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The Man In the Rolls Royce



By Abdulkadir N. Said

I had been in the capital city only a few weeks and was strolling along one of the main avenues, which, like most public places in the kingdom, was named for the absolute monarch who ruled it. All of a sudden, two policemen on motorcycles roared past as if pursuing or being pursued by something devilish. A mere block away, the two-wheeled machines came to a screeching halt in the middle of a busy intersection. It was around three o'clock in the afternoon. Without getting off their machines, the policemen signaled cars from all directions to halt. People lined both sides of the avenue. Quietly, a shiny Rolls Royce approached from a distance.

"It's him . . . It's him," shouted a couple standing not far from me. I knew—perhaps by intuition—who was coming and moved closer to the curb to get a better look at the important passenger as the Rolls Royce swished past. The lone figure in the back seat waved at "his" subjects.

An African potentate in the Twentieth Century—a man who lived by the rule of centuries past. Motorists got out of their cars to pay homage by stooping, so did the pedestrians. It was as if God himself had descended to earth and was cruising past.

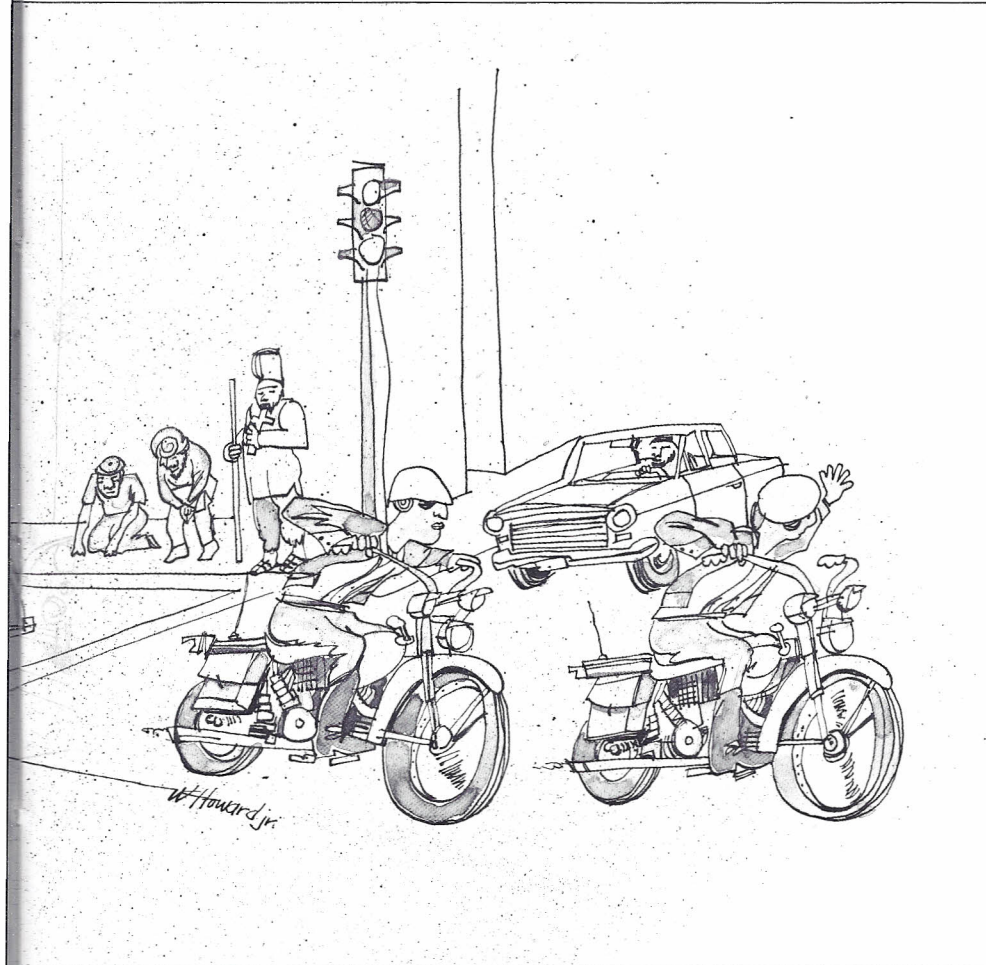
I paid my respect by waving the right hand. I saw some people along the avenue actually kneel low and kiss the ground. Such was the mysticism surrounding the passenger in the Rolls Royce. I couldn't help but feel amused at the seemingly strange scene. Except for photographs, I've never seen the man in person. Was I rude for not stooping? Not really. Unlike my Christian Ethiopian brethren, my Islamic faith permitted no worshipping of another human being.

Who was this man? "Haile Selassie, I, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, King of Kings, *Elect of God*, Emperor of Ethiopia."

Until a year ago when a band of daring military men rendered him powerless by abolishing his court and locking up the

venal men who served him—some of whom were later executed—Haile Selassie ruled Ethiopia and its people for more than 50 years without much overt opposition. It was difficult at times to envision Ethiopia without him. For his long reign was sustained by the bond between the monarchy, the Church and the class of nobility. With the power and wealth concentrated in a few hands, orderly transition from a feudal estate to a progressive society was unthinkable in Ethiopia. Hence the military coup. Haile Selassie (once a great and respected leader, perhaps outlived his usefulness) died in obscurity on the eve of the first anniversary of his overthrow.

Growing up in Ethiopia under a feudal dictatorship carries with it memories of a backward system replete with corruption, political repression, subservience to the ruling class, and loss of individual liberty. Ironically, life in such a miserable system was made to appear easy through a systematic conditioning of the populace (in the name of tradition) to pledge loyalty to



the monarch and the ruling class. Under these circumstances, teachers in state-run schools led their pupils in daily prayers for the longevity of the monarch. As a child, I too willingly participated in this futile practice. That was many years back. It all seemed sane then. In later years I continued to offer prayers in private, not for Haile Selassie's longevity but for freedom from the "traditional" shackles of feudalism.

Having left Ethiopia in the early Sixties and having been in America for nearly ten years, I have become accustomed to the inevitable question most Americans ask when meeting a foreigner for the first time—particularly us from the motherland, Africa. The question is: "When are you going back home?" In every instance I would answer: "Eventually." I refrain from being specific because, to me, home means more than one geographic location. Both my parents are from Somalia (that's next door to Ethiopia and Kenya) which entitles me to claim it as a home.

Kenya, another home. But I grew up in Ethiopia and would still be there were it not for the fact that the dictatorship didn't set well with me. Therefore, home is Somalia. And Kenya. And Ethiopia. I now reside in the United States. Add this to the list. As you can see, home for me can be many places. What is important is that I am an African and like my ancestors I too am adventurous and do move around from place to place with my identity intact.

I left Ethiopia not to return until the feudal dictatorship gave way to an open and progressive system of government. Simply stated, this meant Ethiopia without an absolute monarch or one-man rule. You might say I was engaged in wishful thinking. Ethiopia without a monarch? "You are crazy," was the reaction of an intimate friend. "Not in our life time." But my mind was made up. I was leaving—to stay out. Being a Somali (definitely not a member of the ruling class) and of the Islamic faith (definitely not the state religion) left me with two alternatives: To remain in Ethiopia and endure political repression

and other bias. To move to safer grounds. I opted for the later course. Had Kenya been a free country, probably I would have gone there. Mind you, this is 1961 before the British gave up their political hold. Instead, I elected Somalia, which regained its independence (political independence) a year earlier.

I distinctly recall the day I left Addis Ababa. It was cold and raining. The African sun was barely visible through the heavy clouds and the tall eucalyptus trees that grace the city. It was one of those days suited to be spent in bed with a loved one. The weekend before, I had a few drinks with some of my co-workers at the state-run English daily, *The Ethiopian Herald*. I was one of four sub-editors (assistant editors) in training. My colleagues had knowledge of my plan to leave the city. But little did they suspect that I was headed for Somalia, instead of Asmara, the capital of Eritrea. Asmara in those days was a peaceful place; the independence movement you read about frequently in American papers was a year

16 away. Was I being deceitful for convincing my colleagues that a lucrative position awaited me in Asmara? I think not.

"I'll keep you posted after my arrival in Asmara," I remember saying to them. They must have believed me because there was nothing to suggest otherwise. With every third person suspected of being in the pay of the police, I was not about to foolishly reveal my destination. At that time, Somalia and Ethiopia were in the midst of a lingering dispute involving territorial rights. (To this date, the dispute continues. Even after my arrival in Somalia I was hesitant to write my colleagues at the paper for fear that my communication might get them in hot water).

During the course of the conversation, my colleagues and I reminisced our apprenticeship days at the paper, barely two years earlier—under the supervision of two Black editors from the United States. We talked about the problems of working for a state-run medium. We had dreams of someday studying abroad, England or America. The mood was somber. We were apprehensive to discuss politics. In view of the turmoil in the capital city in those days, it was dangerous to talk politics. The city was returning to normalcy following an abortive military coup against Haile Selassie two months earlier. The wise word, therefore, was caution. CAUTION!! The coup was engineered by the prestigious troops of Haile Selassie, the Imperial Body Guard, with the aid of army, police and air force officers. It lasted no more than one week. But the flame of revolution that took life at that time (December 1960) led to the demise of the monarchy in mid-1974.

I was in Addis Ababa during that coup. There was nothing to suggest a coup was in the making. But again, one had to be among the plotters to know otherwise. The city was calm and in control. The Emperor had left a few days earlier for a visit to countries in South America. I remember well. The night of the coup it was my turn to be at the printing press as night editor. I recall waiting for a late wire

printing plant until 2 a.m. The driver of the VW bus at my disposal dropped me off at my place 30 minutes later. Everything along the route appeared quiet as usual. It was rather cold. The temperature must have been around 40 degrees. I was cold and hungry, with no prospect of food until breakfast. Needless to say, I went to sleep with an empty stomach and awoke around 9 o'clock. Relaxed but still hungry. I washed up in a haste (didn't have much to shave in those days) and got ready to face the world and enjoy a day off. I walked briskly to a nearby coffee shop. It was 10 o'clock, three hours before a luncheon date with a friend. After breakfast, I walked for about a mile through the business district to pick a copy of the morning paper from the office. On my way, I passed by the city's main bank and almost didn't notice the soldiers. They were in battle uniform and armed with small machine guns. The bank's main door was closed. This was unusual, but I continued to walk to the corner. I stopped. I hesitated for a moment. Then I turned back, mainly to satisfy my curiosity. I was attempting to walk toward the bank—up the steps to the large door—to make sure if indeed the bank was closed when one of the soldiers motioned me to step back. "Move on. The bank is closed," the soldier said in a stern voice. Bank robberies were unheard of in those days; it was a mystery to me why the bank was not open. I left and soon came upon more soldiers with guns outside a government office building not far from the bank.

This time I was afraid to ask. But the feeling that something was amiss intensified in my mind. An American-made jeep carrying several armed soldiers crossed an intersection. I wondered where the jeep was headed. The thought of a plot against Haile Selassie's throne was so unreal I quickly dismissed the idea. Yet I couldn't help but feel apprehensive. You know the feeling one gets inside when things aren't quite right.

I passed by several stores and restaurants. Business was as usual. As I had

anticipated, there were soldiers outside the complex of buildings that housed the state-run radio station, the administrative headquarters of the Ministry of Information, and the newspaper's editorial office. No attempt was made to stop me as I walked nonchalantly through the main door and into the lobby.

The atmosphere inside the office was unusually tense with staff members doing their assignments quietly. It was apparent the reporters and editors on duty had sensed the abnormality of the situation. What was wrong? Nobody had the answer. The presence of armed troops outside was a mystery to them. The whole affair was inexplicable.

Moments before I was to leave the office, word came from the director general of the Ministry of Information instructing the staff to continue normal operation, and to await a major announcement later in the day. The staff was quick to notice the instruction came from the number two man. Ordinarily it would have come from the minister—assistant minister rather— of information. Haile Selassie kept the information minister's portfolio and saw no need to name anyone to the post.

"Where is Amedemichael today?" Someone inquired. "Who cares." I gestured jokingly but mindful of the fact that the staff knew I cared very little for Amedemichael. "Amedemichael is at the Palace with 13 other government ministers," one of the editors said. We all looked at the editor wanting more information. It wasn't forthcoming. It was not unusual for Amedemichael to spend most of his time at the Palace conferring with Haile Selassie, whom he served as assistant minister of information. But this time it was different. Haile Selassie was out of the country.

"I know why . . . I know why," shouted an excited reporter. "What? Tell us," the others in the room shouted. The reporter cleared his throat and said: "The Queen is dead." Nobody was moved by the revelation. "The Queen had been ailing for



months; you all know it," the reporter continued—looking at us straight in the eyes as if to seek approval. No one challenged the reporter's thesis because the possibility of the ailing Queen dying was more likely than a coup against the monarchy. But deep inside, most of us in the room probably knew there was more to the strange situation than the passing of an ailing Queen. 17

I left the office around noon and walked back to the city plaza to await what was to come. The place was crowded as usual. Small groups of people huddled outside restaurants and shops listening to martial music on portable radios. Suddenly the monotonous music stopped. The crowd grew silent. The voice of an announcer boomed over the airwaves to deliver the message that everyone in the empire had been waiting for. And when it came, it was a shocker. Bingo! Coup d'état against Haile Selassie. In a few seconds the impact of the announcement hit the crowd like a fiery storm. Total confusion. But nobody left. Instead, the crowd moved closer to the radio. "Freedom. Down with monarchy," shouted a man in the crowd.

A new voice came on the radio. "I'm Crown Prince Asfaw Wossen," it said. There was silence in the crowd. Unbelievable as it seemed, the speaker was—without a doubt—the Crown Prince of Ethiopia, eldest son of the Emperor and heir to the throne. Speaking in a deep but controlled voice, the Crown Prince announced the coup. He defined it as a necessary instrument of change, for political and social reform. He made a pledge for an open society and an end to his father's repressive regime. Indeed, this came as an unexpected surprise because no one had envisioned a coup let alone one which included a member of the royal family.

"I don't believe this. I don't believe Asfaw Wossan is saying all this willingly," said an Ethiopian skeptic, one of the loyal subjects of the monarch. Even face-to-face with a real but new situation, the skeptic was not convinced. 4

18 The day's events were surrounded with mystery. Was the Crown Prince one of the plotters? Or was he speaking under the threat of a gun. A willing or reluctant collaborator? The public didn't know. But his broadcast message on behalf of the revolution gave legitimacy to the coup. The pledge of a new social order, free from corruption and political persecution, by a member of the royal family was in itself a revolutionary event without parallel in Ethiopia.

As I stood there listening to the radio, I envisioned a better day for Ethiopia and for its people—the masses who have endured much hardship for so long. I could not help but recall what I read about a similar situation that occurred in Egypt a few years back. Will the military men who engineered the coup succeed in deposing Haile Selassie as was done to King Farouk by officers of his own army? This question lingered in my mind as I listened to the radio, completely forgetting the luncheon date I had with a friend.

All afternoon the radio broadcast more revolutionary messages from the new leaders. Series of patriotic poems was recited by scores of hitherto unheard of or unpopular poets, who, by act of the revolution regained the freedom of speech which was denied them under the autocratic regime of Haile Selassie. Rousing speeches condemning the old regime were broadcast one after another. Praise for the revolution and its heroes was in abundance. The stage was set, so it seemed, for a quick transition of power, despite the air of uncertainty.

For the first time ever, students of the Haile Selassie 1st University marched through the streets of the Capital City carrying banners with messages of support for the revolution; punishment for members of the old regime. Haile Selassie's long reign was depicted as the epitome of all that was corrupt in the country. Indeed, the institution of monarchy came under attack.

Perhaps the leaders of the 1960 revolution underestimated the power of the



monarch. Perhaps they failed to see the absence of a true cohesion between the various branches of the armed forces. For, even at his absence, Haile Selassie wielded certain mystical powers over his troops. Many within the ranks of the armed forces remained loyal to him while paying lip service to the revolution. In the end, this "blind" loyalty became a major factor which contributed to the fall of the 1960 revolution.

It was the third or fourth day of the short-lived revolution when something apparently went wrong. News of a major rift between opposing units of the armed forces circulated the city. It was said certain powerful army generals have withdrawn support at the last minute when they learned the emperor was on his way back, and were readying for a confrontation with the Imperial Body Guard. The pro-monarchy forces' stance was enhanced by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, whose leaders publicly reaffirmed this notion: That Haile Selassie was the one chosen by God to rule over Ethiopia. An emissary of God? Yes, according to the belief of a majority of tradition-bound Ethiopians.

Within days the rift between opposing forces emerged into the open. The fighting started—in the streets of the city, in the valleys and mountains of the countryside. Sporadic gunfire erupted in the center of Addis Ababa and continued for more than three days, particularly in the vicinity of the Emperor's Palace. Needless to say, the safety of the entire inhabitants of the capital city was endangered. People were scared out of their wits. When it all ended, hundreds were dead. The victims included some civilians caught in the cross fire. The 14 government ministers who were held at the Palace perished, along with some key members of the coup.

General Mangistu Neway, head of the Imperial Body Guard, fled to the countryside with the remainder of his troops and his younger brother. Rumor had it that the general's American-educated brother was

the one who masterminded the whole operation. Several weeks later, the general was captured after he was wounded in a battle. His brother and two other key men were killed during the same engagement with loyalist troops. (After the general recovered from his wounds, he was tried, found guilty, and executed).

The fallen bodies of the defeated revolutionaries were transported to the city and put on public display—perhaps as a warning to those with secret plans to challenge the power of the throne. It was a gruesome sight. And a tragic end for the leaders of an almost-successful revolution. But again, tragedy and bloodshed have always kept company with revolution.

"I wonder what he's thinking now," a sorrowful spectator was heard saying after he closely examined the bloody body of the general's brother—hung lifeless with a rope around a broken neck.

Soon after, Haile Selassie returned from overseas. First stop, Asmara. And a few days later, Addis Ababa, to reclaim a tarnished throne. The rounding up of university students and other Ethiopians considered to be "subversives" followed. It seemed—at least on the surface—that peace had been restored to the empire. But behind the scenes, at home and abroad, a quiet campaign to do away with the monarchy had begun. And Ethiopia had been threading the path of revolution ever since that ill-fated coup of 1960. The decisive point was reached in 1974. Only this time it was executed gradually and methodically . . . successfully. For better or for worse, Ethiopia no longer remains the domain of one man or one family.

To many Black Americans, especially members of the Old Guard who were mystified by Haile Selassie's dramatic and historic appeal to the old League of Nations when Italy invaded Ethiopia, their esteem for the man is still there. Perhaps rightly so, but only if viewed in its proper context. One must not forget that Ethiopia as a country is more than the aura of

mysticism that surrounded its deposed monarch. 19

What lies ahead for Ethiopia? Only time will tell. But having lived in Ethiopia under the old system, I know of no other system that can be worse. □

