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The Paintings in St. George Church in Addis Ababa as a Method of Conveying Information about History and Power in 20th - century Ethiopia¹

Abstract: In one of the most important churches in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), there is a panel containing several paintings. They are exact copies of photographs showing Emperor Haile Sellasie I during the war against Italy (1935-1941). The paintings were copied from frequently published, and thus well-known, photographs, which served imperial propaganda to show the Emperor's role in fighting for Ethiopia's independence. Using the paintings as source material, it is the aim of this article to discuss specific propagandistic methods applied in Ethiopia under Haile Sellasie to transmit a message about power and history, and to present the intended image of the Emperor to his subjects.

Keywords: Ethiopia, visual representation, St. George Church, Haile Sellasie I, Italo-Ethiopian War

Introduction

In St. George Church, one of the main Addis Ababa churches, there is a panel of paintings presenting scenes from the Italo-Ethiopian war (between 1935 and 1941). The paintings were made as a reminder of the role Haile Sellasie I (the emperor of Ethiopia from 1930 to 1974) performed in regaining Ethiopia's independence. The pictures were meant to testify to the Emperor's services to the nation and emphasize his right – frequently undermined by his opponents – to rule the country after independence was regained. They also con-

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stitute a good example of the method of communication and of the message delivered by the Emperor to his subjects.

The aim of this article is to present how Haile Sellasie took advantage of visual material and employed it within a wider spectrum of his propaganda politics. His politics can also be perceived in wider terms as an integral part of the system of legitimization of power. The imperial propaganda used different tools and methods to transfer a message of power, and especially the message based on visual material played an important role within this system. This article uses the panel of paintings from St. George Church to elaborate on this issue.

The content conveyed by the panel and the methods of providing the appropriate message can be analyzed by taking into account several aspects. One is the role played by the relation of tradition and modernity. The terms “traditional” and “modern” as well as the discussion of the process of “modernization” provide space for a complex and multilayered deliberation.² It is so in terms of Ethiopia, where, similarly as in a number of non-European states, the idea of “modernization” played a major role in rapid changes occurring at the turn of the 20th century. If we take the examples of Japan under the Meiji dynasty, Atatürk’s Turkey or Habib Bourguiba’s Tunisia, in spite of the differences in all these countries, we see how strong the shared idea of the necessity to introduce changes was. The changes, aimed mostly at adopting technology and new administra-

² References to modernity and modernisation in literature on Ethiopia’s history are numerous. Bahru Zewde discusses the subject from different angles, and his “Pioneers of Change” provide a fundamental contribution (Bahru Zewde 2002). Elisabeth Wolde Giorgis’s Ph.D. thesis (2010) and a special issue of *Northeast African Studies* (2013) are among the latest publications devoted to this topic. However, it should be remembered that the discussion on modernity was initiated in Ethiopia decades ago. Gebre Hiywet Beykedegn is remembered as the writer who initiated the discussion almost a hundred years ago, while Mahteme Sillasie Welde Mesqel or Hadis Alemayehu are among those who participated in it during Haile Sellasie’s reign (cf. Rubinkowska-Anioł, Wołk-Sore 2014 and 2015).

tive and educational models, were supposed to make it possible for the countries in question to survive and rebuild their power in new circumstances.

In Ethiopia, Tewodros II (1855-1869) and the emperors who followed struggled to centralize the country, strengthen imperial power and bring about the country's unity. To achieve these aims, they searched for different ideas while building an ideology. They called on what could be seen as tradition, but they also employed changes and introduced new approaches to strengthen their position and the image of imperial power. Apart from benefitting from Ethiopian patterns found in the history of the Empire which were applied in the wide concept of legitimization of power (e.g. Yohannis IV, 1972-1989, cf. Orłowska 2006), and constructing a new vision of the country (as in the case of Menelik and the conquests of the neighbouring lands, cf. Donham, James 2002), the emperors were aware of the necessity to adopt Western patterns into different spheres of ruling the country. The process reached its peak during the reign of Haile Sillasié, and can be traced in every sphere of social and political life. The dichotomy of "traditional" (Amh. *tarikawi*) and "modern" (Amh. *zemenawi*) can also be found in the language used at the time to discuss both the contemporary situation in the country as well as its future. However, for the purposes of this article I do not intend to discuss the complex meaning of "modernization" in Ethiopia in the times of Haile Sillasié. I rather propose to understand both terms "modernization" and "modern" as an aim which the Emperor and a group of his subjects³ wanted to achieve⁴. The Emperor wanted Ethiopia to be "modern", but also used "modern" accessories to stress the value of traditional aspects of Ethiopian culture. He applied modern, i.e. newly introduced forms to stress the power of the country, its people and – quite obviously – the power of his person and Imperial

³ The group in literature is referred to as "intellectuals" (e.g. Elisabeth Wolde Giorgis 2010) or "pioneers of change" (Bahru Zewde 2002).

⁴ Elisabeth Wolde Giorgis writes about "early intellectuals' obsession with 'new' and 'modern'" (Elisabeth Wolde Giorgis 2010: 14).

dignity. In Haile Sellasie's message of legitimization, modernity was strongly intermingled with traditional elements. The result was supposed to provide a vision created out of the perfect combination of "modern" and "traditional". This was a vision of Ethiopia and its culture based on a long and splendid history of its civilization while at the same time as fitting well into the contemporary world. This mixture of modern and traditional elements was the core of the message Haile Sillasie wanted to deliver to his subjects as well as to the outside world. The panel of paintings from St. George Church presents this bricolage and – with all the complex layers of elements which are meant to represent "modern" or "traditional" – forms an example of how Haile Sillasie conveyed information about recent Ethiopian history and about his power. In other words, how this paintings served as a method of conveying the Emperor's message.

Another aspect of the analyses includes the question of applying connotation to oral and written forms of the message. The culture of the Ethiopian Empire was deeply submerged in orality with a strong influence of the written word and *vice versa*. This also provides a certain point of view for analyses. The panel consists of paintings, which by their very nature are neither a part of oral nor of written methods of communication. However, the paintings can be perceived in relation to both and they served as a mnemonical tool for delivering a message. The images were accessible to illiterate subjects, and while strengthening the message conveyed to those who could read and write, remain within the quasi-oral form of transferring information. The pictures were, however, supported by information provided in writing attached to each of the paintings. The text provided a precise description of the situation represented in the picture and this joint manner of delivering the message – through the visual representation and through the text – resulted in an even stronger effect. The connection of the panel to the church and ennobling of the message by the presence of religious images makes it play a role not only within the sphere of non-written Ethiopian culture, but also through the church and sacrum the message is related to the area of written culture.

The interweaving of the sacred and the profane in service of power, as in the case of the paintings from St. George Church, creates

another point of observation. The secular scenes involving the Emperor were placed in a religious context. Both the place where the panel was located (on the inner walls of the church) and the inclusion of other paintings presenting hagiographic scenes inscribed the panel into the convention of actions in which supernatural powers played a part.

All these perspectives allow for analyses of a complex set of methods applied to deliver a specific message about the role performed by the Emperor during the war, emphasizing his function as a leader, his patriotism, courage and his aspirations to regain Ethiopian independence.

Having all this in mind and before I move on to the analyses of the pictures from the St. George Church panel, I will describe the background for the desired message provided by Haile Sellasie.

1. The significance of St. George Church

St. George Church (in Amharic *Kiddus Giyorgis*) is also known as the Arada Church (from the name of one of the Ethiopian capital's central districts where the church is located) or *Gennete Tsigie Giyorgis*. The term which best captures the significance of this church is yet another name, *Mennagesha Kiddus Giyorgis*, since the Amharic word 'mennagesha' is used to denote a ruler's residence or place where his or her coronation takes place. As a matter of fact, two Ethiopian rulers were crowned in St. George Church – Empress Zewditu in 1917 and Emperor Haile Sellasie in 1930. Numerous ceremonies connected to the most important events in the Ethiopian Empire were also held there throughout the 20th century, amongst others, the main ceremonies related to the celebration of the 25th anniversary of the coronation of the imperial couple in 1955.

The church is situated in the very centre of Addis Ababa in Piassa (or Arada – as this area was once called). Addis Ababa was founded toward the end of the 19th century, but hundreds of years earlier another church building had already stood in the location which later came to house St. George Church. According to legend, this first church was destroyed during the Muslim invasion of Ethiopia in the 16th century. After several centuries, in 1886 according to the Ethiopian calendar, i.e. 1893 or 1894 A.D., Menelik II ordained the con-

struction of a new church, which was initially a small building with a thatched roof. The significance of the church during Menelik's II reign is evidenced by the fact that the function of the *gebez*,⁵ i.e. the secular church administrator, was performed by one of the most important people in Ethiopia at that time: *Ras*⁶ Mekonnin, who was Emperor Menelik's cousin and the father of *Ras* Teferi Mekonnin, the later Emperor Haile Sellassie. The fact that many Ethiopian dignitaries were buried in the church also testifies to its significance. In 1926, *Fitawrari*⁷ Habte Giyorgis was laid to rest in St. George Church. Habte Giyorgis was one of the members of the triumvirate (alongside Empress Zewditu and *Ras* Teferi Mekonnin), which ruled the country between 1916 and 1926 (Haile Gabriel Dagne 1987: 64).

St. George is one of the most popular and revered saints in the Ethiopian Church. Paintings presenting George killing a dragon are frequently found in many church buildings, while his significance can also be observed in different aspects of everyday life, among others the fact that *Kiddus Giyorgis*, i.e. "Saint George", is the name of the most popular beer brand in Ethiopia, produced since Haile Sillassie's reign. The saint also played an important role in Ethiopia's history. It is widely believed that George's intervention helped the Ethiopians in their victory over the Italians in the Battle of Adwa in 1896. The battle is remembered as one of the most important events in the history of Africa as it deterred European plans of colonizing Ethiopia and guaranteed its independence for the next few decades. The saint's intervention followed Emperor Menelik's decision to take the *tabot*⁸ from St. George Church so that it would accompany

⁵ The function of *gebez* was entrusted to a member of Ethiopian aristocracy with more or less influence, depending on the significance of the church. The function could be performed by both women and men. The position of the particular aristocrat who was chosen to be the *gebez* of a given church could also raise the importance of the parish.

⁶ *Ras* – one of the highest court titles in the Ethiopian Empire.

⁷ *Fitawrari* – a military title in the Ethiopian Empire.

⁸ *Tabot* – a replica of the tablets containing the Ten Commandments given to Moses, stored in a special chest. This is the holiest item kept in every

the soldiers into battle and ensure their victory. The presence of the *tabot* on the battlefield and the support the Saint provided to the fighting Ethiopians are traditional elements of the stories about the Battle of Adwa and of its numerous iconographic representations.

Following the battle, St. George's merits were duly appreciated and, even though the saint had already enjoyed a lot of popularity among church members, his cult only became stronger after the Ethiopian victory. As a form of expressing gratitude, Emperor Menelik II established an annual holiday to celebrate the Saint and bestowed some land for the construction of a church in Arada which would be dedicated to St. George. Some years after the victorious battle, the construction of a new building was initiated, this time in the European style. It was finally completed in 1916 shortly before Empress Zewditu's coronation.

In 1935 the Italians attacked Ethiopia again, this time conquering the country. During the occupation, the Ethiopians made sure that the *tabot* from the church in Arada did not fall into the enemy's hands. It was moved to the provincial areas and handed into the care of the leader of the underground army in central Ethiopia – Ras Abebe Aregay. During the war, the church in Arada was bombarded by the Italians, but the occupants who appreciated the beauty of Ethiopian buildings later partially reconstructed it. After the war, Haile Selassie made sure that St. George Church was returned to its former pre-war splendour. After Ethiopia regained its independence, the original *tabot* was brought back to the Church (Haile Gabriel Dagne 1987: 64). Upon his return to Addis Ababa in 1941, the Emperor's first port of call was St. George Church, a move which stressed the significance of the place.⁹

Ethiopian church. In accordance with the rules of Ethiopian christianity, a church building is only able to perform a sacral role when it contains a consecrated *tabot*.

⁹ The Pathé News commentator states the following for the British Chronicle: "His Majesty Haile Sellasie returns in triumph to Addis Ababa. A great ovation is given to him by his subjects who witness the moving spectacle of their emperor attending a thanksgiving service at the Cathedral of St.

During Haile Sellasie's I reign, St. George Church was one of the most important and frequently visited sacral buildings in the capital. As a result, the paintings which decorated its walls were admired by many and the message they meant to convey performed their intended role. Today the church serves both as a place of worship and as a museum. The information conveyed by the pictures on the walls continues to be received, both by Ethiopians and by foreigners.

2. The paintings in St. George Church

In Ethiopian churches, the *tabot* is located in the *meqdes*, “the holiest of holy” places. It is not accessible to anyone but the priests who have received the highest ordination, and Ethiopian emperors. In many Ethiopian churches, the walls separating the *meqdes* from the remaining parts of the church are decorated with paintings. In St. George Church, these consist of works by prominent Ethiopian painters: the best known and esteemed being Afewerk Tekle. The author of the panel in question is Imaelaf Hiruy. During the reign of Haile Sellasie, the new generation of painters was influenced by European styles and in later decades received a formal education (Elisabeth Wolde Giorgis 2012: 65; on early development of secular art cf. Pankhurst 1966). Those active after the Italian occupation, even though frequently alluding to the Ethiopian painting tradition, simultaneously broke with its principles, while their works initiated a new period in the history of the fine arts. Imaelaf Hiruy could be perceived as one of those who paved the way for this generation. Born in 1908 and trained within the traditional framework by his father, a church artist from Gojjam, Imaelaf was already an experienced artist when he painted the St. George panel.

The content of the paintings conveys information concerning selected events from Ethiopian history which served as means of legit-

George. His first act on returning to the throne of Ethiopia.”; “Haile Sellasie enters Addis Abeba” (Pathe 1941) available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=akChOvfHADs> (accessed on 8 August 2014).

imizing imperial power. The immortalized subject matter includes the coronation of Emperor Haile Sellasie I, the Battle of Adwa, as well as a representation of the legendary meeting between Queen Sheba and King Solomon, in other words – the founding myth of the dynasty of Ethiopian rulers¹⁰ (frescoes painted by Afewerk Tekle). However, in this article, primarily the paintings by Imaelaf Hiruy are discussed. They represent events from the period of the war with Italy in 1935-1941 and the involvement of the Emperor. Even though from the artistic point of view these works are a far cry from those by Afewerk Tekle, they provide a contribution to the analysis of the use of the fine arts in the service of conveying information to society on such topics as history and power. These paintings like many other ventures during Haile Sellasie's reign¹¹ refer both to traditional models and suggest various changes. On the one hand, they break with the accepted Ethiopian painting patterns used in churches; on the other, they also refer back to this tradition. Such exceptional elements which break with tradition include the message they convey and the adopted techniques. The paintings are copies of a few photographs which were on numerous occasions published in Ethiopian books and in the press, presenting the Emperor during critical moments of the war. These photographs became so well known that they began to function as symbols of Ethiopian resistance to the Italian invader, of the struggle for independence and the ultimate victory of the Ethiopians, as well as of the might of the Ethiopian nation and

¹⁰ An English translation of the Ethiopian legend of Queen of Sheba, King Solomon and their son Menelik I (*Kibre negest*) was done by A. Wallis Budge as “The Queen of Sheba and her only son Menyelek” (1922).

¹¹ According to the information provided by Wiesława Bolimowska, a journalist who frequently travelled to Ethiopia in the 1970s and 1980s, the discussed panel was not visible in St. George Church during the Derg regime (a military dictatorship under the leadership of Mengistu Haile Mariam), which overthrew the Emperor in 1974 and maintained power until 1991. In all probability, due to the propaganda it served to spread, the anti-imperial Derg ordered the paintings to be covered or destroyed. Today they can once again be admired in St. George Church.

of the Emperor himself.

3. The message concerning history and power in 20th - century Imperial Ethiopia

The possible range of research issues connected to the methods used by Haile Sellasie I for conveying information about his right to hold power, his own might and the strength of his country is enormous. The same is also true of any attempts at analysing the efforts the Emperor made to introduce a particular version of Ethiopian history. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the details of these various issues. However, in order to enable an analysis of the role of the paintings from St. George Church in Addis Ababa, it is essential that a few basic features of the Emperor's policies connected to his methods of conveying information are presented. Primarily, Haile Sellasie valued modern methods which made communication easier and to a large extent he based his reign on various technological solutions which he propagated in Ethiopia. These included, among other things, telephone and telegraphic lines, which connected various sites across the entire country so that the Emperor could convey his orders quickly and directly while also being up-to-date with events occurring in distant provinces. The beginnings of the telecommunication system in Ethiopia were introduced during Menelik's II reign, who – like Haile Sellasie later – acknowledged the need to use modern means to strengthen his power and maintain better control over the country. The first telephone in Ethiopia was installed in 1902 at the seat at that time of the Ethiopian ruler in Addis Alem. However, rapid development of telecommunications only occurred after Ethiopia freed itself from Italian occupation. According to the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, there were 90 telephone numbers in Desie (one of the larger Ethiopian cities) in the 1950s, while there were as many as 236 in 1967 in Harer (yet another important municipality) (Lindahl 2010: 913ff.). In addition, the Emperor's fascination with aviation, the import of airplanes and the construction of airports resulted from a desire for more effective management of the country. Therefore, he acknowledged the need to develop means of moving more easily across difficult Ethiopian terrain and a more efficient transfer of information as paramount to his reign. The new communication capabilities were all the more important as in a large

part of the mountainous Ethiopia traditional forms of travel became practically impossible during the rainy season.

Haile Sellasie was also more than willing to use new methods and technologies for conveying information about power in Ethiopia and about the history of the country. He used print and photographs, propagating an image of the Empire – both of its past and its present – through books and the press. Both words and images were used in various publications, i.e. a certain message was conveyed not only through the text but also through the attached illustrations (drawings and photographs). The Emperor was also aware of the possibilities offered by other media – when he was still performing the function of heir to the throne and participated in governing the country during Empress Zewditu's reign, he noted the propagandist potential of images immortalized on film. Filmmakers from Europe and the USA arrived in Ethiopia as early as at the beginning of the 20th century. Films exist from the period of Zewditu's reign,¹² and it can be assumed that they were made with the approval of the Heir to the Throne at that time, the later Emperor Haile Sellasie I. Without a doubt, Haile Sellasie consciously made use of the message conveyed by the film chronicle Movietone News, which immortalized his coronation in 1930.¹³ Haile Sellasie also valued theatre in terms of its propaganda capabilities, and as a result this form of entertainment became popular in Ethiopia during his reign. The first Ethiopian plays were performed during the period when Zewditu's was in power,¹⁴ while with time theatre became increasingly more highly valued

¹² Among others, a 13-minute-long film in the Albert Kahn Archive in Boulogne/Billancourt in France entitled "Ethiopie: Couronnement de la reine 11 février 1917".

¹³ Available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SJI0i_yvxQM or <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qlzfuiL2WIA> (accessed on 25.07.2014)

¹⁴ Tekle Hawariat Tekle Mariam is the author of the first Ethiopian play "The Comedy of Animals", which alluded to La Fontaine's fables. It has never been printed. Written in 1911/12, it was performed in 1921 in the Hotel Majestic for the imperial court. It was later banned due to its criticism of the current social relations (Kane 1975: 7).

by Ethiopian authors and audiences. Simultaneously, Haile Sellasie did not refrain from making use of more traditional methods of conveying information. He kept in mind that the majority of his subjects remained in the sphere of oral tradition; therefore, the spoken word and images were more effective means of communication than the written word. It was precisely for this reason that theatre enjoyed such popularity, which – despite its European form – quickly found a willing audience among the Ethiopians by referring to oral culture. All in all, in post-war Ethiopia, images of Haile Sillasie were published and distributed on a great number on occasion, the Emperor was to be seen in the press, in the beginning pages of books; his image was also presented in churches alongside representations of saints, as in the case of the St. George panel. (Cf. Elisabeth Wolde Giorgis 2013: 63)

The Emperor took advantage of legal and administrative means to control information. Following liberation, a Censorship Board composed of seven members was established. It functioned within the “Newspaper and Information Office” (*Yegazietanna mastaweqiya mesriya biet*), a department under the Ministry of the Pen. In 1960, its name was changed into the Ministry of Information. (Wondwosen Teshome 2009) On a daily basis, Haile Sillasie himself checked if press information (both in terms of its form and content) met his expectations. As Meseret Chekol Reta puts it, “The Ministry of Information was to ensure that films, plays and other types of public entertainment were in conformity with moral standards and did not destabilize the imperial government”. (Meseret Chekol Reta 2013: 165) The Ministry of Information was also responsible for providing specific information regarding the Emperor: e.g. information concerning Haile Sillasie’s daily activities received priority and the front page was devoted exclusively to news about the Emperor. (Meseret Chekol Reta 2013: 108-109) A significant task of the Ministry included publishing information and propaganda material. The Ministry issued a number of books and booklets which were supposed to provide a specific image both of the country and of its ruler.

For centuries in Ethiopia, painting was one of the traditional methods of conveying information, including art which served those in power. For hundreds of years, the paintings which often decorated

the walls of churches influenced the imagination of the faithful, presenting events described in the Bible, the hagiography of saints, as well as scenes of a political nature. The pictures – traditionally supplemented by short inscriptions containing information on what the particular painting illustrated – intertwined written content with a non-textual image; therefore, they were able to influence the perception of those who could read and those who had not mastered the skill. This desire to integrate the written and visual form during Haile Selassie's times was thus a continuation of practices from earlier centuries. Despite the huge pressure placed on the need for educating his subjects, the level of illiteracy in Ethiopia continued to be high. However, it is equally important to note that even the perception of those who could read was shaped by a largely oral culture, which was extremely significant for the reception of the conveyed information. On the other hand, the use of the written word in images which for centuries had been connected with issues of power and religion raised the significance of the message conveyed by the paintings and ennobled their content.

Throughout history, the methods of presenting rulers have undergone certain modifications, especially since the end of the 19th century, but the principle of propagating information concerning a particular ruler's might through this medium (i.e. painting) – used also in other parts of the world, including Europe – remained the same. Those visiting a church, a sacred place, could see what the person who had commissioned the painting considered to be important information, worthy of being conveyed and immortalized. This was also the case with the panel on the walls in St. George Church.

4. The story behind the represented scenes

The panel consists of seven paintings (from the top):

1. Scenes from the life of the equestrian saints Gigar and Aboli
2. Haile Sellasie hoisting a flag in Um Idla
3. St Mercurius killing Ulianos, wherein one of his opponents has the head of a dog
4. Haile Sellasie next to a cannon during the Battle of Maychew in 1936
5. Haile Sellasie on the battlefield

6. Haile Sellasie giving a speech before the League of Nations in 1936
7. Saint Aregawi

Re. 1 – see re. 3.

Re. 2

The photograph which was the basis for this painting was taken following Haile Sellasie's return from Great Britain, after crossing the border with Sudan to enter Ethiopia. Like various other such photographs, it was often published and copied during Haile Sellasie's reign. One such example would be the publication of this photograph in the magazine "Ethiopian Review" in May 1945 (in the book by Desta Ager Beneberch 1945: unnumbered).

In January 1941, the British with the support of the Ethiopians achieved a considerable success in their battles against Italy. The Italians were attacked on three fronts. On 19th January, British and Indian detachments attacked from the north, from Kassali through Eritrea, and arrived in northern Tigray. The second attack came from the south: the British and South African forces attacked on the 24th of January from the Kenyan side. These detachments moved through Italian Somalia and Harer to arrive in Addis Ababa on 6th April. From the perspective of this article, and from that of Ethiopian propaganda which aimed to emphasize Haile Sellasie's participation in the battles and his significance for Ethiopia's liberation, the third front was the most important. On 20th January, a smaller detachment than the others, consisting of Ethiopian, Sudanese and British forces, led – at least formally – by the Emperor marched into Ethiopia at the border village of Um Idla. From there, they marched south to Addis Ababa (Pankhurst 2014).

However, before this happened, on 18th January Haile Sellasie and his court were transported by plane to Khartoum from Roseire, situated some 60 km from the border with Ethiopia, and from there – also by plane – they arrived in Um Idla, a border village located on the Ethiopian side of the border with Sudan. This place was chosen by General Orde Wingate who was in charge of the front and had come to the conclusion that it offered the smallest chance of direct

contact with the enemy. Two days earlier, Wingate had marched into Um Idla with his detachment, while Haile Sellasie arrived only after it had been confirmed that the Emperor would not be in any danger. As a British participant of the war, Anthony Mockler wrote: “There was not then, nor was there ever to be, any question of Haile Sellasie leading his own troops in person: his person was too valuable to risk. He (...) followed behind where Wingate and others led” (Mockler 2002: 316).

The role Haile Sellasie performed in 1941 consisted in providing a symbolic emphasis for the actions of the British, who aimed to help the Ethiopians in regaining their independence and were not striving to take over the Ethiopian territories from the Italians through military action. The British Pathé film chronicle immortalized Haile Selassie’s arrival by plane in Um Idla and him hoisting the Ethiopian flag. The reader states that “the ceremony is of such significance that the crowned prince himself makes a photographic record of it”. However, it is difficult to establish whether the photograph which was the model for the paintings in St. George Church is one of those taken by the Emperor’s son and heir to the throne, Asfa Wessen. The commentator of this same film chronicle continues, “and now the most dramatic scene of all, the breaking of the red, green and gold flag of Ethiopia by His Majesty, who said ‘I am entering Ethiopia with full confidence of assistance from the British government in order to crush our common enemy’” (The British Pathé Chronicle).

In his approach to his subjects, Haile Sellasie attempted to create a version of history in which he himself had commanded the Ethiopian forces, liberated the occupied lands, and in which his role had been much more significant than the one presented above. In Ethiopia, such was the official version of events in 1941, and until the fall of the Empire it was confirmed by numerous publications of the discussed photograph. The paintings in St. George Church in Piassa served the same purpose of conveying such a version of history.

It should be noted that even though the discussed photograph is the most popular, other images of Haile Selassie arriving in Um Idla and hoisting the Ethiopian flag were also used in Ethiopian publications.

Re. 1, 3, 7

The representations of saints – the equestrian saints Gigar and Aboli at the top of the panel, St. Mercurius below and St. Aregawi at the very bottom – is not simply a supplementary element to the rest of the composition as it allows for a more in-depth interpretation of the entire panel.

The painting situated at the top of the panel represents two saints; one (Gigar) is fighting Herod, while the other (Aboli) is murdering a pagan. Both saints are mounted on horses, which – according to the interpretation of traditional Ethiopian paintings – serves to ennoble them, making them worthy of the highest form of respect. St. Gigar is one of the most frequently encountered saints in Ethiopian church paintings. The legend of his deeds was written down in the book “One hundred and ten miracles of our Lady Mary”. According to the story, St. Gigar was the first martyr for Jesus cause and died after being sentenced by Herod. In connection with Herod’s search for the Holy Family, the traditional representation of St. Gigar is usually situated in the vicinity of the representation of the flight to Egypt (Friedlander 2007: 38). However, this is not the case in the St. George church panel.

According to the Synaxarium, i.e. the Ethiopian compilation of saints arranged in the order of their anniversaries with each appointed one day in the liturgical year, St. Aboli was a Roman martyr who refused to worship idols (Friedlander 2007: 46).

In the case of the third painting, the represented story is connected to one of the saints of the Eastern churches, St. Mercurius of Cappadocia. He was also described in the Synaxarium. In the painting on the panel at St. George Church, St. Mercurius is shown killing the Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate, who in Ethiopian tradition bore the name Ulianos (Friedlander 2007: 45f). One of the most significant elements of the painting would be the representation of an enemy with a dog’s head. Dogs do not enjoy much respect in Ethiopian culture and calling someone a dog is considered to be the highest form of insult. In this case, an enemy of the faith is represented as a dog. In all probability, this symbol can be interpreted as an offensive representation of the enemies of the Christian Ethiopian Empire. In combination with the paintings alluding to the war against Italy, such

a representation suggests an insult aimed at the Italian invaders.

The representation of these particular saints, i.e. Mercurius, Gigar and Aboli, does not seem to have been a random choice. The stories of these warriors for the faith metaphorically refer to the role performed by Haile Sellasie (both during the war and later). If we take into consideration that metaphors play an enormous role in Ethiopian culture, it becomes clear how obvious the message conveyed by the panel in St. George Church was to an Ethiopian audience.

The representation of St. Aregawi is not relevant to these considerations. Aregawi, one of nine Syrian saints considered in Ethiopia to be propagators of the faith, the legendary founder of the Debre Damo Monastery, is represented according to traditional conventions – with a snake which supposedly aided him in climbing the inaccessible mountain where he founded the monastery (Friedlander 2007: 32). He is one of the saints most frequently represented in traditional paintings in Ethiopian churches. However, the different – less realistic and more traditional – painting style from that of the others in the panel make it possible to perceive this picture as an element which was added later, perhaps painted by a different artist. This is confirmed by the date on the painting (1979 a.m., i.e. 1987/88). This dating is all the more surprising if we take into account that in all probability the panel did not adorn the walls of the church during the *Derg* dictatorship (1974-1991).

Re. 4 and 5

These two paintings show Haile Sellasie on the battlefield during the war of 1935/36. The first presents the Emperor next to a cannon during the Battle of Maychew, while in the other Haile Sellasie is on the battlefield, standing and gazing down at an Italian bomb which has not exploded. The Emperor is accompanied by various dignitaries and by his own son – the Heir to the Throne Asfa Wessen.

The Battle of Maychew took place on 31st May 1936. It is the most frequently mentioned battle of the war in 1935/36, during which Haile Sellasie had intended to tip the scales in Ethiopia's favour and which was supposed to have been a spectacular victory. However, this was in fact where the Ethiopian forces suffered their ultimate defeat. The Emperor arrived at the battlefield in the compa-

ny of his court, the archbishop of the Ethiopian Church and the head of the Ethiopian monks. Approximately 40 thousand Ethiopians participated in the battle, including the best trained detachments – the imperial guards. The Emperor as the commander of the Ethiopian army was supposed to have guaranteed their victory. The battle which was meant to ensure Ethiopia’s continued independence instead became the decisive moment leading to the Italian occupation of the country. It has also been remembered as the “Lake Ashangi Massacre” due to the Italians’ use of poisonous gas.¹⁵

The Emperor retreated from the battlefield and went to Addis Ababa, where small isolated Ethiopian troops continued to fight against the Italians. As a result of the defeat, Haile Sellasie (and formally a night session of the Ethiopian parliament) came to the decision that he as ruler of the country should flee Ethiopia for Europe from where he would conduct diplomatic activities and strive for support for Ethiopia. The Emperor’s decision was often criticized in Ethiopia and perceived as treason.

Maychew is a symbol of Ethiopian valour, the fight against the Italians under the leadership of the Emperor, but also of defeat and suffering. Haile Sellasie – especially after independence had been regained – wanted the Battle of Maychew to be remembered as evidence of the Emperor’s sacrifice and his active participation in the fighting on the battlefield.

The photograph which presents Haile Sellasie next to the cannon at Maychew was published in numerous texts, among others, in a book of praise written in poetic form entitled “Kibre negest” (The Glory of the Kings) published in 1939 according to the Ethiopian calendar (i.e. 1946/47 A.D.) by Welde Giyorgis, while an example of a publication in the press is the issue of the “Ethiopian Review” from

¹⁵ The Battle of Maychew – as the decisive moment in the Italo-Ethiopian war – is frequently mentioned in the literature on the topic. A. Mockler writes about the battle in *Haile Sellasie’s War* (Mockler 2002) while another description can be found in A. del Boca’s *Negus: The Life and Death of the Last King of Kings* (del Boca 2012), as well as in numerous other positions.

May 1945, in which a similar though not identical photograph was published.

Another image that was frequently published came in the form of photographs presenting Haile Sellasie standing with his son on the battlefield over an Italian bomb. An example of this is one of the most important Ethiopian publications from Haile Sellasie's period, i.e. his autobiography, published right before the revolution erupted which in 1974 overturned the Emperor (Haile Sellasie 1973/74).

Re. 6

Haile Sellasie gives a speech before the League of Nations.

The speech given by the Emperor in Geneva was an important event, but it did not influence Ethiopia's fate. It was an attempt by Haile Sellasie to draw the world's attention to the events occurring in his country and a diplomatic appeal for support against Italy. The only countries capable of supporting Ethiopia and curbing Italy's actions, i.e. France and Great Britain, came to the conclusion that a good relationship with Italy was more important than showing support for a relatively insignificant African country. However, Haile Sellasie's speech became a symbol for all Africans fighting for their countries, a symbol of the efforts introduced to make the rights of "small countries" matter (at that time the term "small countries" was used to denote all those nations which did not have a voice in deciding the fate of the world, primarily Central European countries). It also documented Haile Sellasie's skills at analysing the global situation and his ability to foresee the results. In Geneva, Haile Sellasie also spoke of the possibility of the extermination of nations (even though he did not use the exact term, which at that time did not yet function with the connotations it later acquired), and also about the threat that fascism posed if there was no reaction from the world powers.¹⁶ Haile Sellasie's speech, even if did not have any direct

¹⁶ For more information about the international situation behind the scenes in terms of the Italo-Ethiopian war and the various intrigues within the League of Nations in connection to the war in 1938 and 1939, see A. Bartnicki (1971). The text of the speech in Amharic (the language in which the

effect, went down in world history and diplomacy as a symbol of the struggle of a weaker opponent against his oppressor, while the Emperor himself as a dignified and wise politician and diplomat. It is therefore not surprising that the most known photograph from his speech at the League of Nations was used to remind people of the praiseworthy role the monarch played in the struggle for the independence of his country.

This photograph was, among others, included in the authorless book “Tarikinna sira (bachiru)” (History and work, in short), published in Addis Ababa in 1939 a.m. (1946). The photograph of Haile Sellasie giving the speech was also published in the Emperor’s autobiography (1936/37 [1973]).

In the next part, I will argue that the multilayered message conveyed by the panel referred to a number of connotations.

5. The message conveyed by the panel in St. George Church

The original photographs themselves provide material for analysis of the symbolism of power and the message referring to the Emperor. Such elements as the clothes worn by Haile Sillasié, the people who accompanied the Emperor, the choice of specific photographs among many different similar presentations, etc., provide grounds for further research. Such consideration, however attractive, remains beyond the scope of this article. The same is true about a discussion of the reason behind taking certain photographs as well as how the scenes were stylized and whether they were at all. Instead, here I intend to limit myself to discussing the method of communicating the message to those who saw the paintings.

In the case of the panel in St. George Church, both tradition and change (which can be defined as indications of Western influences, modernity and the pro-modernizing tendencies of the Emperor) inter-

Emperor gave the speech) was published in Haile Sellasie’s autobiography (Haile Sillasié 1936/37 [1973]: 253-264); the English translation is available in the English version of the Emperor’s autobiography (Ullendorff 1976: 299-312); and in the *Selected speeches of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I 1918 to 1967* (1967: 304-316).

twine on a number of interpretational levels. The traditional elements and those which constitute novel modifications were both used as tools for conveying specific content concerning the Emperor's role in defending the country and in regaining the country's independence.

The panel refers to this mixture of tradition and new methods of expression through its form. The technique initially used to immortalize the scenes, which was photography, can be identified as modern. These modern techniques were transposed to a traditional form, which is a panel of paintings in a church. The fact that the pictures were painted on the walls separating the *kiddasie* from the rest of the church open to the public is an element which can be perceived as in accordance with tradition. The written texts under the pictures providing information about their content also constitute a traditional element. The inclusion of images representing various saints (St. Mercurius, St. Gigar, and St. Aboli) emphasizes the panel's embedment within the convention which for centuries had been used in the painting of church walls in Ethiopia.

The style of the paintings breaks with tradition by referring to realistic European art. The Emperor is to be recognized easily, not through imperial attributes and symbolic representation, but just because of the specific features of the person. This fact goes against the Ethiopian painting tradition. (Cp. Weinerth 2014: 58). Another example of the abandonment of tradition came in the form of the painter, Imealef Hiruy, signing his works (traditional painting in Ethiopia was anonymous).¹⁷ The fact that the paintings are faithful copies of photographs can be perceived as an innovative tendency. However, the faithful representation of a scene immortalized in photographs can also be considered as a reference to tradition. Traditional Ethiopian painting was often based on copying specific patterns. This can also be applied to the interpretation of the picture from the panel in St. George Church. Selected photographs, often re-issued both in books and in the press, constitute a fixed model (all the more

¹⁷ It is interesting to note that not all the pictures in the panel were signed by the artist. The painting presenting Haile Sellasie giving his speech before the League of Nations lacks a signature.

consolidated as they were often copied through multiple publications of a given book). Thus, the copying of such fixed models as paintings on church walls can definitely be perceived as a continuation of the tradition of Ethiopian art.

From the perspective of the subject matter of the paintings, this can also be interpreted as an aspect which simultaneously refers to tradition and to change. The scenes from Ethiopian history and the focus on presenting the ruler refer to tradition, but the fact that a large part of the panel was dedicated to this topic – and not to a more religious theme – constitutes a break with tradition.

This reference to both tradition and innovations, elevating secular topic to the sphere of sacredness and making the message easily understood through the mnemonics of Ethiopian culture were exactly what constituted the method used to convey the message - the desired vision of the Emperor Haile Sellasie I.

6. Conclusions

The panel in St. George Church constitutes a valuable source concerning the way in which a certain message about power in Ethiopia was conveyed. An analysis of this material provides information about many aspects of how the Emperor communicated with his subjects and how he formulated his propaganda.

As stated in the beginning of this article, the basic idea behind the panel and the message transferred through this medium includes a number of manners and levels of providing information to a viewer. Both the form and the content are employed to deliver a certain message. The method included presenting well visible and easy to read information, elevating the recent Ethiopian history and deeds of the Emperor to the level of sacredness as well as increasing the attractiveness of the subject by presenting the content in a modern form, however making it familiar to the viewer by putting it in a well-known setting. The panel of paintings evoked traditional Ethiopian art and by pointing at tradition inscribed the panel in the sphere of grand history. These traditional aspects were complemented by modern elements. The way in which the figures were presented and the use of photography as the basis for the paintings reflected this vision of modernity.

The symbolism and mnemonics of the panel stressed the sacredness of the story presented in the paintings. The location on the wall of the *meqdes* situated the story told within the framework of the life of the saints traditionally presented in the sacred church setting.

Such a complex message fulfilled the role it was entrusted during Haile Sellasie's reign. It continues to perform this role today as St. George Church remains one of the most frequently visited places in Addis Ababa, not only by Ethiopians, but also by foreign tourists. The Ethiopian priest who provides a tour of the church talks about the Emperor's deeds performed for Ethiopia and his struggle for the country's independence. As a result, the panel continues to perform the role for which it was initially created.

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St. George Church in Addis Ababa



A panel from St. George Church



*Haile Sellasie speaking at the League of Nations in 1936.
Photography published in: "Tarikinna sira" (1946: 27).*



*Painting from St. George Church panel copied from the photography
of Haile Sillasie speaking at the League of Nations in 1936.*