

A GALLOP IN ETHIOPIA: WAX, GOLD & THE ABYSSINIAN PONY

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It has been a long time, a millennium and a half, since Ethiopia was a relevant player on the world stage. But I sometimes wonder if, as the present age grinds to its stupid end, the time of Ethiopia, with its ancient, self-confident Christian civilization, has come round again. Out of the corner of my mind's eye, I see the Ethiopians sweeping northwards to dominate the Middle East, then replacing much of what is left of the decayed Europeans, perhaps linking up with their Orthodox brethren, expelling the Turks, and returning most of Eurasia to the Christian fold, igniting a new syncretic civilization. Probably not, but why not? That's what we're going to explore today.

I freely admit I do not really understand much about present-day Ethiopia, although I know a few more facts than the average American (which is to say I know more than zero) about Ethiopian history. This is mostly because I previously read and discussed G. W. Bowersock's *The Throne of Adulis*, the focus of which is late Classical Ethiopia, including the Aksumite Empire. My ignorance about Ethiopia has, however, been somewhat alleviated by reading this very interesting book. *A Gallop in Ethiopia* is not a reference work, or even a work that is easily classifiable. It is like a spotlight, that briefly and idiosyncratically illuminates a variety of fascinating topics in turn. It is a type of autobiography, of a Frenchman, Yves-Marie Stranger, who moved almost by chance to Ethiopia in 2000, stayed, married an Ethiopian woman, and returned to France in 2016. In those years, Ethiopia underwent great change, as did Stranger himself, and he shares glimpses of his adventure with his readers.

Stranger, who does not here provide much detail about his own life other than as it illuminates Ethiopia (we are not told, for example, what he does now, other than write, and it's implied that some of his family by marriage has moved to France, but we don't get details), is a type of one-man band spreading the news about Ethiopia. He has another, longer, book, *Ethiopia through Writer's Eyes*, of which I have a copy but have not read, and has a podcast series, *The Abyssinian Syllabary*, explaining

Ethiopia through thirty-three biographical sketches, one for each letter of the Ge'ez alphabet (some impressionistic, others purely factual). In addition, he has a website, *Uthiopia.com* (a portmanteau of "Utopia" and "Ethiopia"), that among other offerings, lists other books to read about Ethiopia. I've ordered several, but again have not read them.

Maybe part of why Ethiopia resonates with me is that I could have been an Ethiopian. Sort of. When my grandfather fled the Communist conquest of Hungary in 1945, and was a refugee in Germany, one of the places he considered emigrating was Abyssinia. He loved hunting, and thought that Ethiopia would offer exotic hunting. And Haile Selassie, the last Emperor of Ethiopia, in a line (maybe) thousands of years old, was actively recruiting a Hungarian physician, to replace one he liked, who was retiring. But my grandmother, wisely, vetoed the idea, and so I am (or this I is) American.

Most Americans can't comprehend modern Ethiopia, and anyway, don't think about it much. Some Americans remember Ethiopia from the famine-relief efforts of the 1980s, and the images stuck in their mind are of starving people in a desert land—the former hasn't been true for a long time, and the latter was never true (most Americans fail to grasp that Ethiopia has a widely-varied landscape, much of it very beautiful). Nobody told us at the time that the main cause of that famine was deliberate starvation used as a weapon by the Communist regime then in power, and that most of the relief raised by Live Aid and other efforts was diverted to line their pockets. Regardless, unlike most Westerners associated in one way or another with Ethiopia, Stranger fully immersed himself in the local culture, aside from his marriage. He learned the difficult Ethiopian language Amharic (one of several; he may have learned more than one, but he's not a self-promoter, so we are not told specifically). He worked as a translator, including at the challenging job of simultaneous translating for diplomatic exchanges. Stranger also for some years ran a business, a type of livery stable, offering horses—the Abyssinian ponies of the subtitle, which are culturally very important in Ethiopia—for treks across the northern Ethiopian landscape, often near the Blue Nile. He did not, it appears, convert to Ethiopian Orthodoxy, but he knows a lot about it, if for no other reason than his mother-in-law insisted on strict adherence to the fasting rules.

Throughout the book, it benefits the reader to refer outside it to basic data on Ethiopian history, because otherwise the casual references made to, for example, the Red Terror under the Communists (who overthrew Selassie in 1974 and were in turn overthrown in 1991) are hard to fully understand. This is not a burden; any looking into Ethiopian history is rewarding, because it's packed with fascinating episodes, much different than the monotonous, unimportant, and depressing history, or rather non-history, of most of Africa (other than North Africa, which is not really Africa in a historical sense). Not only the Aksumite Empire, but also, for example, the rule of Emperor Theodore (Tewodros II, 1818–1868), who united much of Ethiopia and then fought against the British, who were annoyed he had seized Westerners and imprisoned them. He lost the fight, but was instrumental in preventing Ethiopia from ever being colonized (though Stranger thinks he's overrated). Or an older episode Stranger mentions in passing, the “*Birtukans*,’ the descendants of the Portuguese musketeers who came to succour the kingdom of Abyssinia in the 16th century.” Those were adventurers under the command of Christopher da Gama, the son of Vasco da Gama, who came to help fight the Muslims trying (for the umpteenth failed time) to conquer Ethiopia, and stayed—although it is not clear to me whether there are any traceable descendants, because as with much in this book, Stranger only makes a passing reference and then moves on.

Beyond simple history knowledge, I'm interested in the Ethiopian personality, because I want to know what Ethiopia offers the world for the future. In Stranger's telling, the Ethiopians are ambitious and hard-working (maybe assisted by frequent consumption of the plant drug *qat*, a stimulant). At the same time, Ethiopian interpersonal relations are heavily influenced by the desire to keep up appearances, of worrying “what the neighbors will think.” Decorum and shame are therefore crucial elements of the society. I, of course, regard this as a societal strength; no worthwhile society has not featured very strict taboos and harsh stigma for those who violate them. What this creates, Stranger says, is a “country of individualist conformists.” This combination, this balance, is probably ideal for an achieving society.

Another strength is that the Ethiopians are very religious—most of them are Orthodox Christians. There are some Muslims, who like to exaggerate, as always, their numbers—though to be sure, with the

unpleasant neighbors Ethiopia has, Islam is relevant. But culturally, Ethiopia has been Christian for nearly two thousand years. Ethiopian Orthodoxy is a very strict form of Orthodoxy; frequent, rigid fasting is the norm. Fasting rules are one reason for the popularity of *injera*, the fermented flatbread Americans know from Ethiopian restaurants, which can be used as part of many different strictly vegan meals, thus meeting fasting requirements. (Me, I hate it—I've never enjoyed an Ethiopian restaurant, in part because I don't like communal eating. If I had wanted to eat what you ordered, I would have ordered it myself.)

Yet another strength is that relations among the sexes are not wildly imbalanced in the usual non-Western fashion. Stranger cites data showing that Ethiopia is the only non-Western nation where the nuclear, rather than extended, family is the norm. The result of this is a higher status for women (not that women can't also have high status in a society with extended families, but it is less automatic). As one of Stranger's interlocutors, an urbanized female architect (whose son unfortunately aspires to be a "global citizen") says, "I would say that paradoxically, women are independent in Ethiopia, because . . . men allow it! There is a strong respect for women from Ethiopian men." Propagandized modern Westerners may find this truth strange, but the reality is balanced, partnership-centered relations among the sexes have been the standard throughout all Christian cultures, and generally, the more Christian, the more true it is. (Westerners who watch ludicrous movies like Ridley Scott's *The Last Duel*, and from that receive a totally false impression of historic Western relations between the sexes, designed as a weapon for use by today's Left, unfortunately don't understand this at all.) Moreover, this proper balance between the sexes is perhaps particularly true in Orthodox cultures, where strong masculinity and high, but practical, respect for women are both demanded theologically and woven into the fabric of the religion.

OK, so Ethiopia is culturally pretty promising as a future power. It also has the potential muscle. Ethiopia is two-and-a-half times the size of France, and has the second-highest population in Africa (nearly 120 million, accounting for ten percent of the African continent's entire population). That population is rapidly growing, and more than half are under age twenty-five, which means a society that is dynamic and masculine, not sclerotic, safety-focused, and hyper-feminized in the

manner of aging Western societies. Properly channeled, all this is a recipe for civilizational success.

What's about the economic strength of Ethiopia? Outside the West, more people often just means more poverty. The Great Divergence, where some countries of the world sped ahead as others were left behind, has always been a purely Western phenomenon—achieved, after some centuries, by a few non-Western countries that adopted Western ideas and technology. Can Ethiopia break free of the lassitude in which most of the world has always been mired by inferior cultures and raw material? Well, early returns are good. As is clear from Stranger's narration of his own experience, Ethiopia has experienced massive growth in the past twenty years. "[Ethiopia] has changed more in twenty years than in twenty centuries." This is not cost-free; poverty remains high in absolute numbers, and Stranger clearly conveys a sense of loss, of the "old" Ethiopia as it modernizes. The GDP of Ethiopia has increased fifteen- to twenty-fold in the past twenty years. As with any rapidly-developing country, however, the old co-exists with the new. Eighty percent of the population still works the land (suggesting that further accelerated growth is possible, even likely). And, crucially, the economic advancement of Ethiopia seems to have torn less at the social fabric than one might think. Stranger says there is still a good deal of social cohesion, including in urban areas, in large part due to the Ethiopian practice of social pressure—in this case, to join and maintain intermediary institutions, such as neighborhood organizations of various types. Again, this is promising.

Ethiopia's rapid industrialization isn't internally generated, in the way the industrialization of the West was. It is largely the result of being a major beneficiary of the Chinese Belt and Road program. Among many other projects, Ethiopia has recently, with Chinese money, inaugurated the largest hydroelectric dam in Africa (the Grand Renaissance dam, near the border with Sudan). There is also development aid from the West, but that's mostly of negative value, with stupid goals set by stupid people such as aiming to make Ethiopia a "Start-Up Nation" and enshrining carbon neutrality as the primary aim of development, with the secondary aim of turning as many Ethiopian girls into aggressively consuming, barren wine aunts as possible. You will not be surprised that the odious Gates Foundation, global purveyor of forced abortion,

coerced birth control, and killer vaccines, whose midwit estrogen-drenched founder keeps popping up in our newsfeeds displaying his ever-swelling potbelly, is a big presence in Ethiopia. Thus any actual advancement in Ethiopia isn't coming from the West, but from Ethiopian hard work and Chinese money, though China doesn't make investments out of the goodness of the Chinese heart, and totally aside from China, Stranger says choking bureaucracy is a big problem (not corrupt, precisely, but with enormous red tape and numerous placeholder jobs), suggesting again that this development is not the type of fiercely efficient, internally-driven development that made the West. Moreover, it is a fair question whether all these massive changes will simply make Ethiopia another pathetic country, addicted to cheap Chinese consumer goods while it abandons what makes it strong—religion, national pride, and children. That's probably the goal of the Chinese; it's certainly the goal of the Gates Foundation.

Still, so far, it seems Ethiopia bids fair to play a big role in the future. But not so fast—the problem Ethiopia faces for its future (other than day-to-day challenges that face any rapidly-growing country) is that it's far from unified. Multiple ethnic groupings and languages coexist; like so many countries on the continent, Ethiopia is very heterogeneous, unlike the Western cultures who came to dominate the world before they fell from glory. In Ethiopia, though it is opaque to most foreigners, who is Omoro, Amhara, Tigrayan, or some other ethnicity or tribe, matters more than anything else. Not that these are neatly-divisible groupings; Stranger describes Ethiopia as largely consisting of “groupings of cultures and languages closely interwoven with each other.” But it doesn't matter; the point is that outsized glory is only available to a high-trust society, and a diverse society is by definition not as high trust as a non-diverse society. And to emphasize the point, in the year since Stranger wrote *A Gallop in Ethiopia* (or rather beginning just as he finished it), a fresh civil war has riven Ethiopia, a complicated set of events focusing on Tigray, a northern province adjacent to Eritrea, whose people until recently dominated the central government, but do so no longer. The details don't matter for my purposes; my point is that if a new Kaleb, lord of Aksum, showed up today he'd not be able to herd all these cats to conquer, say, Yemen or Saudi Arabia, as desirable as it would be for Christians to do so.

Maybe this is too pessimistic; to really make a sound judgment, I'd have to learn a lot more about Ethiopia. I may be mostly wrong about this entire analysis. I'm not sure how one would go about learning more in a reliable fashion. Certainly, listening to Westernized Ethiopians on social media, as Americans do for most countries, would be a very bad way, because those people almost always hate their own country and are eager to chase the West down the road to perdition. Reading Western history and analytical books older than thirty or forty years might help. You can't read more recent books by Westerners (at least by those who, unlike *Stranger*, have only passing familiarity with Ethiopian culture); any such are nearly certain to be mendacious globohomo propaganda. (For example, the *Economist* magazine offered a short documentary on Ethiopia a few years back. It told us nothing, merely aggressively propagandizing for "girls learning to code," "green energy" and similarly worthless matters.) And even a book written by an Ethiopian is unlikely to be much better. Leaving aside bias due to internal conflicts, which would likely be invisible to an outsider, it would almost certainly be written by one of the elites trying to become globalized and to impress his global friends and perceived superiors, looking to London or Dubai as his model, rather than celebrating what Ethiopia is and can become, without trying to become like the West (or the Chinese, for that matter).

In sum, despite the many apparent advantages of its civilization relative to the West, it seems very unlikely Ethiopia will return to real prominence on the world stage. No nation torn by ethnic conflict is going to raise up a new empire; the only peoples that have ever done so are homogenous, at least at their beginnings. You can, with some difficulty and not forever, run a multi-ethnic empire, but you can't build an empire from a multi-ethnic basis. You need ethnic (and cultural) near-total homogeneity. Supporting this conclusion, and suggesting *Stranger* agrees, at least up to a point, the epilogue for the book, written pseudonymously by someone we are told is a famous academic expert on Ethiopia, is very pessimistic about Ethiopia's future, also citing ethnic conflict, describing it as a "circular firing squad." I wish the Ethiopians the best, and I suspect they will do fine, but I sadly conclude that they will not likely form an important part of the future in the lands that currently constitute the West.