

IZABELA ORŁOWSKA

**Re-imagining Empire: the Coronation of Yohannis IV
as an Expression of Historical Memory**

Abstract

In this paper I investigate how the historical memory the Ethiopian Empire was used to further the task of imperial reconstruction and form an ideological underpinning for the monarchy of Yohannis IV. I utilize hitherto unexplored Ethiopian chronicles that provide new insights into the dynamics of late nineteenth-century Ethiopian kingship. I pay particular attention to Yohannis's coronation ceremony in 1872 as an example of the mobilization of imperial ideology. Attention is drawn to the fact that Yohannis mobilized a range of historic symbols derived from the glorious past of the Ethiopian monarchy and the church. His policy was a response to a need for new ideology adapted to the challenges of the late 19th century. It was re-imagined from the memory of what was believed to be ancient customs. The pageantry of the Axumite ritual displayed symbols, slogans and ideas of the past that Yohannis mobilized to legitimize his imperial project.

This paper is a part of a bigger project on the reconstruction of the Ethiopian monarchy during reign of emperor Yohannis IV (1872–1889). It addresses three main questions. First, where did Yohannis look for ideological inspiration? Second, who did he attempt to associate himself with in order to further the task of imperial reconstruction? Third, what was his understanding of the Ethiopian monarchy? Ethiopian sources are crucial in answering these questions. The chronicles give us the best indication of how Ethiopian kingship was understood at the time as well as the general political culture of the period. I will pay particular attention to the coronation ceremony of Yohannis in 1872, as an especially valuable and richly documented example of the mobilization of imperial ideology.

It is still unclear exactly how the reconstruction of the Ethiopian empire and the revival of imperial power came about after the *Zemene Mesafint* (1784–1855), a period marked by the lack of imperial authority and a shift in power in favour of the nobility (*mekwannint*, *mesafint*). The period was also characterised by a crisis in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, whose ideology was fundamental to the Solomonic State. The Church was divided by the rise of sectarian controversies focused on the nature of Christ, further encouraging regionalism due to their significant regional dimension.

Little is known about the internal dynamics of the process of re-establishing imperial authority. The secondary literature on the period tends to concentrate on Ethiopia's relations with Europe. The only existing monograph on the reign of Yohannis IV, by Zewde Gabre-Sellase, although very detailed, treats the topic from the point of view of diplomacy and foreign threats.¹ The question of how this African government reconstructed and reinvented itself after more than a century of decline in imperial authority is still not fully answered. The deficiencies of the existing literature may be a result of the heavy reliance on the part of modern historians on external European sources. These highlight the reigns of Tewodros (1855–68), who re-introduced the concept of strong imperial power, and Menelik (1889–1913) the successor of Yohannis. Shedding light on the reign of Yohannis IV, the second of the monarchs who presided over the period widely known as marking the beginning of modern Ethiopian monarchy, should contribute to our understanding of this period. To this end I focus here on chronicles commemorating the reign of Yohannis IV.

In contrast with his predecessor, Tewodros II, Yohannis utilised the Orthodox Church to further his project of the reconstruction of the Ethiopian monarchy. This is reflected in the reform of doctrine finalised at the Council of Boru Meda (1878) and the emphasis on religious uniformity within the Church. Yohannis also enjoyed greater success than his predecessor in dealing with the regional nobility, by allowing the ruling class (*mekwannint*) their traditional right to take part in the ruling process. Scholars have neglected this part of Yohannis' internal policy, focusing instead on his supposed religious intolerance.²

Yohannis' emphasis on the Church brings us to the issue of its role during his reign. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church facilitated the revival and mobilisation of national ideology that in turn underpinned imperial propaganda. By national ideology I mean the common beliefs embodied in the national epic, the *Kibre Negest*, which legitimised Ethiopia, its rulers and people by making them the successors of ancient Israel and the Jews. A replica of the Ark of the Covenant, a *tabot*, is present in every Orthodox church in Ethiopia and serves as a powerful reminder of the special status of the Ethiopians as a chosen nation. The Ethiopian ethos recorded in the *Kibre Negest* and regulated by the law code of the *Fithe Negest* provides a rich stock of symbols and images for authority.

¹ Zewde Gabre-Sellase, *Yohannes IV of Ethiopia: A Political Biography*, Oxford 1975.

² Erlich Haggai, *Ethiopia and the Middle East*, London 1994, p. 62; Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1885–1991*, Addis Ababa 2002, p. 48.

These are further reinforced by the preaching of the Church, whose role was crucial in disseminating the message of submission to the rulers appointed by God.

I want to draw attention to the fact that Yohannis mobilized a range of historic symbols derived from the glorious past of the Ethiopian monarchy in order to justify and legitimise the return to strong imperial power. Just as European colonial rulers drew on the invented symbols of 'imperial monarchy' in order to establish hegemony over Asian and African subjects, so too did this indigenous African emperor.³ The decline of imperial authority resulted in a need to legitimise the basis for imperial authority on the part of those attempting to seize the throne in the late nineteenth century. A need arose for a new reinvented ideology, adapted to the new circumstances and challenges but still drawing heavily on what was believed to be an ancient custom of the *abatoche negestat*.⁴ Hence, Yohannis sought legitimacy for his imperial authority by reference to the imperial past and the ideology that had supported it.

Early correspondence reveals how cautious Yohannis was, still as Dejazmach Kassa, with assuming titles expressing imperial power. As an independent ruler of a big area (present-day Eritrea and Tigray), Kassa used a non-royal title of *dejazmach*, and the only claim to his superiority was expressed by the slogan *ri'ise mekwannint ze-Ityopya* – 'head of the nobles of Ethiopia'. Gradually, he added on *siyume Igziabhér* – 'elect of God' in order to draw on the belief that power is given from God and emphasise his selection. In 1871, *Dejazmach* Kassa began styling himself *niguse Tsiyon* – 'king of Zion', but was still surprisingly careful with assuming the imperial title of *niguse negest* – 'king of kings', unlike his rivals for the imperial crown, *Wagshum*⁵ Gobeze of Lasta and Menelik of Shewa. At the time there was no *abun*⁶ in Ethiopia, yet Gobeze, in an attempt to legitimise his rule, was crowned by an Ethiopian *ichege*⁷, a practice contrary to Ethiopian tradition. Despite sending missions to the Patriarch of Alexandria he was unable to obtain the service of the *abun*, a Coptic bishop, traditionally the head of Ethiopian clergy. Nevertheless, *Wagshum* Gobeze was crowned Tekle Giyorgis II. Menelik, who was also unable to acquire the *abun*, did not even trouble himself with a coronation. He simply began using a seal with the imperial title of *niguse negest* – 'king of kings'.⁸

Dejazmach Kassa tried hard to obtain the service of the Egyptian *abun* and sent several missions to the authorities in Alexandria. The revenue for this purpose was col-

³ *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. E. Hobsbawm & T. Ranger, Cambridge 1992.

⁴ Lit. "fathers the kings", which means 'our ancestors the kings', a phrase very often used when referring to ancient kings.

⁵ *Wagshum*: title of the hereditary chief of the provinces of Wag and Lasta.

⁶ *Abun*: Coptic bishop, the head of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Although his real power was rather limited, only he had the right to ordain Ethiopian clergy and conduct a coronation ceremony for an emperor.

⁷ *Ichege*: Abbot of the monastery of Debre Libanos, head of monastic Order of Tekle Haymanot, who enjoyed considerable political as well as religious influence.

⁸ *Internal Rivalries and Foreign Threats 1869–1879*, ed. Sven Rubenson, (Acta Aethiopica, 3), Addis Ababa 2000, pp. 110–111.

lected through additional taxation of his subjects.⁹ His coronation by the Coptic *abun* was therefore a significant achievement and a crucial point in the process of legitimising his rule. The *Chronicle of Debre Birhan Sillasé*¹⁰ emphasises the propriety of the ceremony of enthronement by stressing the involvement of the *abun*, which was the requirement of Ethiopian law.

“But this Yohannis, king of peace and love was crowned by archbishop Atnatewos, by the will of the Trinity, the creator of Heaven and Earth. There was a great love and happiness gathered in Debre Tsiyon [church in Aksum], because there was Atnatewos, archbishop, the father of all other fathers...”¹¹

The text also provides clues as to why the Aksumite ceremony should be regarded essential for the Ethiopian ruler. “Ethiopia was blessed by the placing of Tsiyon here. Many rulers were crowned by Tsiyon, from Ibne Hakim [Menelik I] to our king Yohannis”.¹² The text also strongly emphasises that the coronation of Yohannis took place according to the traditional rite practised by the ancient Aksumites:

“Yohannis king of Tsiyon, king of kings, was crowned according to the order (law) of his fathers the kings Abreha, Atsbeha and Gebre Mesqel on Sunday, 13 Tir, the year of John, 5500 year of the world, 1864 *Amete Mihret*, 7364 after the creation of the world [corresponding to 21 Jan. 1872].¹³

“This Yohannis became a king with accordance of the rules of the books, rules of the monks and advice of the *mikre liqawint*. The council agreed to make him a king according to the rules of his wise fathers, the kings”.¹⁴

The issue of the antiquity of this custom believed to be practised by the Aksumite kings, together with the involvement of the *abun* is repeatedly stressed throughout the account and its aim quite clearly is to emphasise the legitimacy of enthronement of Yohannis.

The *Debre Birhan Sillasé Chronicle* addresses the issue of duality of the process of becoming emperor, the elect of God. An emperor, as the Earthly king of Tsiyon, a representative of God on Earth, was meant to receive his royal mystique through the

⁹ George Douin, *L'Empire Africain, III: Histoire du règne du Khédive Ismail*, Caire 1941, pp. 301–304.

¹⁰ Unpublished manuscript, chronicle of Yohannis IV from the church of Debre Birhan Sillasé in Adwa. It is a hitherto unexplored Gi'iz text kept in the *iqā bēt* of the church. In August 2002 the local priests allowed me access to it. It consists of 102 pages with two columns on each page. Bairu Tafla was aware of its existence in early 1970s. He then conducted a number of interviews with local clergy on the basis of which he claims that this chronicle was written/compiled by a team of three ecclesiastics: Liqe Merawī Tekle Istifanos, the chief scribe of emperor Yohannis IV, Melake Birhanat Birhanu, a native of Begemdir and at the time the head of the church in question and the Nibure id Ūyasu, the head of the Maryam Tsiyon church in Axum. They are said to have composed the text shortly after the coronation of Yohannis in January 1872; (hereafter DBS).

¹¹ DBS f. 84 b.

¹² DBS f. 71b.

¹³ *A Chronicle of Emperor Yohannes IV (1872–89)*, ed. Bairu Tafla, (ÄthForsch, 1), Wiesbaden 1977, pp. 127–129; see also DBS f. 43b.

¹⁴ DBS f. 43a.

ceremony of coronation and anointment with oil.¹⁵ The Debre Birhan Sillasé *Chronicle of Yohannis* clearly states that it was at the coronation that he received “the crown of the kingdom of his fathers” (*aklile mengist*).¹⁶ But it also addresses the second element of the royal selection procedure that is achievement. It explains that the ceremony was indeed the second anointment of Yohannis, the first being a secret bestowal of power to Yohannis by God, who had chosen him as His representative on earth. It was only because of this secret anointment that Yohannis was able to defeat his enemies and maintain power.¹⁷ Tekle Giyorgis II, Yohannis’ predecessor, is used to illustrate this process. His defeat and imprisonment is perceived as a consequence of the latter’s divine selection. That is coupled with the fact that Tekle Giyorgis was not “properly” crowned by the *abun*, which is interpreted as an “obvious” lack of the divine sanction and is mobilised to Yohannis’ advantage.

The chronicles repeatedly emphasise that the ritual was conducted according to traditions of the greatest representatives of the Solomonic line, David and Solomon themselves. In this way the emphasis is quite visibly placed on the continuation of the Solomonic monarchy through reconstituting the ancient ritual as well as the laws and order. The repeated references to the ancient ritual and the great ancestors appear to carry a promise of a return of strength and might of the ancient Ethiopian Empire. The actual ritual is described in great detail. As Kassa-Yohannis approached the church, he was challenged three times on his identity to which he responded “I am the king of Tsiyon of Ethiopia”, then he pulled out his sword and cut the ribbon of silk already prepared by women specially selected for this purpose. He said: “It is finished, says the Heavenly and Earthly king of Tsiyon”. The clergy sang: “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of God”.¹⁸ Then, they all prayed to “God, Heavenly King on behalf of the Earthly king of Tsiyon to place a crown on his head”. The royal insignia, a crown of gold and diamonds and a royal gown, were placed before the *tobot* to be blessed. After the coronation prayer the *abun* took the “oil of the kingdom” (*qib’a mengist*) and poured it over Yohannis’ head. Through doing so he anointed him and enthroned him and called him “Yohannis, king of Tsiyon, king of kings of Ethiopia”. Next, the new emperor was seated on a royal seat carved of stone commonly known as the ‘throne of David’ with four statues on the sides of it, in a place called Menagesha (a place of coronation, enthronement). Yohannis sat on it accompanied by the *abun* of his right and *ichegé* on his left, and he recited the Psalms of David as was the custom of this place.

Various elements of the coronation carry further clues regarding the purpose of the ceremony. The presence of numerous nobles and clergy, especially of those from outside of the Tigray province, was unusual and seems deliberate. The last to have a ceremony

¹⁵ La Verle Berry, *The Solomonic Monarchy at Gondar 1630–1755: An Institutional Kingdom of Ethiopia*, PhD thesis (Boston University, 1976); D. Levine, *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture*, Chicago 1967, p. 165.

¹⁶ DBS, f. 95b, 96a.

¹⁷ DBS, f. 46b.

¹⁸ DBS, f. 45a.

in Aksum was Susinyos (1607–30). During the Gonderine period (1630–1755), few were crowned in Aksum. From Fasilides to Iyo’as no one went to Aksum for the coronation ceremony.¹⁹ Those who did limited the ceremony to a purely Tigrean affair, mainly with local clergy. Yohannis’ ceremony was very different in that sense. Not only were all provincial rulers who had submitted to him present, but also a number of other important individuals. “There was no one from among the clergy and secular officials living between Shewa and Matsawa who was not present”.²⁰ “Present were all the children of Amhara and Tigray”.²¹ The quotation refers to the *mekwannint*, rulers of his home region and from the provinces that submitted to him, but also the so-called *deqqa mengist*, the children of the former kings of the *Zemene Mesafint*, Ato Welde Agazit and Ato Gebre Mariam. What is even more surprising, so too was the recently deposed ruler, Tekle Giyorgis II, as well as Yohannis III, last of the puppet emperors of the *Zemene Mesafint*. On the day of the coronation the future emperor conducted another ceremony of decoration of newly appointed officials. New dignitaries such as *liqe mekwas*,²² an important court official, *nibure id*, the cleric and administrator of Maryam Tsiyon, as well as other church officials were appointed. The secular appointees were mainly people from his closest circle that had been elevated to higher ranks and titles.²³ Many were members of Yohannis’ family, while others consisted of his trusted officials. The *Chronicle of Debre Birhan Sellasé* points out that the official appointment of these people took place in a special ceremony conducted in *Mishalam*, which is said to have been a customary thing to do. Therefore, on the one hand, this performative event of enthronement conducted in the presence of potential contenders seems to have aimed to humiliate them and convey a clear message that Yohannis IV was the new and legitimate *niguse negest*. On the other, by extending the ceremony to the appointments of his officials, Yohannis aimed also to legitimise his state apparatus.

The renewal of the office of the *nibure id*²⁴ and his special role during the coronation is an attempt to recall the might and importance of the Church of Maryam Tsiyon. The office is alleged to have been created by Azarias, the head priest of the Israelites in the time of Solomon, who is believed to have brought the Tablets of Law with Menelik I to Ethiopia. Yohannis combines the reintroduction of this office with a creation of a new one. During the coronation, the *nibure id* was juxtaposed with the newly appointed head of the new Church of Debre Birhan Sillassé, a *melake birhanat*.²⁵ At the coronation the *melake birhanat* was given an outfit previously reserved only for the *nibure id*

¹⁹ Berry, *op. cit.*, pp. 123–124.

²⁰ DBS, f. 86b, f. 90a.

²¹ DBS, f. 86b.

²² *liqe mekwas*: the title of one of the highest court functionaries who played an active role in royal counselling, royal ceremony, judicial administration. In the battlefield he would impersonate the sovereign.

²³ DBS f. 43b.

²⁴ *nibure id*: head of the Church of St. Mary of Aksum and administrator of the territory belonging to the church.

²⁵ DBS, f. 66b, 86b, 89a; the unpublished manuscript compiled by *qegnazmach* Fisseha Welde Mikael a *tsehafe ti’izaz* for Ras Siyum, private collection of *Dejazmach Zewde Gabre-Selassie* [henceforth: Fisseha], p. 32.

(that is a special golden head-dress). This gesture had a symbolic meaning and aimed to make *melake birhanat* a leader almost equal in his authority to the *nibure id* of Aksum. By treating the two in the same manner and symbolically dressing in the same outfit, he elevated the new sanctuary in his working capital Adwa to almost the same rank. The Church of Debre Birhan Sillasé received special attention from the emperor, who endowed it with land grants, and unusually numerous clergy. Yohannis endowed the church with the same *gult* pattern as the church in Aksum.²⁶ According to oral tradition, Yohannis bought the right to use the name Debre Birhan Sellasé from the famous church of that name in Gonder. The first *melake birhanat* of this church, by the name of Birhanu, was also from Gonder.²⁷ By drawing on the ecclesiastical traditions of Gonder, Yohannis sought to incorporate its legacy into the body of symbols that were to build the ideological basis for his monarchy.

Yet another example of the incorporation of other traditions is the treatment of *Wagshum* Teferri during the ceremony. This hereditary chief of Wag and Lasta was treated with distinction. He was allowed to perform a special ceremony of washing in the golden basin used exclusively by the emperor, and was decorated in a rich official costume reserved only for the *wagshum*.²⁸ The tradition of the *wagshum* was associated with the downfall of the Zagwe kings in the thirteenth century and the re-emergence of the Solomonic line. It was then that an agreement was reached that even though the Zagwe line was to lose power, the *wagshums* would retain their position under the emperor with special privileges. *Wagshum* Teferri was a cousin of the recently defeated Tekle Giyorgis II, who was also present at the coronation, but in chains! Having both Tekle Giyorgis II and Yohannis III present and restrained at the coronation was a powerful reminder that it was Kassa-Yohannis who was finally granted the divine sanction by being legitimately crowned. But the elevation of Tekle Giyorgis' cousin, *Wagshum* Teferri, is an example of integrating into Yohannis' monarchy medieval traditions associated with former Agew contenders, the *wagshums*. It also brings to mind the analogy between the revival of his monarchy and the re-establishment of the Solomonic dynasty in 1270, when the special status of the *wagshums* was recognized.

To conclude, Yohannis successfully mined and manipulated the past in order to legitimate his project of imperial reconstruction. The coronation ceremony in Aksum enabled Yohannis to mobilise symbols, slogans and traditions of the past needed to define the ideology of the new, revived empire. The references to past rituals, offices and institutions carefully blended with new elements were to form the ideological background for Yohannis' monarchy. The Aksum ceremony mobilised rich symbolism embedded in the history of the holy city and combined it with later traditions that were to contribute to the revived monarchy. The mobilisation of those symbols and their public manifes-

²⁶ DBS. f. 66b.

²⁷ *Chronicle of Yohannes*, *op. cit.* (in n. 12), p. 93.

²⁸ Aleqa Lemlem, *History of Atse Tekle Giyorgis and Atse Yohannes*, f. 17, ms. éth., 259, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris; Wudu Tafete Kassu, *A Political History of Wag and Lasta, c. 1543–1912*, MA thesis, Addis Ababa University, 1995, pp. 14–15; *Chronicle of Yohannes*, pp. 118–119.

tation through the pageantry of the ritual, together with the revival of offices and the reestablishment of the Coptic bishop served to legitimate the shift from the noble title of *ri'ise mekwannint* to the imperial status of *niguse negest*. God's selection of *Dejazmach* Kassa was reconfirmed in the revived ritual, which was in turn extended to his state apparatus. The ceremony provided the answer to the crucial question posed to Kassa by the virgins who symbolically blocked his path into the holy temple of Tsiyon: "Who are you? What is your name, what is your faith, and are you coming in peace?" The answer "I am the king of Tsiyon of Ethiopia" captured the key ideological elements underpinning the monarchy and therefore legitimised the new emperor and his new imperial order.