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**Conference report**

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## Report on an exhibition (Amsterdam: November 1998 – August 1999)

### “Ethiopia – the heritage of an empire”. Notes on an exhibition

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#### Introduction

Under the above title, the *Tropenmuseum* (Royal Tropical Museum) in Amsterdam is hosting an exhibition on Ethiopia, which runs from November 1998 until August 1999. As the title may suggest, the emphasis of this well-prepared and comprehensive display is on Ethiopia's modern history and imagery, and not on cultural diversity, contrasts and ethnography. The latter aspects were more prominent in the 'fore-runner' of this exhibition, organized in 1997 in Belgium (at the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren) under the title *Aethiopia – Peoples and Cultures of Ethiopia*.<sup>1</sup> The exhibition in Amsterdam is based on, and inspired by, ideas and material of the Tervuren one, but it has been substantially modified so as to have become almost unrecognizable. (This is probably only the second exhibition on Ethiopia hosted in the Netherlands, the first one being that on the occasion of Emperor Haile Sellasie's visit in 1954).

It is encouraging that the interest of Western and other audiences for Ethiopia seems to be growing. Ethiopia is an African country that, whatever its record and image of dismal poverty, famine, violence, autocracy and underdevelopment, is still carrying a promise of renewal and future importance. It fully deserves to catch up on other African countries in attracting serious attention from a larger audience. Ethiopia's long and deep historical legacy, its ancient and autochthonous forms of Islam and Christianity, its long state traditions and its unfathomed cultural richness make it an ever-challenging country. In addition, it is gaining more international political importance.

The Netherlands has no tradition of Ethiopian studies like that existing, for instance, in Germany, France or Italy, although various individual scholars in history, linguistic and religious studies and anthropology have been active there for

<sup>1</sup> For a review, see *Museum Anthropology* 22(2) 1998, pp. 62-66.

many years. Dutch public interest in Ethiopia has also been limited, although the country draws substantial interest from various Dutch development organizations and government agencies (including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Development Cooperation).

In this review I will discuss some aspects of the organization, aims and mode of presentation of this exhibition, in an attempt to assess the atmosphere and the 'message' that visitors might retain after having concluded the tour.

### Theme

The Tropenmuseum exhibition highlights history and contemporary society of Ethiopia. As the accompanying texts note, it is about the history, the country, the religions and culture, against the background of the Ethiopian debate about the nation's future.

This theme is addressed by looking at what was, and what remains of, the once prestigious empire and its famous emperor Haile Sellassie, and naturally at what Ethiopian society looks like today in post-empire conditions. For the latter purpose, scenes from daily life, market stalls, a bar, shops and home interiors are displayed, together with products and objects of daily use.

The exhibition is made up of self-contained units addressing these two underlying themes. It opens with a slide show near the entrance showing a great variety of good pictures of the countryside, city scenes, markets, objects and products, architecture and monuments, religious life, and people from various regions and groups.

The first part of the exhibition is about contemporary Addis Ababa and its market area, showing products and stalls. To the left of this one finds a big cross-shaped showcase with fabulous Christian religious objects: manuscripts, hand crosses, processional crosses, sistrums, etc. A video film shows a tour recorded on location of the rock churches of Lalibela.

In the historical parts of the exhibition, religious culture, historical identity and the imperial heritage feature prominently. Attention is, of course, paid to Emperor Haile Sellassie, whose fame has now faded but who was a household name in Western political circles and even among the larger public after his great speech to the League of Nations on July 1, 1936. This ominous speech protested the brutal and near-genocidal invasion of Ethiopia by Fascist Italy, and the cowardly abandonment of the country by the Western powers to appease the emerging Fascist and Nazi aggression in Europe. The Emperor then also (correctly) predicted the demise of Europe in an all-out war if no stance would be made against such aggression. We see images of the Italo-Ethiopian war of 1935-36 in the film fragments presented in a special small cinema hall within the exhibition (see below).

Another section addressing the historical heritage is the “Palace of Memories”: here we find a display of robes of nobles, weapons (shields, knives), ornamented horse-saddle covers, lion-maned head covers, impressive paintings of royals and historical scenes, and some musical instruments (like the big *bägäna* harp, once owned by Emperor Haile Sellassie). Many of the objects here are on loan from the Übersee-Museum of Bremen, and from the Staatliches Museum in Munich (in view of the crowded space and lack of museum attendants, it struck me that these paintings were neither protected nor set at some distance from the public).

To the left of this section there is a niche devoted to the Rastafarian movement, with paintings, record covers of Rasta music and a film on a video monitor showing Emperor Haile Sellassie’s visit to Jamaica in 1964 (? the year 1966 is also given in the accompanying text). Another section addressing historical issues is the niche with traditional-style paintings on historical battles and with propaganda posters from the Mengistu era.

An interesting formula is that of the “Cinema Ethiopia”: a small film hall showing a collation of rather unknown historical film fragments on Ethiopia’s recent history, from the battle of Adwa in 1896 to the recent federal elections of 1995.

Religious culture and traditions are further shown in the large model of a village church with walls painted with religious scenes. Explanation on video monitors of their symbolism and meaning is provided in four places. A street stall with religious items, as found in Addis Ababa near churches, is shown next to it. This section also has a monitor showing an interview with an Ethiopian historian explaining the social and spiritual significance of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in the country.

Next there is a wall panel explaining the role of Islam in Ethiopia, followed by sections devoted to the city and culture of Harar (showing the interior of a house) and to Somali culture (wooden and domestic objects, neck stools, Koran writing boards). The accompanying video monitor shows an interview with an Ethiopian specialist on Harar and Islam in Ethiopia (the figure in the text of Ethiopian Muslims as constituting 50% of the population seems to be too high). This section concludes the first level of the exhibition.

The second level is relatively modest and devoted to “African traditions”. Some forty-four objects from four Ethiopian peoples, the Boran Oromo, the Arssi Oromo, the Konso and the Nuer: among them neck stools, milk containers, wooden funerary poles, decorative items, pipes, and clothing. Traditional music is played in the background. These objects are shown in a display which makes the impression of having been a kind of afterthought. Is this to reflect the alleged mar-

ginal position of the peoples concerned within Ethiopia, or their being African and not Islamic or Christian, or not having been part of the heritage of the empire? Almost all visitors are puzzled by this strange arrangement of objects on the wide wooden 'roof' of the exhibition - however beautiful and interesting these items are in their own right.

The route then leads further back to a lower level, which contains explanatory texts on the new challenges of diversity in Ethiopia after the demise of the empire, of 'Amharisation' and of the socialist state. Aspects of the contemporary political situation (with more recognition of local languages and cultures, etc.) is explained. The adjacent section is devoted to contemporary urban life: the city bar and/or *azmari bet*, with a realistically furnished interior and a life-size video display of dancing female performers and singers. The role of these bars as meeting places and of (veiled) social criticism is highlighted. In this area there is again a small video, showing interviews with some Ethiopian public figures on the future of the country. Near the exit of the exhibition there are computer terminals that can be consulted for Internet sites and links on Ethiopia.

#### **Balance of subjects/topics within the overall theme**

The ambition of the organizers was, as the director of the Tropenmuseum said in his exhibition opening speech on November 15, 1998, "to do something better than in Tervuren" (see above). I am not sure whether that has been successful, but for one thing, the present exhibition certainly is very different: much more interactive, more emphasis on contemporary urban life and social challenges, and more attention to the historical, political, and religious mainstream of Ethiopia as compared to the non-highland cultures and their diversity.

The attention to religious tradition and recent history – especially through the cinema, the large model of a village church, and the memorabilia of the former elite – is very interesting and worthwhile. The organization of the display in various separate and rather different sections – e.g., Islam, Christianity, Rastafarianism, the city bar, the Mercato, the church treasures, and the 'ethnic' section – prevents monotony or an intimidating effect, enhancing a feeling of discovery.

Of course this display was also faced with limits to space, budget and the availability of objects of all the many ethno-cultural groups in the country, and every one understands that a selective approach was inevitable. But still these latter groups (most not all of them living outside the highland areas) are only marginally displayed, on the wooden roof on the main exhibition ground. Perhaps it was a well-chosen spot to exhibit the 'peripheral', non-Christian, non-Islamic peoples of Ethiopia in the empire-state: politically non-influential, socially not integrated, linguistically and culturally so 'different'. But to treat the Oromo population in

such a manner is disappointing. The same can be said for the large groups of Sidama, Kaficho or Wolayta, who each have their own historical legacies, partly independent, partly overlapping and shared with the empire state. Also, to define the Oromo heritage (which one? It is in itself very diverse) as primarily ‘African’, and the Highland Christian and Muslim ones not does not seem justified. First of all, these traditions also intersect. Secondly, both faiths have been in Ethiopia almost from the beginning and are very much more rooted there (and therefore also African) than in many other countries. It seems then a kind of artificial division, wanting to see only the ‘traditional’ Sidama, Konso, or Oromo religions and rituals as the ‘African heritage’ and not Islam and Christianity.

### Display and interactive character

The spatial outlay of this exhibition is somewhat cramped: within cardboard walls, small niches devoted to different subjects have been created, but when there are many people there is not enough room to move about and take in what is on show.

Also, the route to follow is indicated with small arrows, but seems not to be very clear. Especially when it is busy, visitors appear to get lost and do not closely go the route described in an accompanying leaflet. They either follow what they think is interesting or just miss the arrows. This is perhaps due to the lack of space within the exhibition, set up in the middle of the central hall of the Museum. One can understand that this was probably technically and financially not feasible, but in this respect a larger second storey display would have been better.

The interactive character of this exhibition is, however, very good: the many video-monitors (although they are perhaps too small) showing interviews with leading Ethiopians, the beautiful slide-show at the beginning, the “Cinema Ethiopia” concept, the presence of relatively brief (and not too many) introductory texts in Dutch and English on the walls, the video film in the bar (*Täjjbet*), and the computer monitor to consult Internet discussion lists on Ethiopia and Eritrea. There has not been an emphasis on presenting or transmitting as much *knowledge* about Ethiopia as possible, but on trying to take up the challenge of making sense of post-empire conditions of the country, in line with models and narratives of cultural diversity, ethnic difference and alternative histories. What visitors get, therefore, is a colourful and lively presentation of aspects of Ethiopian history and society, with the museum display obviously as a forum, and not as a shrine or temple of knowledge only to be respectfully entered and admired. By moving through different sections and niches, visitors are gradually familiarized with Ethiopia and may not only pick up knowledge of the country but also get some touch with the daily realities and some of the ‘flavour of life’ there.

### Conclusions

What emerges from this engaging and lively exhibition is a feeling for the complex, problematic and controversial legacy left by the empire. Visitors retain an informed, visually attractive and dynamic image of a country that has suffered and that is trying to keep up its own spirit of survival and dignity, despite formidable odds.

It has become clear – although it is not harshly brought out in the exhibition – that the immediate legacy of the empire has been dealt with in a destructive and irreverent manner by the country's new leaders since 1974. The empire was then declared, in glowing revolutionary rhetoric, to be “feudal, corrupt, violent, repressive”, etc. Obviously, the faults of the last Emperor are clear: among them, the errors of judgement in the Eritrea question, his political absolutism and growing social conservatism, and his lack of democratic reforms in the 1960s and 1970s. But a sober assessment of the twentieth century record will show that subsequent rulers from a disaffected but equally authoritarian and violent younger generation have, in most respects, not been able to equal the last Emperor's achievements in education, public policy, economic development, judicial reform and maintaining social peace and an integrative state project, however oppressive this sometimes could work out. Among the legacies of the Empire – which of course will always remain controversial for the different audiences in and outside the country – is therefore that Haile Sellassie will probably be judged as among the most important if not greatest rulers that Ethiopia has known in the last 200 years.

This exhibition is a fascinating event, exploring the unique character of Ethiopia, more unfathomable than most other African countries. But as a display it has a rather disjointed character, and perhaps does not reveal enough of the nature and depth of the *links* between the political, social, ethnic and religious elements that constitute Ethiopian society. Nevertheless, the exhibition cannot be missed by any one interested in Ethiopia and in its historical legacy and the complexity of its cultural and religious values, even if only a glimpse is shown of what this intriguing country has to offer.

For this exhibition one new publication was produced: a well-illustrated book of 95 pages called *Ethiopië: de erfenis van een keizerrijk. Beelden en verhalen* (only in Dutch) and containing a selection of 22 stories, poems and fragments from historical works or important Ethiopian novels. The big edited volume *Aethiopia – Peoples of Ethiopia*, prepared for the Tervuren exhibition of 1997, is also on sale. The Museum shop in addition sells Ethiopian material items, like wooden head-rests, new painted icons, sistrums, limestone tryptiches, and wooden and nickel crosses.