David and Solomon, and they are even of the line of Abraham.’ In this edict he mentioned two sorts of libelers: people supporting the rival claims of a rebel called Negusé, and certain ‘lettrés’ of Ethiopia. Assure them, he said, ‘that I am on the throne of my fathers, from Abraham to David and from David to Fasil.’

The edict highlights the importance of charges concerning his mother in inspiring this statement of Solomonic descent. The emperor had spent his formative years with his mother, who had indeed been poor. For a time she had made a living by preparing and selling a common medicine against tapeworms (Rubenson 1966: 27-28, 31-32). Téwodros did not deny the substance of this charge, indeed, subsequently he boasted of it in a letter to Queen Victoria in January 1866 (Girma-Sellasis Asfaw, Appleyard & Ullendorf 1979: 5): ‘I am the son of a daughter of Israel’, he claimed, ‘one who was poor’. In this letter, he identified his revilers as ‘the men I had imprisoned’, one of whom we can identify as the missionary Stern, the first to have recorded and circulated the story of the medicine-vending mother. This identification widened the circle of spreaders of malicious gossip to include some foreigners. However, we should note that the charges against Téwodros’s mother do not concern her possession of Solomonic blood, but only her social standing. Nonetheless, the emperor did assert his rightful Solomonic inheritance, and demonstrated it by divine election.

Téwodros’s rehearsal of Ethiopia’s Solomonic legacy in the Gafat edict contained a number of additional points of importance. Firstly, it referred to only two ‘historic kings’ of Ethiopia, David and Fasil. David was none other than the Biblical hero. Fasil reigned during the middle third of the 17th century, founded the glorious imperial capital of Gondar, restored a degree of national unity, and fathered a line of kings who ruled well on into the next century. Secondly, the Gafat edict raised ethnicity in mentioning the ‘dynasty of the Gallas’. Téwodros most probably was referring to the group which had dominated the central region of the country in the years immediately preceding his rise. This group, known

20. It is not certain what Amharic phrase underlies the French at this point. Liqawent would be ‘the learned’; dabtaroq would be closer to the Biblical ‘scribes’, and would fit other accusations made by Téwodros against a particularly venal segment of the clergy.
as the Warrashék, had ancestral and ongoing political connections to a people who had dramatically entered the national scene in the 16th century, a people now more commonly known as Oromo, although to their 18th- and 19th-century contemporaries they were ‘Galla’. The Oromo language belongs to the Cushitic branch of the Afroasiatic family.

A third point raised by the Gafat edict lay in the statement that Téwodros’s parents ‘are even of the line of Abraham’. This assertion may have been designed to extend the emperor’s appeal beyond the Semitic range of the Solomonic myth. The Zagwé, an early medieval dynasty, had previously confronted this limitation. They were of Agäw, or Cushitic, origin. To counter the already prevalent belief in the superiority of Semitic culture and Solomonic descent, the Zagwé rulers developed a tradition of descent from the patriarch Abraham (Conti Rossini 1937: 49). It seems likely that Téwodros referred to this tradition in the Gafat edict, especially in light of his strong associations with the province of Qwara and its prominent Agäw population.

Later generations did not challenge Téwodros’s dynastic legitimacy. In making the case for their hero, Yohannes’s chroniclers attacked Téwodros on religious grounds. They admitted an initial period of restored imperial rule under a righteous Téwodros, but equally concurred in comparing his later behavior to Diocletian, Saul of Tarsus, and the local 16th-century Muslim conqueror, Ahmād Grañ. At no point in these justifications did Solomonic descent arise. Menilek’s chronicler painted a similar portrait and even agreed that Téwodros had been an instrument of God in rectifying the Church. However, he also pointed out that at about the same time as claimed by Yohannes’s chroniclers, ‘The power of God was separated from Ašé Téwodros’ (Gäbrä Sellasé 1959 Eth. cal.).

By the 20th century we find elaborate genealogies documenting the bald statement that both his father and mother ‘descend from David and Solomon’. Such was the material embodied in twelve pages of the manuscript biography of Kassa Mäshäshä, grandson of Téwodros II, negusä nāgāst of Ethiopia [...] from the house of David, King of Israel’. Kassa Mäshäshä lived through the reign of that most fastidious claimant to Solomonic descent Haile Sellassie I who seems not to have challenged Téwodros’s claim to rule, and even permitted a prominent square in Addis Ababa to be dedicated in his honor (Haile Sellassie I 1976: 80, 110).

In short, while strict accounts of dynastic descent were tendered on behalf of each of the major later 19th-century emperors, they seem to have

21. Bairu Tafa 1977: 49-57. See also the anonymous Ge’ez language chronicle of Emperor Yohannes IV, whose title translation is ‘History of Emperor Yohannes’, fol. 2v-3v, Sellase Church, Adwa, Tegre Province.

22. Atäqa Ayyähu G. Maryam, ‘YäHewwät Tarık (YaDäjazmach Kassa Mäshäshä Téwodros’), Ge’ez manuscript, a copy of which I owe to the kindness of the late Dr Richard Caulk, together with an English translation by Tesfayohannes Fessahaye.
been subordinate to the broader claim to have restored the empire and the rule of the negusä nágäst, which they manifested in righteous behavior and support for the Church. These issues are even clearer in the case of Yohannes IV to whom we must turn after a brief glance at the reign of Täklä Giyorgis who claimed the throne between 1868 and 1871.

Täklä Giyorgis (r. 1868-1871)

Täklä Giyorgis emerged to brief success from amongst the crowd of aspirants which arose in the last couple of years of Téwodros’s reign. His ideological claims and supporting moves exemplify a number of our general themes: the importance of primary symbols as a mode of communication—in this case a regnal name—; the reference to the secular precedents of Ethiopian kingship; the overwhelming importance of Orthodox Christianity as a source of legitimating concepts and support; and the fluidity of notions of legitimacy. His case also exemplifies the point that, however important were the ideas on which they drew, and however creative they were in projecting them, Ethiopian princes of the later 19th century rose, maintained themselves and fell by use of the sword (Caulk 1972).

Täklä Giyorgis was the chosen throne name of Gobäzé, the ruler of the province of Wag. The reference made by his regnal epithet was unmistakeable, and would have been clear to each peasant, let alone the learned. The previous ruler of that throne name had reigned off and on during the last two decades of the 18th century and had entered tradition with the nickname Fāssamé Mängest, ‘Ender of the Kingdom’, or, very loosely, ‘Last of the Line’ (Rubenson 1976: 32-33). Consequently, when Gobäzé adopted this name in 1868 he announced the renewal of the kingdom, and himself as successor to the earlier Täklä Giyorgis. In this way he drew on the imperial legacy of Gondär, the capital of Fasil and his sons. It was a more mundane claim than that of the apocalyptic Téwodros, and a more secular one. Yet Täklä Giyorgis also appealed to religion. Gondär was the city of forty-four churches, a renowned center of learning, and Täklä Giyorgis proclaimed himself king before the priests of Gondär. He restored to the churches lands taken away by the late Téwodros, gave generous quantities of equipment to them, and arranged for a special burial and commemoration for Téwodros’s bishop who had died ignominiously in October 1867. The chronicler tells us: ‘After Fasil there was no one who did for Gondär as Aṣé Täklä Giyorgis did’.23

In one final respect the ephemeral Täklä Giyorgis also threw light on

23. Aläqa Lämläm, ‘Tarik Yaṣé Täklä Giyorgis[onna] Yaṣé Yohannes’, fol. 6, 6v, BN/MEA, 259. See also Ricci (1947:48, 51), where the rebuilding of the Gondär churches is the only development noted under Täklä Giyorgis.
notions of legitimacy, and confirmed the view that strict interpretations of Solomonic descent were now no longer of consequence. Gobäzé’s province of Wag was inhabited by the Agaw people, and his title of wag-shum generally indicated the leading prince of the neighboring provinces of Wag and Lasta, both Agaw areas. Thus it is most probable that Gobäzé was not a native Semitic-speaker, however much his ancestors had intermarried with Amharic and Tegreña speakers, and his successful claiming of the throne demonstrated that even the metaphorical Semitic content of the Kebrä Nəgäst was not strictly determining. Gobäzé was successful, establishing himself on the standard list of modern rulers of Ethiopia despite his rapid eclipse by Yohannes IV, who defeated him in battle in July 1871, and overthrew him (Haile Sellassie I 1976: 201).

Yohännes (r. 1871-1889)

Yohännes was more successful than Tewodros and more lasting than Taklā Gıyorgis. Building on the precedents staked out by Tewodros he dominated Christian Ethiopia from 1871 until his death in battle against the Sudanese Mahdists in 1889. He has not received the attention he deserves, since after his death the locus of power shifted south from his base in Tegre province to Shāwa where a different line of rulers held sway for the next eighty years. Others have been misled by the fact that at the time of his death, both of his principal Christian vassals were in rebellious defiance. This has encouraged the notion that he never controlled them. Yet control them he did, as a careful reading of all related chronicles makes clear.

The young Yohännes—Kassa before the taking of his throne name—was a turbulent and ambitious warrior. He attended the court of Tewodros, who impressed him but against whom he rebelled during his declining years. After having secured a base in his native Tegre province he challenged Tāklā Gıyorgis for supremacy (Rubenson 1976; Zewde Gabre-Sellassie 1975) and defeated him not far from the town of Adwa, in July 1871. He was crowned the following January. His rise and early years of rule reveal a deft manipulation of a set of political and religious symbols akin to those manipulated by Tewodros.

His earliest letters strike a distinctive note. Already in August 1870

24. For Menilek, see Gəbrə Sellasē 1950 Eth. cal.; for Tāklā Haymanot of Gojjam, see Alağa Tāklā Ivasus, ‘YāGojjam Tarik’ Ms. 254, Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University; and for Yohannes, in addition to Lamūṃ, ‘Tarik...’, BN/MEA, 250 (see ref. In. 23), see also Bāye Tafela 1977.

he grandiloquently styled himself: 'Däjazmach Kassa, Chief of the Nobles, Elect of God, of the land of Aksum Zion, the free, Chief of the Sanctuaries of Ethiopia'. Restricted to the noble title of däjazmach, he claimed some primacy by using re'esā mākwannent, 'chief of the nobles', a title which we have seen deployed by various rulers of the earlier 19th century and which also established a link to one of the great 18th-century lords, Mika'el Schul (Getatchew Haile 1981: 80). In using the phrase Seyumā የጌ짓abe허ር, 'Elect of God', Kassa-Yohannes instituted a standard royal title. In boasting of his connection with the land of Aksum Zion, the aspirant Kassa claimed the legacy of the Kebrä Nāgäst, a move strengthened by his protecting the churches of Ethiopia. This collection of titles and images was a powerful package, at once religious and secular, which gave virtue and strength to what might have been a limitation.

Yohannes was the first Tegreňña speaker to claim the imperial throne. For six hundreds years, since 1268, Ethiopia's rulers had spoken Amharic as their first language. Tegreňña, although Semitic, had the status of a provincial tongue compared with the imperial Amharic which emperor Yohannes, conforming to the historic practice, used for his correspondence. Nonetheless, he turned to his advantage the fact that the Tegreňña speakers occupied the territory of the ancient empire which had had its capital at Aksum. This was his first purchase on the national charter. His second claim lay in the symbol of Zion. The town of Aksum possessed the country's oldest and most prestigious church, dedicated to St Mary of Zion. The town of Aksum possessed the table of the law given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. This conviction was reinforced by another: that Mary Herself was the new Zion, the vehicle for effecting the Incarnation. This made of Zion a profound symbol which simultaneously confirmed Ethiopia's Semitic inheritance and Christian identity, and did so by reference to the most ancient site in the country from which kings had ruled. Yohannes neglected none of these considerations.

In January 1872 he had himself crowned according to the traditional rite in the St. Mary Church at Aksum. We will return to this ceremony after looking at his imperial self-descriptions in his letters. He announced his victory over Täklä Giyorgis in a letter to Queen Victoria, dated July 28, 1871, and introduced himself as 'Elect of God, Kassa,

---

of the letters of Yohannes and Menilek, I am indebted to Richard Caulk. For other letters stemming from the period before his victory over Täklä Giyorgis, see BN/MEA, 369, fol. 1-3: three letters addressed to the French consul at Massawa, the first dated 10 Sāné 1862 Eth. cal. [= 16 June 1870]; the other two, without years, are 9 Hedar [= 17 or 18 Dec.] and 20 Hamilä [= 26 July]. See also BAIRU TAPLA (1977: 163) for three more letters from the same period, dated Jan. 1869, May 1870, and Aug. 1870.

26. See above, fn. 5, and related material.
King of Kings of Ethiopia’. Like Tewodros his fundamental claims were to divine election and to the office of negusä nágäst, ‘King of Kings’. Also like Tewodros he made little of the title of aṣé, although his chroniclers commonly refer to him with it, and we also find it in documents stemming from his reign. The early letters following his coronation add another element, to which he later had recourse. Letters of 1872 announced their sender as: ‘King of Kings Yohannes of Ethiopia and all its territories’. This was the first time in the self-descriptions of her princes in their 19th-century correspondence that Ethiopia became a territorial question as well as a cultural and a political one.

But virtually a decade passed before the country’s rulers began to specify what Ethiopia territories consisted of. In February 1881 Yohannes wrote to Kaiser Wilhelm informing him of his country: ‘... as it was at the hands of my fathers, the Kings of Ethiopia, before Mähämäd Grañ devastated it, and the State disintegrated’, and went on to name twenty nine particular districts recently lost, as well as areas occupied by three different ethnic groups, as being his by right. Most of the specific territories lay in northwest Ethiopia, the bulk of them in today’s Eritrea, where the definition of boundaries between the Ethiopians in the highlands, the Turks at Massawa, and the Egyptians in the Sudan, had been at issue for upwards of forty years. Of pertinence to us here is the historical baseline: the medieval Ethiopian kingdom before its devastation by Muslim conquest. Yohannes extended that baseline through reference to a restoration period marked by Sārsä Dengel (1563-1597) and the great Gondärine rulers Fasil and Iyyasu, but, like Tewodros, blamed the rulers of the earlier 19th century for the country’s decline. He struck a more intensely proprietary note, returning to the charge two years later: ‘What have I done that I should be robbed of my land while all other sovereigns retain their respective lands and possessions?’ Yohannes was trying to define his patrimony as negusä Šeyon, ‘King of Zion’.

‘King of Zion’ was Yohannes’s preferred, and most characteristic, description of himself. It appears in most of his letters and in his chronicles. It captured both secular and religious elements in justi-

28. Ms. 1, fol. 60r, 80r, 91v, Ethiopian Monastic Microfilm Library, St. Johns University, Collegeville.
29. ‘Negusä Nágäst Yohannes zaltyoppya wákulu adyanika’, PRO/FO, 95/731. Two of these letters have been published by Ullendorff & Demoz 1966. Other examples of wákulu adyanika, or closely related phrases, can be found in Bairu Tafla 1977: 167; 1981: 189.
30. Bairu Tafla 1981: 201-203; Zewde Gabre-Sellassie 1975: 258-259. The phrase abbatoché nágästätä Ḥyoppya is virtually identical to the phrase used by Tewodros. Mähämäd Grañ is the same person referred to elsewhere as Ahmad Grañ.
32. See, for example, the two preceding citations to Bairu Tafla 1981; the letters appended to the book he edited (1977: 165-187), twenty-one of them addressed
fying the king’s rule. We will look first at the religious and then at the secular.

Yohannes’s self-perception was strongly religious, the principal difference between him and Tewodros lying not in intensity but in Yohannes’s greater steadiness and in the more conventional cast of his piety. In most respects, Yohannes followed the lines laid down by Tewodros, and sought to assure his rule by winning over the clergy. However, unlike his predecessor he gave generous amounts of land and treasure to the Church, where Tewodros had emphasised institutional support for the bishop, the establishment of doctrinal uniformity, and the reinstitution of Christian social morality. One of Yohannes’s chroniclers told of the treasure which the king collected and of how he spent it on building a church in Jerusalem, sustaining the Ethiopian monks there, and on churches in Ethiopia. By contrast, ‘There is nothing that the emperor spent on his kingdom’. A second chronicler tells how Yohannes restored church lands lost in previous times, freshly endowed the Aksum Seyon Church, and built new ones to the Trinity in Adwa, and to the Savior of the World in Mäqälé (Bairu Tafla 1977: 81-85, 121-123). A third chronicler, confirming these details, added that he reconstructed churches destroyed by Tewodros, from Gondär to Gojjam. These acts of generosity, for which he had ample precedent from amongst ‘his fathers the kings’, achieved their object, and won Yohannes the dedication of much of the Ethiopian Church.

Yohannes emulated Tewodros in other ways in which he attempted to act out the ideologically-determined notion of the Christian king. He, too, supported the bishops. Control of Ābunā Atnatewos, the recently-arrived Copt, was a key point at issue between him and Täklä Giyorgis, Yohannes’s chronicle making much of the fact that Täklä Giyorgis, in his claim to rule, had not benefited from anointment by the bishop. Atnatewos died in 1876. Yohannes eventually had him replaced in 1882, by an unprecedented team of four bishops (Zewde Gabre-Sellassie 1975: 121–123).

---

33 Lämläm, ‘Tarik . . . ’, fol. 16 v sq., BN/MEA 259 (see ref. fn. 23), and the untitled Ge’ez manuscript history of Emperor Yohannes IV attributed to Haylā Maryam, held in the Se’el Bêt of the Aksum Seyon Church, Aksum, Tegré Province, access to which I owe to the kindness of Richard Caulk, as also to the manuscript chronicle by Qesā Gābās Täklä Haymanot, ‘Tarikā Nāgāst’ (also to be found at the Aksum Seyon Church) where the same phrase occurs. It is striking how little modern commentators have made of this epithet.

34 History . . . ’, fol. 7’, Sellasé Church (see ref. fn. 21).

35 For some of the precedents, see HUNTINGFORD 1965. This is an English translation of parts of the Liber Axunae (1909), with some additions, but omitting the Ethiopian language text.
Like Tewodros, Yohannes also directed a lot of energy to imposing doctrinal unity on a Church divided by Christology (Crummey 1978). In this he had marked success.

Yohannes also imposed further religious uniformity through his demand that his Muslim subjects either convert to Christianity, or leave his country. In October 1879 he announced to the Aksum Seyon Church: ‘We are baptizing all Moslems having told them to become Christians’. The first person plural included his army, for a great deal of duress was involved in this mass conversion. A chronicler noted that at the beginning of 1881 Yohannes issued a decree giving Muslims the option of exile, and ordered his principal vassals to impose it as well. He destroyed mosques, built churches in their stead, and a few months later he was with Menilek in Wallo, where ‘... they slaughtered the Muslims who were not converted...’. Finally, Yohannes imposed religious uniformity against popular forms of religion as well as against Islam. He fervently attacked the possession cult known as zar.

In one other respect Yohannes also acted out the Christian script that Tewodros had unfolded. He adopted an ostentatious chastity. Several Ethiopian sources state that as a young man he had to be dissuaded from becoming a monk. He did marry, a chronicler wrote, not ‘for voluptuous pleasure’, but out of his duty to procreate. When his wife died, the same source continued, ‘He became a virgin as before, without any impurity’. We also learn that he had his food prepared by a monk, no woman entering his chambers on any grounds whatever. Extraordinary behavior for an Ethiopian noble, this was customary for the Ethiopian clergy. Monks, of course, swore to chastity. The secular clergy had to marry, but became celibate on the deaths of their wives. Tewodros had dallied with the possibility that such a custom ought also to apply to the kings. When the wife whom he had religiously wed in 1854 died in 1858, he became celibate for a period, and did not remarry for almost two years (Rubenson 1976: 56).

Yohannes went beyond personal abstemiousness and set to regulate his kingdom along Christian lines. The editor of the chronicle of Yohannes’s great rival, Menilek, believed that Yohannes had imposed religious marriage on his major vassals as well (Gabra Sellassé 1930-32, I:

36. Yohannes IV to Neburad'ed Iyyasu, 7 Tegent 1872 Eth. cal. [± 16 Oct. 1879], Amharic letter held in the Eqa Bet Aksum Seyon Church.
37. Lamlam, 'Tarik...', fol. 26, 30, BN/MEA, 259 (see ref. fn. 23).
38. Gabra Madhen Kidane (1972: ch. iv) provides many further references to the violence with which Yohannes converted Muslims.
39. 'History...', fol. 2, Sellase Church (see ref. fn. 21). Baire Taf'a 1977: 45.
40. Manuscript history attributed to Hayla Maryam, fol. 42, Aksum Seyon Church (see ref. fn. 32).
41. Lamlam, 'Tarik...', fol. 18, BN/MEA, 259 (see ref. fn. 23). See also Gabra Madhen Kidane (1972: 3) and Baire Taf'a 1977: 147. Kassa, as he then was, announced the death of his wife, Tekabä Selläse, in a letter to Jerusalem, dated 6 Tef 1861 Eth. cal. [± 16 Jan. 1869], in Baire Taf'a 1977: 103.
Whatever the degree of compulsion involved—and one who had converted Muslims by the sword and opposed the use of tobacco with bodily mutilations would hardly hesitate to interfere in the marital affairs of his nobles—Menilek did marry religiously during the reign of Yohannes, on Easter Sunday, 29 April 1883. Yohannes would have found precedent in the actions of Tewodros who had inspired many of his nobles to follow him in entering religious marriages (Rubenson 1966: 56-57).

Yohannes was most probably sincere in his religious views. However, considering the important political implications those views had, the king was also quite capable of cultivating them for those implications. The more secular notions of kingship on which he drew illustrate this point.

Yohannes legitimated his rule by reference to abbatoché nāgāstāt, ‘my fathers the kings’, by whom he meant Ethiopia’s medieval rulers as well as its early Gondärine kings, Fasil and Iyyasu, and carefully manipulated the symbols of his ancestors’ glories. This was one of the burdens of his often misconstrued letters to Queen Victoria and Lord Granville of August 1872, in which he referred to two objects closely associated with the Gondärine court, a book of laws entitled Fethä Nāgäst, and an icon called Kweratalä Re’esu. Attention has generally focused on the Fethä Nāgäst, about which a celebrated mistranslation has Yohannes say: ‘I pray you will find out who has got this book, and send it to me, for in my country my people will not obey my orders without it’. What the king actually said about its loss should be rendered as: ‘... in my country it has resulted in some discord [to my detriment]’ (Ullendorff & Demoz 1969: 139). He wanted it not simply for its practical value as an authoritative law code, but also for its close association with the last period of monarchical glory, the Gondärine era and he also wanted the holy icon of Jesus with His crown of thorns: ‘Please send me both of them’, he wrote (ibid.).

The Fethä Nāgäst (1968: xvii) had entered Ethiopia during the reign of Emperor Zär’a Ya’qob (1434-1468). However, the oldest manuscripts

42. For details here I am indebted to Chris Prouty Rosenfeld. For tobacco, see Gabra Madhen Kidane (1972: 49-50). Yohannes avowed that the Muslims had converted voluntarily, and at their own initiative, that the Gospel did not sanction forced conversions, and that: ‘There is nothing that I have done by force’; he wrote in a letter to Wilhelm I, 20 Nov. 1879 (in Bairu Tafila 1981: 191-192).


44. Ullendorff & Demoz 1969: 135-142. The originals of these Amharic letters are to be found in PRO/FO, 95/731.

45. Budge (1922: xxxiv-xxxv) was responsible for legitimating and disseminating this mistranslation, which originated with an English envoy of Yohannes called Kirkham (Ullendorff & Demoz 1969: 135).
of it date to the reign of Yohannes I (1667-1682), son of Fasil and one of the great kings of Gondar. So far as we know the Gondarine kings used it very sparingly, but its title alone, ‘The Law of the Kings’, was enough to closely associate it in the eyes of posterity with their rule. Its companion piece, the Kweratal Re’esu, invariably accompanied the Gondarine kings on their military campaigns, and was an essential ornament of their majesty. Tewodros had used both the Fethä Nāgāst and the Kweratal Re’esu to buttress his rule. We learn that for his first imperial expedition in 1855 he was accompanied by the bishop, the head of the monks, the tabots of the Jesus and Mary churches, ‘by the painting Kweratal Re’esu, by the judges, and by the councillors’ (Conti Rossini 1947: 410). His chronicler justified his actions with more references to the Fethä Nāgāst than we have for any earlier ruler (Zänäb, 1902: 28, 34, 35; Fethä Nāgāst 1968: xvii sq.). In his later years Tewodros deposited these objects at his royal store house at Mäqdāla, whence the British expeditionary force of 1868 had taken them to London. In seeking the return of the Kweratal Re’esu and the Fethä Nāgāst from London, Yohannes was obviously emulating Tewodros and through him the great rulers of Gondar.

Yohannes outdid Tewodros and Tāklā Giyorgis in the lavishness of his coronation ceremony. Tewodros’s coronation apparently lacked much pomp and took place in a location with no mythic redolence, Därāsgē in Semén. Tāklā Giyorgis declared himself king in Gondar, but could not be anointed by a bishop, there being none in the country at the time. The would-be Yohannes made sure of his bishop, lavished wealth on the Church, and called everyone to join him at Aksum in January 1872. There he attempted to reenact the coronations of old, ‘according to the order of his fathers, the Kings Abreha and Ašbehā’, celebrated Christian rulers of ancient Aksum. Ancient the ceremony may have been, common it was not. The elaborate ritual followed in 1872 had only occasionally been enacted in former times, and was not a normal practice of the Gondarine rulers (Berry 1976).

Three Ethiopian sources provide detailed accounts of Yohannes’s coronation. One avers that this was the king’s second anointing, God having secretly bestowed the first. The second simply signified ‘that he had defeated the Tegré nobles. . . , the powerful sheftas [rebels], and later on the negus of Ethiopia’ (Bairu Tafla 1977: 131 [fol. 136rb]). The coronation was a magnificent display involving nobility ans clergy. It spoke to the peasants of order and propriety. It legitimated a key slogan: ‘Who’, cried the virgins, holding a thread to bar his entrance to the sanctuary of St. Mary, ‘Who are you and what is your name and what is your faith and is your coming in peace?’ Yohannes replied, ‘I am the

46. Bairu Tafla (1977: 127-143, esp. 139 fn. 240) provides references to four descriptions of earlier coronations.
47. [History . . .], fol. 18, Sellase Church (cf. ref. fn. 21).
King of Zion of Ethiopia,’48 a reply which declared his faith and assured that he came in peace.

The emperor used the ceremony to announce his regnal name. Yohannes was a less programmatic name than Tewodros, and has given rise to less comment. A hagiographical chronicle attributed the name to the king’s intention to baptize the peoples of Ethiopia, in emulation of John the Baptist.49 However, this explanation is posthumous since the chronicler extended the parallelism to cover the martyrdom of Yohannes who, like John the Baptist, had his head cut off. Another chronicler noted that John was the beloved disciple.50 We should not follow the chroniclers in ignoring secular precedent. Emperor Yohannes I ruled from 1667 to 1682. He was the son of Fasil, founder of Gondär and of its line of kings, and the father of Iyyasu the Great. To his reign we owe our main copies of the Fethä Nägäst. He lived on in tradition with the nickname sadiq, ‘just’, ‘righteous’, ‘holy’; the very reputation that Kassa-Yohannes desired for himself. In this instance, secular precedent brings us back to the religious basis of much of 19th-century Ethiopian imperial ideology. So does the question of dynastic legitimacy.

Yohannes made a detailed claim to legitimate descent from the Solomonic line. He first sketched this in a letter of August 1868 to Napoleon III, in which he informed the French Emperor: ‘... I am the son of the kings, Bäkaffa and Fasil. And from the great lords I am the son of Mika’él and Wäldä Sellasie’.51 His published chronicle contains pages of genealogical material connecting him to the medieval rulers Amda Seyon and Zär’a Ya’qob. The Adwa manuscript provides the key to interpreting this material: the details were not at issue, it was their meaning. The chronicler claimed that the kingdom came seeking this son of David and Solomon, because he had kept the commandments of God:

‘However, there were some envious people who said: “We have never seen the son of a negus’s daughter become negus”. We give them an answer thus: You backbiters and wicked men, have you not heard that the son of Empress Helen, Constantine, who organized the faith, became a negus? Moreover, although his kingdom was natural was not the Christ, the grandson of David through a woman, called the Chief Priest and the King of Kings? Many were those who occupied the throne through their mothers!’52

48 Lämläm, ‘Tärik...’, fol. 16, BN/MEA, 259 (see ref. fn. 23); see also ‘History...’, fol. 18, Sellasé Church (ref. fn. 21).
49 Manuscript history attributed to Haylä Maryam, fol. 8-9, Aksum Seyon Church (cf. ref. fn. 32).
50 As quoted in GABRA MADHEN KIDANE 1972: 9. Gabra Madhen’s own discussion is inconclusive and reflects the lack of clear guidance from our earliest sources.
51 Kassa to Napoléon III, 3 Nàhasé 1860 Eth. cal., MAE, Protocole (henceforth MAE/P), C41 (Éthiopie), 1869-1887, 1.
52 ‘History...’, fol. 20v, Sellasé Church (see ref. fn. 21); and BAIRO TAFLA 1977: 27-33.
This is a wonderful attempt to make the best of a bad situation, for the backbiters were correct: Solomonic legitimacy required descent through the male line, and Yohannés's genealogies all pass through females, in one case his mother and in the other his father's mother.

The dynastic requirement was at variance with the rules of descent and inheritance of ordinary society. Those rules were ambilineal, attributing legitimacy of descent and rights of inheritance to any child through either parent (Hoben 1973). Moreover, so fragile was the institution of marriage amongst the Ethiopian laity, that marriage of the parents was not a prerequisite for recognition as legitimate in descent or inheritance. Yet commentators have always stressed that succession to the throne in Ethiopia was through the male line (Taddesse Tamrat 1972: 275 sq.; Haberland 1965: 57-58), and our only case of Solomonic 'illegitimacy' bears this out. In 1716 the Gondarine ruler, Yostos, had been deposed after five years on the throne. Prior to his death a group of court nobles approached him and demanded to know who he was and by what right he ruled; 'Yes', he replied, 'I have reigned over that which does not belong to me, for I am the son of Dājazmach Dēlābā Iyāsūs' (Bégninot 1901; Basset 1882: 184). Historians have generally agreed in recognizing that Yostos's mother belonged to the royal family, so they interpret the story as an admission of the illegitimacy of succession to the throne through the female line (Berry 1976: ch. 11).

What are the implications of Yohannés's claim to Solomonic legitimacy through the female line? It opened the throne to legitimate demands from the bulk of the Ethiopian nobility and certainly to anyone who possessed enough power to think of such a move. Many factors had led to this situation: Christian Ethiopians are highly exogamous, and the court and nobility were much given to strategic marriages. As a result the Solomonids intermarried with all the noble families. Besides this the royal and noble practice of concubinage, and even polygyny, coupled to a very loose sense of legitimacy of birth, meant that royal blood flowed widely indeed. Nor, buttressed as it was with such impeccable religio-political precedents as Constantine and Jesus, would Yohannés's attempt to apply general societal rules of descent have seemed unreasonable to the nobility or peasants. But it did mean that the claim was virtually meaningless in any strict sense, for it justified anyone's rule, as it had justified Tewodros's (whose claim was almost certainly as sound as Yohannés's), and as it would justify Haile Sellassie's, whose line of descent ran back through a daughter to the great Shāwan king, Sahālā Sellassē (Haile Sellassie I 1976: 313). As one 19th-century observer commented (Rochet d'Héricourt 1846: 241) 'The principal chiefs who share this country today all claim to descend from Menelek [the son of Solomon and Sheba'].

In light of the above, Yohannés's argument ironically confirms Getatchew Haile's judgment (1981: 73) that: 'The question of royal
blood does not seem, in fact, to concern the population...'. The dynastic issue was just another way of proclaiming oneself to be a true and good Christian king. A look at the phlegmatic Menilek II should confirm this observation.

**Menilek (r. 1889-1913)**

Menilek exemplifies most of our themes: the question of legitimacy, especially in dynastic terms; the use of primary symbols drawing on religious imagery and expressed through slogans; and the existence of a neo-Solomonic ideology of kingship shared by all later 19th-century Ethiopian rulers, but largely created by Tewodros and Yohannes.

Menilek’s chronicle, like Yohannes’s, opens with an extended claim to Solomonic dynastic legitimacy, this time couched in the form of a re-telling of the founding legend: the union of Solomon and Sheba (Gäbrä Sellası 1959 Eth. cal.: ch. 1-111). Unlike his predecessors, Menilek had ready-made two essential parts of a case: firstly, as a young man he had been universally recognized as a leading candidate for the succession to the throne of Shāwa province, and this was in spite of a birth openly depicted by his chronicler as illegitimate, the product of a casual liaison between the heir apparent and a servile waiting woman (ibid.: ch. xiv). More to the point is that as aspirant to rule Shāwa he inherited a claim to Solomonic descent. Secondly, his given name was the same as that of the legendary son of Solomon and Sheba, and it did not take Madison Avenue advertising agency to come up with the slogan ‘from Menilek I to Menilek II’53 nor did Menilek have to go through the trouble of finding a regnal name to address a message to the people.

Posterity has tended to adopt one of two attitudes to the Shāwan house’s assertion of its legitimate descent from the medieval Solomonids: uncritical acceptance or equally uncritical rejection. This has precluded the close scrutiny which the issue warrants. Our earliest 19th-century sources unanimously testify to this claim having been made by the most distinguished of Menilek’s predecessors, his grand-father Sahlä Sellası (r. 1813-1847). However, they equally agree that the essential link to the dynasty via Lebnä Dengel (r. 1508-1540) was through the female line.54 So the case was the same as that of Yohannes IV and presumably

---

53. GÄBRÄ SELLASI (1959 Eth. cal.: ch. xxvi); the context of this slogan is particularly poignant: the submission of Menilek to Yohannes IV in 1878.

54. DARKWAH (1975: 6 fn. 12) provides the references: ISENGARD & KRAPP 1843: 312; HARRIS 1844, III: 7-8; CECCHI 1885-87, I: 237-238; and ROCHELET D’HÉRICOURT 1846: 241 whose account is to the point: ‘Sahlé-Sellassi se rattache à cette origine [Solomon and Sheba] par les femmes’. GÄBRÄ SELLASI (1959: ch. x) slides over much of the detail, but tries to make a direct link through Minas (r. 1559-1563), son of Lebnä Dengel. He omits the most significant legitimating link of our earliest accounts which consists of 17th-century ras Fares. See also the account in LEVINE (1965: 289-290, fn. 23, 24), which provides further references to Ethiopian and European authors.
Téwodros II. Once the female connection was admitted to the argument, virtually all contenders became equally legitimate in dynastic terms.

The most significant omission in the 19th- and 20th-century literature of kingship in Ethiopia is that no reigning king attacked the dynastic legitimacy of his predecessor or rivals. Menilek went the furthest in the opposite direction, when, writing to the French, he referred to his predecessor as 'the great emperor ለስ ዂ�ንስ' and, to the English, as 'the honored' Yohannes.55 The basis of such attacks as were made was irreligion, and each attack carried an implicit model of a righteous, Christian king. The weightiest of these accusations was made by Yohannes's chronicler, who justified Yohannes's rebellion against Tewodros on the grounds that the latter had become '-addons negus' (Bairu Tafla 1977: 57 [fol. 117v]). 'Alawé' here means 'outlaw', 'lawless', or 'rebel' (Getatchew Haile 1981: 73). The context of this charge was Tewodros's abusing of his bishop, which had led the former's being anathematized. Later in his reign, Yohannes used the term again, in a letter, this time with reference to the 16th-century Muslim figure—one of the most notorious in Christian Ethiopian historiography—Ahmad Grañ, whom he designated as 'eslam alawé', 'a lawless Muslim' (Ullendorff & Demoz 1969: pl. I).

The same accusation was made against Tewodros early in his reign, as well as after it. In 1856 a prince of northern Ethiopia called Negusé wrote for military and diplomatic assistance from the French complaining that an outlaw [alawé] king has risen up against me'.56 This outlaw king was none other than Tewodros. Negusé justified his charge by announcing: 'He has destroyed the Christians'. Lest we draw the erroneous conclusion that Negusé and Yohannes had an identical view of Tewodros we should note that Negusé's Christians were fledgling Roman Catholic converts. However, the underlying point is reinforced: the weightiest charge which Ethiopian political rivals levied against each other was that of irreligion; and so it is that an investigation of pretenses to dynastic legitimacy brings us back quickly to the religious basis of royal ideology in 19th-century Ethiopia.

Menilek made his own claims to be a righteous, Christian king, and did so in a way that his successors followed. Menilek was the first amongst Ethiopia's modern aspirants to rule to put forth the slogan: Mo'a anbäsä za'emnäzäädä Yehuda, 'The lion of the tribe of Judah has prevailed'. He did this as early as 1872 in the seals of two letters to Queen Victoria, which also bore the title Negusä Nágäst (Rubenson 1965:

55. Menilek to Carnot, 23 Dec. 1886, MAE/P, C41, Choa, 1890-1891; Menilek to Victoria, 14 Dec. 1880, PRO/FO, 95/750.
56. Negusé to Napoléon III, 9 June 1856, fol. 107, MAE/C/P, Massaouah II (see ref. fn. 7). Tewodros in his turn dismissed Negusé with the far more demeaning epithet of 'thief' (leba) in a letter to the English consular agent at Massawa, Tewodros to Barroni, 1 Jan. 1861, fol. 220, PRO/FO, 1/11.
He failed to make good on the claim to be emperor for another seventeen years, but continued to use the Lion of Judah slogan as king of Shāwa. Rubenson has carefully laid out the history and meaning of this phrase, the main points of which pertain to the present discussion follow. Seventeenth-century European sources report that contemporary Ethiopian kings used it, so Menilek drew on established precedent. However, contrary to the misconception of 20th-century Europeans, the phrase does not refer primarily either to dynastic legitimacy through the tribe of Judah or to the lion as a royal symbol. The lion of Judah is Jesus Christ, and the slogan comes from the Book of Revelation (ch. v, v. 5). It is a national motto. When Menilek used the phrase he claimed to be a righteous, Christian king, like the kings of old, like Tewodros before him, and like his contemporaries Tākla Giyorgis and Yohānnes IV.

Menilek’s letters to the European powers referred to Ethiopia’s Christian identity and emulated his 19th-century cohort in several other respects as well. His letter to France which extolled Yohānnes pointed out that ‘We alone are a Christian people in big Africa’, and that ‘Our great emperor Aṣē Yohānnes fell, to our loss, having fought for his faith’. Menilek’s titles underscored the distinctive claims discussed above, by describing him as dagmawi Menilek, or ‘Menilek the Second’, and by using the ancient motto ‘The Lion of the tribe of Judah has prevailed’. But they went on to call him ‘Elect of God’ in the phrase introduced by Yohānnes, seyumā Egez’abeher, and ‘Emperor of Ethiopia’ in the one first used by Tewodros, Negusā Nāgāst za ḥtyoppya. The body of the letter made another of Tewodros’s claims. ‘By the power of God’, he told Carnot, ‘I sit on the imperial throne of my country’. Here was the fundamental justification of imperial rule in 19th-century Ethiopia: the power of God. This power manifested itself in force of arms and success on the battlefield; and in the righteous acts of a devout king.

Menilek emulated Yohānnes in holding a lavish coronation ceremony (Marcus 1975: 117; Gābrä Sellaśe 1959 Eth. cal.: ch. xl). He accepted the norm of religiously-sanctioned monogamy introduced by Tewodros and imposed on him by Yohānnes. He followed Yohānnes in giving territorial content to his pretense to be ruler of Ethiopia, and borrowed the same phrase. While his overlord lived he styled himself King of Shāwa and Kāfa and all its territories. He added a rider consonant with Yohānnes’s use: ‘of the Galla land’ [lā behéra Galla]. In this he specified, so far as it was possible, the essence of the territorial claims of Ethiopia’s 19th-century emperors: the old Abyssinian districts sub-

57. Menilek to Carnot, 23 Dec. 1889 (see ref. fn. 55).
58. Menilek to Grévy, 16 Hambé 1877 Eth. cal.: 22 July 1885: negusā Shāwa waKāfa wa ḥakwolhi adyamika, MAE/P, C41, Lettres du Roi de Choa, 1879-1888. For Yohānnes, see fn. 29.
sumed under the notion of Ethiopia and identifiable through their current or historic occupation by Christian and/or Semitic-speaking peoples; the lands of the western borders inhabited by a variety of Nilo-Saharan-speaking peoples known generically (and pejoratively) to the highlanders as Shangqela; the lowlands of the pastoral Afar;59 and the lands of the Oromo, or Galla. In his celebrated circular of 1891 which specified the country’s boundaries he announced his intention to establish them to their ancient limits as far as Lake Nyanza.60 Historians have proved unable to resist commenting on this extravagance, or to penetrate through it to see that it was basically a re-statement of the ‘Galla’ claim.

In yet another respect Menilek followed the lead of Yohannes. Recognizing the potency of the Zion symbol so well exploited by his predecessor, Menilek appropriated it. Unable to move either the ancient site of Aksum nor its church of St. Mary, in 1902 Menilek built himself his own Zion church at the town of Addis Alam, west of Addis Ababa (Gäbrä Sellasé 1959 Eth. cal.: ch. LX).61 Churches to St. Mary were common enough, and Menilek had already established several in Addis Ababa, but that this was a direct imitation of the Aksum Church is revealed in its being called Däbrä Ṣeyon, sanctuary of Zion, and in the title born by its head, neburä ed. This archaic title—which means literally ‘laying on hands’—was reserved for the head of the Aksum Church. Moreover, the seal of Neburä Ed Admassu, who headed the church in the 1920s, carried the designation re’esa ađbarat, ‘chief of the sanctuaries’, with reference to Zion’s pre-eminence amongst the sanctuaries of Ethiopia. The establishment of this church was a fitting tribute to a king from whom Menilek had learned much about ruling, and a fitting expression of the religious stock of ideas with which Ethiopia’s 19th-century rulers sought to underpin their rule.

*

Four men tried to rebuild imperial rule in Ethiopia in the later 19th century. Their primary instrument was force. The battlefield determined changes of rule. Force of arms backed all challenges to imperial pretensions, and force of arms turned back those challenges. Generalship and control of the social, economic, and military resources necessary for making war proved decisive factors in the bitter struggle for power which dominated the country during these years.

59. For the Shangqela and Afar, see Yohannes’s letter to Kaiser Wilhelm of 1881 (in Bairu Tafla 1981: 201).
60. For the letter to Kaiser Wilhelm of 14 Miyazya 1883 Eth. cal.: 21 Apr. 1891], see Bairu Tafla 1981: 215-217; and for Menilek to Victoria, same date, PRO/ FO, 95/751.
61. For the foundation of Addis Alam, see Pankhurst 1968: 706-708.
An intensive propaganda campaign accompanied the struggle for power as each aspirant noble tried to win the allegiance, or at least the preference, of the country at large: lesser nobles, clergy, and peasants. They drew on a common stock of ideas all of which reinforced the notion of the good Christian king. In order to speak more easily to a diffuse population, separated from them by barriers both geographical and social, they used some basic symbols, images and concepts. They proclaimed these symbols through their names, their titles, and their actions. They engraved them on their seals and announced them in their correspondence.

Ethiopia’s rulers in the later 19th century would not have recognized the distinction between religious and political concepts, so analytical separation of the two is arbitrary. The Kebrä Nāgāst, ‘Glory of the Kings’, with its elaborate legend of the origins of the Ethiopian dynasty in the union of Solomon and Sheba and in the transferral of the Ark of the Covenant from Jerusalem to Aksum by their son Menilek united politics and religion. The Kebrä Nāgāst legitimated Christian, Semitic culture in Ethiopia, and an authoritarian, hierarchical, patriarchal social order. All of our rulers skirted its dynastic requirements by defying their exclusively male provision. In so doing they had the support of common social practice.

In purely historical and political terms each ruler of the later 19th century tried to distance himself from the degraded kingdom of the earlier part of the century and from its dynastically legitimate shadow kings. As a result the lack of strict rightful filiation as reckoned through the male line was probably an advantage. Yet each king avidly sought legitimation by reference to earlier historical periods—to the classical, Aksumite period in Yohānnes’s reliance on the Church of St. Mary of Zion in Aksum, and to the great founding Christian kings, Abreha and Aṣāḥā. These references are revived in the very name of Menilek II. The imperial reconstructionists showed little detailed awareness of the glories and triumphs of medieval Ethiopia and mentioned its kings only briefly. The main period with which they sought to legitimate themselves was the Gondarine period, particularly the years 1632 to 1730 marked out by four great rulers: the founding Fasil, his son Yohānnes Şadiq, Iyyasu the Great, and Bäkaffa. The titles, symbols and style of revived monarchy were molded by what was understood about this period.

Eschewing strict dynastic legitimacy and proclaiming renewal from degradation each ruler posed as righteous. Tewodros laid down the template for this role. It entailed the imposition of doctrinal unity on the Church through a return to the authority of the Patriarch of Alexandria. It further meant institutional support for the bishop as opposed to the monastic authorities, as well as the building and endowing of new churches, and the refurbishment of old. Muslims and pagans were converted, by the sword if necessary. European missionaries were
discouraged. Finally, each of these righteous, Christian kings embraced certain moral and social teachings of the Church. They broke with the customs of their class, pursued by their forefathers the kings, as well as by the peasants, and embraced religiously sanctioned monogamy.

Neo-Solomonic ideology was a powerful force which proved efficacious in mobilizing the resources of the Christian polity in support of the main later 19th-century Ethiopian rulers, especially Yohannes and Menilek. However, in the longer run of Ethiopian history, and especially in the 20th-century, the limitations of this ideology became increasingly clear, if not to its proponents, at least to observers. Neo-Solomonic ideology glorified Semitic speech and culture and the Christian religion in a country which predominantly spoke Cushitic languages and observed either Islam or indigenous religions. Semitic-speaking Christians are a minority in today’s Ethiopia as they were in the later 19th century. Moreover, the strongly religious implications of neo-Solomonic thought were repellant to the urbanized, educated elite which emerged in the decades following World War II. As a result, when the deposition of Haile Sellassie I took place in 1974 it encountered little resistance, and the first ten years of the Ethiopian Revolution saw increasing opposition based on ethnicity, but no significant royalist party or movement has affected the situation. Whether such a development occurs in the future remains to be seen.

The rulers of later 19th-century Ethiopia were primarily backward looking. They were inspired by, and took their models from, what they understood to have been the past. But even had they wanted to they could not have escaped innovation. Whether consciously or not they abandoned the practice of royal seclusion. Purposely they rejected the descent line of the strict Solomonids and their marital practices. In so doing they created a neo-Solomonic ideology which lasted until 1974.

University of Illinois, October 1987.

REFERENCES

1. Archival references

Aksum Seyon Church (Aksum, Tigré Province).
Bibliothèque nationale (Paris), Manuscrits éthiopiens–Abbadie; BN/MEA.
British Library (London), Additional manuscripts: BL/AM.
Orient: BL/O.
Egyptian National Archives (Cairo).
Ethiopian Monastic Microfilm Library, St. John’s University (Collegeville, MN).
Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University (Addis Ababa).
Maison Lazariste (Paris).
Ministère des Affaires étrangères (Paris), Correspondance politique: MAE/CP.
Protocole: MAE/P.
Public Record Office (London), Foreign Office: PRO/FO.
Sellasé Church (Adwa, Tegré Province).

2. Bibliography

Annales...


Apocryphes...


BAIRU TAFILA


BAIRU TAFILA, ed.


BASSET, R. M. J.


BECKINGHAM, C. F. & HUNTINGFORD, G. W. B.


BÉGUINOT, F.

1901 *La cronaca abbreviata d'Abissinia* (Roma: Tipografia della Casa editrice italiana).

BERRY, L. B.


BRUCE, J.

1790 *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile in the Years 1768, 1769, 1770, 1771, 1772, and 1773* (Edinburgh: G. G. J. & J. Robinson), 5 vol.

BUDGE, E. A. T. W.

1922 *The Queen of Sheba and her only Son Menyelek [...] A Complete Translation of the Kebra Nagast* (London: Martin Hopkinson).

CAULK, R. A.

Cecchi, A.
1885-87  *Da Zeila alle frontiere del Caffa* (Roma: E. Loescher), 3 vol.

Conti Rossini, C.
1937  *Etiopia e genti di Etiopia* (Firenze: R. Bentorad).

Crumme, D.

Darkwah, R. H. K.

Dufston, H.

Fethä Näräast

Fusella, L.

Gabra Madhen Kidane

Gâbra Sellasë

Geertz, C.

Getatchew Haile

Getatchew Haile & Macomber, W.
1981  *A Catalogue of Ethiopian Manuscripts Microfilmed for the Ethiopian Monas-

Girma-Sellasse Asfaw, Appleyard, D. & Ullendorff, E., eds.

Haberland, E.

Haile Sellassie I

Hamilton, C. A.
1987 'Ideology and Oral Traditions: Listening to the Voices 'From Below'', History in Africa XIV: 67-86.

Harris, W. C.

Hoben, A.

Huntingford, G. W. B., ed.
1965 The Land Charters of Northern Ethiopia (Addis Ababa: Haile Sellassie I University, Institute of Ethiopian Studies–OUP) ("Monographs in Ethiopian Land Tenure" 1).

Isenberg, K. W. & Krapf, J. L.

Krapf, J. L.

Levine, D. N.
DONALD CRUMMEY

Liber Axumae
1909-10 Documenta ad illustrandam historiam. I. Liber Axumae, ed. by C. CONTI ROSSINI (Parisii: Typographæa Reipublicæ), 2 vol. ("Corpus scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 54. 58. Scriptores Aethiopici, ser. 2" 8).

LICHTHEIM, G.

MARCUS, H. G.

PANKHURST, R. K. P.

PANKHURST, R. K. P., ed.

PRAETORIUS, F.
1879 Die amharische Sprache (Halle: Verlag der Buchhandlung des Waisenhauses).

RICCI, L.

Rochet d’HÉRICOURT, C.-E.-X.
1846 Second voyage sur les deux rives de la mer Rouge, dans le pays des Adels, et le royaume de Choa (Paris: A. Bertrand).

RUBENSON, S.

RUBENSON, S., GETATCHEW HAILE & HUNWICK, J., eds.

SAPIRICH’IAN, T.
1871 Deux ans de séjour en Abyssinie, ou Vie morale, politique et religieuse des Abyssiniens (Jérusalem: Couvent de Saint-Jacques), 2 vol.
Shahid, I.

Shils, E. & Johnson, H. M.

Stern, H. A.
1862 *Wanderings among the Falashas in Abyssinia; together with a Description of the Country and its Various Inhabitants* (London: Wertheim, Macintosh & Hunt).

Tadesse Tamrat

Ullendorff, E. & Demoz, A.

Waldá Marvam

Yaté Tewodros Tarik

Zänäb, Däbtära


Zewde Gabre-Sellassie