

# The Missing Links of Traditional Rule in Pre-1974 Aksum

## *Muluwork Kidanemariam*

### 1. Introduction

The objective in writing this short paper is to present an inquiry of the peculiar mechanisms of traditional rule of local governance of pre-1974 Aksum based on local field research. In line with this, this paper focuses on the description of some historical practices rather than attempting to dig out the sources for the codes of such traditional rules of governance. It is meant for initiating research interest on the so far neglected area of the general history of the post Aksumite Kingdom of the area of Aksum and its environs in general and the organizational development patterns of society in particular.

- 1.1 It is true that a lot of studies have so far been conducted with regard to the early history of the Aksumite civilization from its beginning to its downfall although this is, so far, not sufficient to provide a really adequate knowledge and understanding of Aksumite history. Generally, the influence of the ancient Aksum kingdom and its society on the later social and cultural life of the inhabitants of the area is not generally known.
- 1.2 Almost all those limited studies hitherto made about Aksum are concerned with the rise and fall of the Aksumite civilization and its relations with other civilizations with which it established contact. Due to this, the internal processes of continuity and discontinuity are largely ignored.
- 1.3 Owing to this, there is not much knowledge of the impact of the Aksumite kingdom on the subsequent culture, tradition and methods of social organisation of Aksum and its surrounding areas.
- 1.4 It is, however, very important to focus on the study of Aksum and the surrounding areas of the post first millennium period in order to understand:
  - a) Whether there have been influences on the methods of social organization from the past societies.
  - b) How the modes of existence have been affected by subsequent trends of development.

Hence, this short paper aims at inviting further research on the history of the area of Aksum especially after the downfall of its kingdom.

- 1.5 If this is the case, then how can one explain the succession of the Ethiopian state from the Aksumite period to the present and the different modes of adaptation made by the successor states in relation to their respective social and political conditions of existence?
- 1.6 Despite the fact that modern historians have a clear idea about the period which they call “the decline of Aksum,” local history and legends maintain that successive states in Ethiopia were in fact “legally or illegally” (at least in terms of the values and traditions) extensions or continuations of the Aksumite kingdom to which many of them have been attaching themselves in one way or another. According to John Reader,

“With plough and literacy, Aksum possessed the pre-requisites of civilization and state formation. Subsequently, trade, territorial expansion and the rise of social elite with a taste for luxury goods were as evident as Aksum as they have been in every other instance where the process has been observed... No other region of Africa fostered the development of an indigenous literate civilization, and its history spans more than 2000 years.” (J Reader<sup>1</sup>, 210).
- 1.7 Besides, although the impact of the history and tradition of Aksum on the general history and development of Ethiopia is generally known, there are a lot of questions that have remained without answer. The contributions made by Aksum to the development of written language, ways of religious practices and other aspects of culture are clear. But, it is not clear how the sociopolitical heritage of Aksum, with the exception of the so-called ‘Solomonic dynasty’, has marked the methods of social organization and the system of governance that has been subsequently used by the states that claimed to be its inheritors.
- 1.8 It is generally believed that the Aksumite state declined prior to the end of the first millennium. Today, followers of Orthodox Christianity in Ethiopia believe that Aksum is their holy city due to the fact that the first Church in Ethiopia has emerged in Aksum, in addition to many other religion-based explanations. However, how much has the effect of the downfall of the Aksumite state affected the traditions of social organisation of the people who continued to dwell in Aksum and its environs? What is the relationship of the methods of local governance practiced in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Aksum with that of the Aksumite kingdom of the first millennium?

With these issues in mind, this paper tries to give highlights on some aspects of peculiar forms of local governance and other practices of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Aksum which differed from the practices generally followed by the Ethiopian government based on the strong centralizing mission of the state.

1 John Reader: Africa: A Biography of the Continent.

## 2. Aksum – the Root of the Ethiopian State

- 2.1 Ethiopia is one of the ancient countries of the world. It is due to Aksum's rise to power and greatness that Ethiopia gained its prominence as an ancient country. Many scholars believe that the organized state of Aksum is the product of an indigenous African civilization.  
According to John Reader, "... since Eurocentric predispositions have fostered a belief that any evidence of civilization found on the continent (Africa) must have been introduced, it is important to note that Aksum is defining example of indigenous civilization and state formation. Its roots are set deep in the indigenous landscape, sustaining a system that remained viable to this day." (John Reader, p. 210)
- 2.2 It is generally believed that Ethiopia was one of the earliest organised states in the world, although this Ethiopian state had experienced various changes in the its organization, its territorial extent and the location of its centers of power.

## 3. The Ethiopian Government Hierarchy

- 3.1 The Ethiopian government bureaucracy is of a late date and about one hundred years old. Earlier, the kings with their mobile armies had no permanent center of the location of power.
- 3.2 The mobile nature of the rule of kings continued even after the end of the turbulent 'Era of the Princes' during the times of Emperor Téwodros II of Gonder and Yohannes IV of Tigray.
- 3.3 Yohannes IV with his subordinate kings Minilek of Shoa and Teklehaymanot of Gojjam used the title of king of kings during the second half of the nineteenth century since these were formally approved to assume the title of kingship in their hereditary domains within a united religious doctrine of Ethiopia.
- 3.4 The emergence of modern bureaucracy during the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is connected to the beginnings of a strong centralizing policy of Emperor Minilek II. This gradually undermined the autonomy of the different traditional aristocracies in northern Ethiopia, who had continuously ruled the regions which they considered as their hereditary possessions.
- 3.5 The process of centralizing the northern regions of Ethiopia was very slow compared to that of the south, which had been incorporated into the empire through military campaigns carried out over a short period of time.  
The provincial government hierarchy controlled by the Ministry of Interior, along with the affairs of other ministries, have been strongly established in the south. In the north however, the penetration of Ethiopian's centralized government system has been weaker in comparison with the southern

- provinces, while there still has been some distortion of the traditional models of governance going on in the north. Still, as will be shown, the central government slowly penetrated also the northern areas, and just before the revolution the provincial government in the north was approaching to the legal administrative model already applied in the south (John M. Chen, Peter H. Koehn, p. 34).
- 3.6 The Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1936 accelerated the weakening of power of regional rulers because the main resistance against the occupation came from these, since the aristocratic rulers, especially those of the north, had their own traditional armies.
  - 3.7 The aristocratic rulers maintained a politico-military and administrative autonomous structure for a long period in the history of Ethiopia and these structures were largely the effective means of force protecting Ethiopia from the challenges from external invaders. At times, these units were used for mobilizing the people during important challenges of the state.
  - 3.8 After 1942 the influence of the power of local and regional aristocratic rulers was greatly weakened by the central government following the structures created by the Italians in their attempt to colonize Ethiopia. These quick centralizing efforts, however, were not accepted passively, since armed uprisings like that of the rebellion in Tigray (*Qedamay Weyyane*) and others broke out following these measures.
  - 3.9 The administration of justice proclamation of 1942 established the *Teqlay Gizat* (Governorate General), the provincial court known as the High Court in Ethiopia. Although the proclamation did not mention how the lower courts were to be established, it was understood that these were left to be organized under the administration and jurisdiction of the higher courts. The *awraja*, *wereda* and *miketel* levels were thus organized by a circular issued by the Ministry of Justice.
  - 3.10 In line with the administration regulation decree, the provincial heads (Governor Generals or *inderasés*) were presidents of the provincial higher courts, assisted by three judges, the *awraja* governors were president of the *awraja* courts assisted by two or more judges, and the *wereda* governors were also presidents of the *wereda* court assisted by one or more judges.
  - 3.11 Once governorate generals were established after 1942, all the heads of these were assigned as *inderasés* by the Emperor, while Tigray was left to retain its own traditional governor, who was, on the one hand, formally appointed by the Emperor, but who was, on the other hand, understood to be from the lineage of Emperor Yohannes IV of the royal house of Tigray with a special title that included him as a member of the crown. This relationship was further tied by marriage with Emperor Hayle Sillásé.
  - 3.12 Pre-1974 Tigray had eight *awrajas* for which the governors were appointed by the governor general with the exception of Aksum. This means that Aksum as the holy city of the then official religion of the state, Orthodox Christianity, was not left under the control by the head of the Tigray governorate general, since the Emperor himself retained the power of appointing the *awraja* head of Aksum.

- 3.13 Unlike the heads of the 102 *awrajas* of pre-1974 Ethiopia, the *awraja* head of Aksum held the special title known as the *nibre' id* (traditionally maintained). This position meant that he was both the head of the *awraja* and of the prestigious church. Officially the title holder was addressed as the “governor of St. Mary of Tsiyon and the District of Aksum.”
- 3.14 This means that the governor of Aksum was the head of the Church in spiritual matters and as well the politico-administrative head of the district of Aksum, which by the time had six rural sub-districts and one town administration, which included a number of adjacent villages found around the town. The villages were known as *Qulzi* and it was in these areas that the lands possessed by the church of Aksum were located.
- 3.15 The six rural *weredas* of Aksum *awraja*, in line with the 1942 proclamation, were similarly treated together with other *weredas* of Tigray, but the town of Aksum and its adjacent *Qulzi* villages were treated differently owing to the special status that the Aksumite Church had.
- 3.16 Whereas the *awraja* head, the *nibre' id*, was directly appointed by the Emperor, the *wereda* heads on the other hand were directly assigned by the Governor General of Tigray.
- 3.17 It is interesting to see, as we learn from oral tradition, but not mentioned in the literature, that the town head known as the *qerigéta* was a popularly elected person in accordance with the traditional custom, while the *nibre' id* and the *wereda* governors were respectively appointed by the Emperor and the provincial Governor General.

#### 4. The *Qerigéta* of Aksum

- 4.1. The *qerigéta* of Aksum had the mixed functions of a mayor and a judge of the town of Aksum and the adjacent villages, in which the lands possessed by the Church were found.
- 4.2 Elected through a popular vote in a meeting chaired by the *nibre' id* and a council of wise men (*shimagle*) who acted as members of an electoral commission, the *qerigéta's* term of office was only two years. However, he may have a chance for re-election after the end of his first term in office.
- 4.3 Besides, there was no limit for the number of persons who could compete for the post. The number was sometimes high owing to the high number of persons who were interested in the office.
- 4.4 Together with the *nibre' id* of Aksum, the council of wise men elected from the inhabitants of the town, managed the electoral process and count the votes of the people in order to affirm that the election has been carried out freely and fairly.
- 4.5 Contestants had the right to hold speeches in the public in order to gain the support that they needed in order to assume the post of *qerigéta*.
- 4.6 Although the *qerigéta* was elected by popular vote, another interesting phenomenon following the election process was that the elected person

- was formally accepted and registered by the Ministry of Justice and enjoyed a salary paid by the government for the two years of his term in office.
- 4.7 The *qerigéta* was not subject to demotion and transfer by higher offices since the right to remove him rested in the hands of the electorate. In the case of severe administrative mal-practices, people had the right to call for a popular meeting and discussion which eventually may lead to his dismissal from office if such a decision was passed by the public.
  - 4.8 After his two years term in office, although registered by the Ministry of Justice, the *qerigéta* of Aksum had no right to continue the office or any equivalent service in other areas of administration in accordance with the rules and regulations which govern civil servants in the country.
  - 4.9 The system for the election of a *qerigéta*, who was equivalent to an administrator of a *wereda* and a mayor of a town, is an exceptional phenomenon in Ethiopia until the 1974 period, i.e., the revolution. In spite of the strong centralization drive after 1942, the proclamation did not distinctly acknowledge the legal status of Aksum, but the government simply continued to observe the traditionally practiced system of local governance. This was done in recognition of the special role that Aksum played in the history of Ethiopia.
  - 4.10 Although Emperors of Ethiopia were popularly known as 'King of Kings of Ethiopia', the official title by which they were addressed during their visits to Aksum was 'King of Tsiyon of Aksum and king of kings of Ethiopia'. Owing to this, for historical or political purposes the kings practically and symbolically claimed Aksum to be under their own direct control.
  - 4.11 The fact that this traditional mode of local governance coexisted side by side with the centralizing and modernizing efforts of the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century Ethiopian state brings several issues for consideration.
    - a) The Ethiopian state gave due recognition to the the historical role of the Aksumite civilization, which means that the state accepted a contradiction to the idea of a strong unitarian system. Whether this was a tactical approach within the slow penetrating movement of centralization or the result of fear from a strong opposition is now a matter of conjecture. Nevertheless it is possible to say that the king deliberately allowed these traditions to be maintained because his legitimacy rested on the values and traditions of Aksum.
    - b) This form of democratic rule remained confined to the town of Aksum. As a result it is not clear why this practice was restricted to the town of Aksum and why such experiences did not have an influence at least on other areas of Tigray in particular or to the country in general.
    - c) Is this system a legacy of ancient Aksum or has it emerged after the downfall of its civilization? Was Aksum governed in the form of an adopted City-State tradition like that of ancient Greece or is this an indigenously developed system? The fact that there are no studies made on the methods of social organisation, makes it difficult to provide an answer for this. Besides the

absence of any significant research that focuses on the post first millennium history of Aksum also makes it difficult to understand how this legacy has been transferred from the past and was maintained.

## 5. Capital Offense Mediation through the Church

- 5.1 The Holy Church of Aksum is believed to be the first church built in Ethiopia and indeed in the whole of Sub-Saharan Africa. The privilege and respect that the Aksumite Church continues to possess has an effect on the way that it is seen in present day Ethiopia. According to Margery Perham, 'the only place in Ethiopia where the church was more powerful than the state, was in Aksum with its many churches and clergy and its large sanctuary' (Perham, 104). Owing to this, outside of the religious domain the Aksumite Church had an influential and binding effect in adjudicating serious criminal acts.
- 5.2 As an example for this we can refer to homicide. The offender in this case would escape from the place of offense, hides and secretly submits himself to the control of the Church authorities.
- 5.3 Once the criminal confesses about his wrongdoing he is put in chains by the Church authorities and provided with the food necessary for his survival.
- 5.4 A council of priests responsible for resolving the problem is formed and the issue is communicated to the regular church attendants so that these could help in providing supplies to the prisoner of the church until the time of the resolution of the criminal case has come.
- 5.5 The members of the council of priests handle the case and approach the relatives of the victim requesting them to forgive as the offender had regretted and confessed about his wrongdoing to the church of St. Mary of Aksum. In such instances it will be very difficult for the relatives of the victim not to grant a pardon since the messengers are assumed to be rightful. The next process will focus on the payment of an indemnity which shall be negotiated and agreed by relatives of the accused and the victim through the members of the council.
- 5.6 Once an indemnity is paid, the wrongdoer is granted pardon and it is generally forbidden for anyone to take revenge. Anyone attempting to disrespect this rule will be excommunicated by the Church. Besides, government agencies generally refrain from taking the case to the court since the arbitration made by the Church is normally considered final and binding.
- 5.7 Whereas capital offense used to be resolved in such a way, the strong belief in the holiness of the church of Aksum on the other hand prohibited the government from implementing decisions of capital punishment within the town of Aksum. Although this was not based on government laws or statutes, the traditionally maintained values did not allow government authorities to enforce any decisions of capital punishment in the town. Therefore, such measures used to be carried out in other places outside Aksum and its environs.

## Bibliography

Reader, J.

1999 Africa: A Biography of the Continent. New York: Vintage Books.

Henze, P.

2000 A History of Ethiopia, Layers of Time. London: Hurst.

Perham, M.

1969 The Government of Ethiopia. Evanston: North-Western University.