

Ethiopia

Before the Italian Conquest

By KARL LOEB

THE people of Addis Ababa used to say, before the conquest of Ethiopia by Italy, that Ras Haylou would leave orders to be buried with one of his hands extended out of his grave to collect taxes. He was the governor of Gojjam, reputedly the richest province of that African country. He was a supposed possessor of hundreds of golden Swiss watches, dozens of automobiles, of a fine highway connecting his provincial palace with another house¹ belonging to him, of thousands of slaves, and of other unconnected incongruities.

When he was deposed or died (I do not exactly remember which it was), scores of thousands of spoiled goatskins and hides and other raw materials of that province, all of them payments of taxes, were found stored up in his palatial residence. A host of lieutenants had farmed the taxes and provided for their own needs. Chopped-off hands and flogged backs were the reward for inability to give more in taxation than the taxed possessed.

Labor was performed for the lord at his whim. Ras Haylou initiated public works for his own benefit, to be abandoned when he had no further use for them. White people, both those who were invited to supervise the execution of these projects and those who talked the Ras into others, finally left the province in disgust.

Haylou was one of the most powerful political men in Ethiopia, one of the main adversaries of Haile Selassie, the present re-imposed Emperor of Ethiopia.

When I visited Ethiopia, before the Italian conquest, there were export and import duties, Imperial and provincial levies. All the so-called highways of the country were being filled with octroi stations. An Imperial palace was built and finished one year before the conquest, costing more than one million Maria Theresa dollars. The foundation of a university was projected, and a Maginot line was talked of. Thousands of lepers and others afflicted with contagious diseases were allowed to beg their way to wealth (relative to Ethiopian conditions). They were not restricted, because their freedom could not be infringed upon. Tens of thousands of beggar monks of both sexes were fostered by the Church.

The world-wide industrial crisis slowed exportation, created hatred of the white man. But the advantages that the white man had brought to the country allayed the hatred. The railroad, for instance, imported certain goods and customs that were "musts." To abandon or not to abandon all these advantages was the question in the mind of the natives. Since so few natives were as yet ready to take over commerce, would it perhaps be better to tolerate the crisis-bearers? There would

have been a decision one way or another, had not the Italians stepped in to solve the problem in their own way.

Was it only the crisis that caused all the misfortune of the land? The "good earth" of Ethiopia lay waste because the land belonged to a few dozens of men. The people existed for centuries on a strict minimum because the produce did not belong to them. The Imperial government levied more and more taxes in addition to those collected in the provinces. Those people living farthest from Addis Ababa, the principal market and railroad terminal, could no longer bring their goods to the city. The market shrunk and it was projected to extend the railroad into the interior. Addis Ababa was partly a natural market and partly one by artificial restriction. The railroad covered several hundreds of miles of the country and another market was allowed only two-thirds of the way from Addis Ababa. Caravans could have reached the railroad at various points and trade would have benefited by both the shorter inland and railroad travel. At the same time, more and more underpaid employees of the Addis Ababa government were sent to the interior to collect more taxes at the source. These people were reluctant to remit promptly—not all were thieves—because their salaries were too small even for the primitive expenses of a native. A number of young people trained abroad, some at the expense of the government, were not given employment that they and the country so badly needed.

Emperor Menelik II, barbarian but understanding Western civilization, initiated the modernization of Ethiopia. Haile Selassie, cultured but not understanding Western civilization, exposed to destruction these beginnings.

Were the white people the cause of this decay? To a large degree, yes.

The country had remained in primitive backwardness for centuries, and all of a sudden, a new pace was set. Hides, skins, wax, coffee, etc., were exported, cotton goods and sewing machines replaced home weaving, corrugated iron-sheets improved housing, etc. Some of the native brokers acquired undreamed of amounts of money, others made relatively high wages with white people. They became able to buy soil in Addis Ababa—they were able to wrest a small part of the land from the few monopolists. They learned very well how to deal with the increment of land values (one of them taught me). They built houses, rented them to Europeans. Compared to the remainder of the cities of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa was enlarged marvelously both in size and in the quality of its houses. Some of the streets built before the coronation of Haile Selassie were considered miracles of endurance and of solidity, monuments to the ability of the few white engineers living there. To be sure Addis Ababa was no model city, but its advance over that which existed before and at the same time in Ethiopia was tremendous.

Even during the crisis, or rather because of the crisis, build-

ing went on. So did taxation. The Negus had among others an American financial advisor who was very much liked by the natives connected with the government. There were two thousand white people who did not see why the country was decaying. Nor did I. I knew all those facts, but their relation was as unknown to me as the word "economics." In addition to the wealth extorted by the monopolists, the heavy taxation by the provincial governor and his tax farmers, by the Imperial government, road tolls, export duties, import duties, have all but destroyed the wealth and commerce of Ethiopia.

May I suggest that similar conditions are responsible for a state of decay in all of Africa? The natives are eager to produce wealth and engage in trade, even if they tackle their problems differently from us. Africa wants and needs freedom, but does not know how to secure it.

Emperor Haile Selassie has a fine library and is a lover of books. I propose that he be sent a selection of Henry George's works.