

Review

The postponed discourse in Habasha identity: Real or performance?

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Founded on different written sources and personal accounts, this article aims to caution the taken for granted suppositions behind Habasha identity. The term Habasha is challenged that it does not really denote a unitary identity, culturally or historically. The history of Habasha, its origin and representation somehow has been written and rewritten on ideological positions that are often incompatible. Three interacted positions come to work that make Habasha discourse extraordinarily problematic as a) the ethnocentric assumption of Habasha uniqueness, centrality in Africa civilization and their juxtaposition to western culture herald of western scholars or the Habasha elites claim that Ethiopia has been the defender of African freedom in public b) in this manner the adoption of the claim by the subjects either the replacement of multi-nations with a single Habasha identity to support a unitary system or in daily discourse Habasha reinforces the outsider-status of non-Habashas and serves as a reminder of their exclusion from state power and social fabric of ‘Proper Ethiopia’ and c) The affirmation Habasha as a categorical identity by its counter-supporters despite lack of unanimity on this term and its origin. This real problematic disposition about Habasha and the task of tracking all nations into ‘Imaginary Habasha Identity’ would be fairly reinvestigated. If not, one could foretell its underlying and deleterious side effects on the relations between the patrons of Habasha and their foes by extension on existence of the would be ‘Ethiopia’.

Key words: Habasha, discourse, identity, real, performance, self representations, misrepresentations and ethnic exceptionalism.

INTRODUCTION

What do the word Habasha represents? Where does this word come from? A seminal work by a historian Eduard (1895) claimed that the etymology of Habasha must have derived from the Mahri language which means "gatherers". Its numerous variants (Habashat, Habasa,

Habesh, Habeshi, Abesha), hereafter referred to as Habasha, have been used to name geographical pockets of territory and people extending from the Arabian Peninsula to the furthest limits of the Horn of Africa region. In the Horn of Africa region, Habasha, which

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means mixed¹, was peoples of highlands (North part of Ethiopia) named by Arabs (Yates, 2009:102). These ambivalent views embrace that Habasha is both from Arab and African descent, hitherto in legend descended from King Solomon of Israel (Wendy, 2008).

The ambivalence of Habasha descent history has staggered the origin of Habasha in doubt. More doubtful is an account by Sorenson (1993) which framed them as rightful sovereign inhabitants of Greater Ethiopia even if he himself stretch their origin and ancestral ties to King Solomon and defined them "*people as not-Black*". According to Shelly Habecker, immigrants in America from Amhara and Tigrinya² ethnic backgrounds *when approaching white*³ "viewed their Habasha identity as a separate ethnic and racial category that is not black" (Habecker, 2011, p.1215; Mohammed, 2006). An account by Donham (2002) supports this view that the term Habasha was historically used by Tigrayan and Amhara (highlanders) as well as others⁴.

Recognized in Eduard (1895) Habashas were originally from southeastern Yemen, modern district of Mahra and the word Habasha in the Horn of Africa was only in the 4th century by the Aksumite king Ezana. Donald Levine in defining Abyssinian culture, Wax and Gold, substantiated the idea that Habasha is from the South Arabian tribe Habashat, who migrated to the highlands centuries before the birth of Christ (cited in Yates, 2009). As Per advice from Count Pietro Antonelli, an Italian with geographic Society mission in Abyssinia, the state of Abyssinia combined with the newly added states of the South and the West, were later referred to as "Ethiopia". It was only when the Abyssinia state exhausted its scarce resources that its leaders expanded its frontiers South and Westward in order to amass the resources needed to feed their subject.

Having expanded its frontiers, the state of Abyssinia did not only end with amassing resources but more has evolved with related discourses. Primarily that Western scholars specifically Ludendorff's (1968) assumption about "Abyssinia proper", the Carriers of Historical Civilization, not only championed for Habasha uniqueness, but also consigned the other Nations' way of life (Cited in Donald Levine, 2000). Secondly, the

¹It was documented that around first century A.D., Sabaean traders from South Arabian came into contact with native people and intermarried. Their offspring were referred to as "Habasha", which means "people of mixed blood". Their land was later termed Abyssinia.

²As commented by AsafaJalata(1993)Amhara and Tigrayan are, in fact, descended from a single ethnic group, thought to have originated from intermixing with Arab migrants, perhaps in the first millennium BC.

³Intalic my emphasis; Habashause this identity as *litmus paper*. They use the Semitic (Habasha) discourse and the discourse of Christianity to mobilize assistance from America, and similar others. Skillfully, they use their blackness to mobilize other Africans (Scott, 1993; Harris, 1986).

⁴Semitic-speaking Gurage groups (in the southwest) and the Harari (in the east/southeast)

above assumption about the uniqueness of Habasha has routinely been instituted in culture of "Abyssinia Proper" and supported them to represent this claim as well that other wordlessly either accept Habasha Identity or are misrepresented by it. To this effect, the article is trying to critically examine the discourses, as they affects people's minds and how they perceive themselves and others. Let us little explore, discuss and challenge this in smart way.

Self -Representation and Misrepresentation of Habasha

In fact, space does not allow a full exploration of Habasha discourse. But for scholars with little knowledge of Ethiopian, Habasha appears strangely familiar. By selecting the Habasha, the author does not mean to target them and valorize ethnic interventionism, that the Habasha have surely been engaged in such (Wendy, 2008: 70). Rather, his interest is to shade light on how the Habashas are making investments in broadcasting their own achievements and singularity (in fact with the support of western scholars) and challenge why the others have taken for granted this identity as if representing themselves and others. Wendy goes on to say that "these announcements—some inscribed on stone monuments, others available today only in the second-hand but widely read contemporary texts of European outsiders" (Ibid : 69) too routinely used in social medias and daily discourses.

Locating the word Habasha in social Medias like world webpage, one would come up with different interpretations and nuisances of Habasha. In daily discourse, more in phenomenal and sweeping encounter, the author would take you through the experience he had in Europe. As he was seeing some Ethiopian and approaching them on random basis, whatever the case, the first surprise and saying is "Habashaneh?" Are you Habasha⁵? At that exact moment, I waited. I wanted to answer in more assenting, but not in pretending way. I preferred the "country" where am I from to Habasha. Being Habasha. "Habashanet" is a collective identity these days—almost for everyone who uses and accepts it right. However, reflexively, others resist that word and want to say "No I am not Habasha, I am Oromo, Sidama, Somali etc ...".

The author has never argued against Being Habasha. Everyone who confidently likes and accepts it should be respected. But in his own way, he is discouraged from using that word and let others know what Habasha

⁵AzebMadebo study on Seattle's Habasha community looks this in detail as "The question, "Are you Habasha?" is usually followed by more questions regarding what Ethiopian language you speak, and on occasion what ethnic region or ethnicity you associate with - if any at all."

represents and does not represent. The answer is the word Habasha welcomes some but retreats others. Some Ethiopians celebrate the term Habasha as representing a rich and historically vital civilization. In that spirit, having a currency similar to "whiteness" or "Western" in the United States (Wendy, 2008:77; Sorenson, 1993). Other 'Ethiopians', however, especially those who do not identify themselves to Habasha, reject it as promoting the legacy of a racist and arrogant culture that oppressed other African peoples. In her study with Seattle's Habasha Community, Azeb (2014) found that not all people readily claim Habasha identity, and some, like those who identify with Eritrea or Oromia nationalist efforts find it to be an offensive and oppressive identifier.

Habasha's performance of "whiteness" and difference from the rest of Africans is unsettled. It is unsettled because of the duality of Habasha identity. Successive Ethiopian state elites use the Semitic (Habasha) and African discourses both globally and regionally. Globally, they use the Semitic (Habasha) discourse and the discourse of Christianity to mobilize assistance from Europe, North America, and the Middle East. Skillfully, they use their blackness to mobilize other Africans, the African diaspora (Scott, 1993; Harris, 1986). Once more, despite the fact that Habasha elites claim that Ethiopia has been the defender of African freedom in public, they never falter to express their disdain Africans. Sbacchi (1997: 22) notes that the Habashas "have traditionally looked upon the dark skinned people as inferior". Scott (1993: xv), an African American, who participated in a student work-camp in Ethiopia in 1963, expresses his painful encounter with Habasha racism as the following: "I was called barya (slave) by young, bigoted Ethiopian aristocrats, who associated African-Americans with slavery and identified them black".

After Semitic discourse, Habashas construction as categorical and analytical identity to exclude them from the rest of Africa becomes a pretty norm. Case in point, Oromo popular scholar Asafa Jalata regularly uses the term 'Habasha' in contemporary writing interchangeably with the terms Abyssinian and Ethiopian and he contrasted between Oromo and Habasha (David, 2009:9). Here I am neither criticizing his path breaking writing nor just saying that there is no difference between two or more things (for instance between Germany and Italy or between Oromo and Sidama). I would rather argue that such notion has lightly augmented the approval of a unique Habasha identity and abetting the Invention of History, despite lack of unanimity on what does Habasha mean.

Then what does the word Habasha mean? Needless to say, there are people who did not have a clue about it and have naively accepted being called Habasha can mean Ethiopian. In this case, these people have unconsciously trying to substitute Ethiopia with Habasha.

I find it to be a word that is meant to blur the meaning of being 'Ethiopian'⁶ albeit there is no consensus on what Ethiopia it represents. Discerningly, Habasha is a marker of unity. However, how do people want to forgo their heritage for the sake of uniformity? Why cannot people be called 'Ethiopians' or/ and Amhara, Tigrean, Oromo, Somali, Sidama and etc and be proud of their respective being, without having to use another word to unite them. Why cannot we be united while we recognize our differences instead of using Habasha to blur the differences? Then it is not awkward to reject Habasha identity.

An underlying sincerity of rejecting the word Habasha is not because of what it is but for what it actually represents. That it is an autograph given by outsiders, a derogatory word given by Arabs much the same way that white folks use a special N word to label black folks. Nonetheless, as stated above some people from Ethiopia sing a song and others dance with it even knowing that the word Habasha has had a negative connotation. The people favored to be as Habasha today; discussed elsewhere in this article, include the Amhara, Tigray-Tigrinya. In the broadest sense, the word "Habasha" may refer to anyone from Ethiopia, while others would exclude themselves from this association.

At the expense of its negative connotation, however, the scholarly search for the origins of the Habasha in southern Arabia was driven in part by the self-representations of the Habasha. The Habasha have long claimed the Middle East and Africa as an origin, valorizing their difference from both Africans and Arabians. An elaboration in the Habasha originary myth *Kəbrā Nəgāšt* (Glory of the Kings), claims as progenitors a Habasha Queen of Sheba and a Middle Eastern King Solomon.⁷ Baxter (1994, p.172) explains that they "used to stress their Middle Eastern rather than African cultural roots, as is so obvious in the reiteration of the Solomonic legend".

Let us challenge and question it. Who is "Habasha," really? These racist discourses go unchallenged in academic and popular discourse because they help reproduce Ethiopian ethnocentric and colonial state power. U.S. foreign policy elites, diplomats, and other officials recognize and defend such "racial pretension of Ethiopia's ruling class" (Robinson, 1985, p.53). Despite in what manner liberal and neutral one thinks, the only and

⁶Many other scholars and David Fisher Gilbert (2009:20) argue that the term 'Ethiopia' itself does not denote a unitary identity, culturally or historically.

⁷E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Queen of Sheba and Her Only Son Menyelek: Being the History of the Departure of God and His Ark of the Covenant from Jerusalem to Ethiopia, and the Establishment of the Religion of the Hebrews and the Solomonic Line of Kings in That Country* (London: Medici Society, 1922). Paolo Marrassini prefers to translate this as "Nobility of the Kings," and Getatchew Haile as "The Honor of the Kings"; Paolo Marrassini, "KəbrāNəgāšt," in *EncyclopaediaAethiopia*, vol. 3, He-N, ed. SiegbertUhlig (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2007), 364-368.

only, commonly known definition of Habasha is: that girl or fellow with a middle-eastern look, pointed nose, long black hair, brown eyes, and fair skin;⁸ speaks Amharic or Tigrigna or has a mixed background⁹. Those have been the qualities that have defined “true Habasha”; and they still remain authentic requirements. Others who lacked those qualities were rarely considered Habasha. They either had to conceal their background to be accepted or had to completely reject that identity. In fact and rhetorically, beyond the above social markers, in political discourse “Habasha is used in some anti-colonialist histories as it reinforces the outsider-status of non-Habashas and serves as a reminder of their exclusion from state power” (David, 2009:22).

Many scholars have, therefore, described the inter-ethnic power relation between the Habasha (Amhara and the Tigrean) elites merely as a ‘sibling rivalry’ (Levine, 1968; Teshale, 1995). It is this essential similarity in political history and political identity that ethno liberation movements such as the OLF and the ONLF refer to while describing the new political system as ethnocracy, a mere change of masters from Amharas to Tigreans who they collectively describe as Habesha. As Bahru noted, the making of the modern Ethiopian state was ‘initiated by Tewodros, consolidated by Yohannes and consummated by Menilik’, all of who are Habasha (Cited in Dereje, 2011) and now run by mouthpiece of TPLF under the banner of EPDRF. While, Merera (2006) problematizes stress marginalization and separation.

It is one thing to declare one’s Habashan net; to mark oneself with the most qualities possible; and to rejoice it. Anytime someone points my paradox out, furthermore, it is a personal preference that someone call oneself of Habasha instead of Ethiopia Citizens or/and other nations. But “Habeshizing” everyone who comes from Ethiopia is neither acceptable nor promote functional integration. Because that is a cultural homogenization, a practice which made some Ethiopians feel “culturally superior” than their fellow Ethiopians. Habashas have effectively used the discourse of cultural racism in destroying or suppressing other peoples. Cultural racism can be defined as the conscious or subconscious conviction of the politically dominant population group that imposes its cultural patterns and practices through its social institutions in an attempt to destroy or suppress the

⁸ See the comments being provided in social Medias specifically under Facebook account holders, you can see that a girl with such attributes could be a significant “ Beautiful Habasha. In that sense all people without such attributes are not Habasha.

⁹ Yates, Brian James (2009) in foot note remarked that “while this claims may not have substantialevidence; many Ethiopians believe it is due to the fact that both Christianity and Islam rooted in the middle East and I have heard it in both formal and informal environments. Most Semitic scholars share a similar view of this term. However other scholars not that it is simple the name of a single Ethnic group which was present in the Northern Highlands since pre Christian times.”

cultural patterns and practices of the colonized and dominated population (Bowser and Hunt, 1996).I believe that the advocates of “Habashannet,” regardless of how apolitical or genuine they may sound, are naively advocating cultural homogenization and entrenching counter resistances.

HABASHA DISCOURSE IN LITERATURE

Given cultural homogenization is by itself appalling, it is also equally unacceptable both broadcasting and making vivid claims for Habasha’s own exceptionality and originality based on a hybrid ethnic origin, an exemplary religion, and an ancient written culture. Western scholarship centered the Amhara people (Habasha group) of Ethiopia as the “unifying genius of Ethiopia, bringing together disparate ethnic groups within a common identity” (Sorenson, 1993). Such framing aligned with and reinforced Amhara claims to governmental power and ethnic exceptionalism. This is partly because most Habasha (Ethiopian highlands) have a highly elaborated discourse about their centrality to global history. Such claims are rooted in their holy text of the KibraNagast as already indicated in the introduction part. The text glorifies the Habasha monarchy as greater than any other earthly power and emphasizes that the “Habasha are the guardians of true Christianity” (Wendy, 2008:89), as all others shall fall away from the path of righteousness¹⁰. She further stated that some Habasha articulate this centrality in sacred terms: insisting that their homeland is the location of the garden of Eden or that the last Habasha emperor was descended from King Solomon of the Bible (Ibid: 82). An excerpt from AzebMadebo (2014: 8) elaborates that,

Like Whiteness, Habasha ethnic identity in the Horn of Africa has been constructed through oppressive, racist, and essentialist means that privileged the Amhara, Tigre, and Tigrinya peoples of Ethiopia who are predominantly Orthodox Christian. Those who have maintained powerful positions and lighter skin/European features have also maintained Habasha exceptionalism through the construction of mythical Christian origins centered on Queen Sheba and King Solomon. Discursive representations of Habasha identity rely on mythos of exceptionalism and difference.

The Habasha are reasonable to insist on their exceptionality and centrality, however. Not only have they been central to world history, as they declare, but also for

¹⁰For instance, the text claims that the Roman emperors were descended from a younger son of Solomon, Adrami, thus the Romans do not have precedence over the Habasha, who are descended from his first born son, Ebna-Lakhim (Budge1922), 123-124.

a long time Europeans were among the first to say so (Ullendorff, 1968 cited in Levine, 2000). It is partly because the Habasha have been quite successful in projecting a coherent self-identity of difference, since Europeans have historically treated the Habasha as an "Oriental" not African people. They are part of this dissemination, providing evidence for the Habasha's claim to be the first people, to have some of the oldest texts, and to have preserved important aspects of the early church.¹¹ Among those engaged by this discourse was Samuel Johnson. Possibly some of these claims are true or not—but all circulate in part because of the mesmerizing nature of Habasha discourse.

In the Habasha discourse, inevitably, Habasha scholars wrote as if they are the only architect, owner and guardian of Ethiopia. Equivocally as if being an Ethiopian means being Habasha. Supposing that Habasha is Ethiopia and vice versa, and let it be all nations believe themselves as Ethiopian, no Ethiopian is more Ethiopian than the other. One is only an Ethiopian, no more, no less. Some Habashas, however, seem to see themselves as more Ethiopians than the others. What they do not seem to understand is that one cannot quantify one's citizenship. One can only be Ethiopian. Not more Ethiopian. Let it be Present-day Ethiopia is under democratization.

In our day, any person who advocates democratic governance and "unity"¹² in Ethiopia must first deal with any form of outrageous cataloging of all cultures into a single schema and must accept the uniqueness and importance of each culture. Let us not justify that such cataloging means no harm. In the United States, for example, there is change: no one imposes a Latino identity on African Americans, or vice versa; no one addresses Koreans as Japanese Americans unless by mistake. Why cannot it be the same in Ethiopia? Why cannot an Oromo, a Sidama, a Somali and an Afar, for example, be just his or her respective beings without accepting or/and labeling himself or herself as Habasha?

It is not problematic to identify one's self as Habasha. But imposing it on others and self-prescribing Habasha uniqueness is ethnocentrism. That the existence of cultural homogenization could radicalize many young

people forcing them to accept 'Ethiopia identity'. Despite the fact that accepting Ethiopian as a single nation by itself is controversial¹³. Therefore, we must oppose ethnocentrism and homogenization, including economic and political dominance of one group, unequivocally if we want to build a strong nation that is socio-culturally, politically and economically fair to all. If it is fair to all, there could be preference to be called "Ethiopian" to "Habasha". Not because it represents all but includes all who live in Ethiopia.

On the other continuum, others are still relentlessly campaigning towards substituting Ethiopia with Habasha. They are not only using as a social identity markers as discussed above but also as Private Limited Company (PLC) for example, Habasha Garment, Habasha Brewery, Habasha Cement just to mention a few for advertising themselves on both domestic and global market also have neither problem with someone saying, a Habasha, an Oromo, a Sidama, a Nuer, a Keffa, etc nor oppose them using Habasha as PLC. My disagreement, however, as I indicated above, is with collectively calling all "Habasha" when some are openly rejecting that label and implicitly imposing this identity by way of commoditization. In sum, Habasha is a performed socio-cultural, political and economic assemblages of hegemonic identity.

Conclusion

In modern times, Habasha has become a complex phrase that has specific social, geographical and sometimes political connotations. Consequently, there is no consensus on what it actually means, which people and territory it represents. Its lack of a consensus definition leaves it quite vulnerable to constant modifications and interpretations. More concerning of late is the politicization of the word by Ethiopianist who has been repackaging the term to mean anyone from Ethiopia and Eritrea despite the fact that majority people in both countries do not regard themselves with the term. So what does Habasha mean? Habasha is not an ethnicity; it is not a country; nor is there a common language or religion they collectively follow. They have no clear answer about their whereabouts: whether descended

¹¹Science is not immune to discursive claims. Archaeologists first went to Ethiopia because of Habasha inscriptions and claims about being the first people and early Christians. "Mystery has surrounded Ethiopia ever since the days of Herodotus; yet in almost every mysterious legend there is generally some foundation of truth"; James Theodore Bent, David Heinrich Müller, and John George Garson, *The Sacred City of the Ethiopians: Being a Record of Travel and Research in Abyssinia in 1893* (London: Longmans, Green, 1898), 84.

¹²As advocated by (WalleligneMekonen, 1969) we must build a genuine national state in which all nationalities participate equally in state affairs, [...] where every nationality is given equal opportunity to preserve and develop its language, its music, its history. [...] a state where no nation dominates another nation be it economically or culturally (Mekonen, 1969).

¹³(Who is an Ethiopian?) was raised as a controversial issue during 1969 by leaders of student movement IbsaGutema and WalleligneMekonen. The later goes on to say that "Ethiopia is not really one nation. It is made up of a dozen nationalities, with their own languages, ways of dressing, history, social organization and territorial entity. And what else is a nation? Is it not made of a people with a particular tongue, particular ways of dressing, particular history, and particular social and economic organizations? Then may I conclude that in Ethiopia there is the Oromo Nation, the Tigrai Nation, the Amhara Nation, the Gurage Nation, the Sidama Nation, the *Waliyta(my own use)* Nation, the Adere Nation, and however much you may not like it the Somali Nation" (WalleligneMekonen 1969:4 cited in Vaughan, 2003:136).

from Africa, or/and South Arabia or King Solomon of Israel. Consequently, the Habasha is an obsolete term that undermines the national identity of many others. Habasha in many ways is a state of mind - hard to describe. Perhaps the best way to define it is by not trying at all. Otherwise, the so called Habasha would be a suspended balloon in mid of air. Despite these facts, the imaginings of Habasha or Ethiopia surfaced through written sources, media and daily discourses. They are discursive constructions that relied, and still rely, on the expansive and political interplay of Christian mythology, westernized sentiments, and racism; discourses that invalidated competing narratives voiced by disparate nations in Ethiopia.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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