



HAILE SELASSIE STATUE, AU HEADQUARTERS

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

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Executive Summary

The 32nd African Union Summit in Addis Ababa in February 2019 was opened with the unveiling of a new statue of Ethiopia's last emperor, Haile Selassie. The statue, in honour of his founding role in the creation of the organisation, is a controversial addition to the AU premises. Opinion over Selassie remains highly divisive given his strong external commitment to Pan-Africanism and continental anti-colonial movements, while domestically, he maintained a highly centralised feudal state that violently repressed demands for national autonomy and political rights. This case study explores the eight-year-long debate spanning from Addis Ababa to Accra over whether Selassie should be honoured with a statue at the AU.

Introduction

On February 10, 2019, the African Union (AU) unveiled a new statue dedicated to Haile Selassie within the walled grounds surrounding its headquarters in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia.¹ Originally the premises, which opened in 2012, displayed only one statue, that of ex-Ghanian president Kwame Nkrumah. This led to deep resentment in the Union's host state, as they felt Selassie should be recognised by the AU for his founding role in the Union's creation. However, the final Emperor leaves behind a fiercely divisive legacy. Contestations soon arose over whether Haile Selassie should be commemorated for his achievements as a Pan-Africanist and founding role in creating the predecessor body of the AU, the Organization for African Unity (OAU), despite his controversial home rule, including repression of protest movements focused on greater cultural and political autonomy for the country's diverse peoples, as well as his official indifference to the 1972-1975 famine.²

The debate over his legacy roared for eight years, inflaming both the Ghanaian and Ethiopian parliaments. Eventually, a statue of him was approved at the highest level of AU leadership in 2017, leading to both celebrations and fierce criticism across civil society groups in the region. As of June 2021, no official acknowledgement of these disputes has been made, and Haile Selassie continues to be an uncomfortable symbol for many.

Background

Selassie Abroad: Pan-Africanism and Role in the Creation of the Organization of African Unity

The opening of the 32nd African Union Summit in Addis Ababa on February 10, 2019, was inaugurated with the unveiling of a new monument dedicated to Ethiopian Emperor Hailie Selassie, situated on the grounds of the African Union headquarters. The three-meter-high statue cast in bronze was created by three Ethiopian artists, Mesfin Tesfaye, Bekele Mekonnen and Henock Azene from the Addis Ababa University's Alle School of Fine Arts and Design.³ The Statue depicts Selassie with his thumbs and index fingers forming a triangular shape in front of his body, one of his signature hand gestures.

The plinth of the statue is engraved with an extract from the Emperor's famous 'Towards African Unity' speech, which Selassie gave to the OAU upon accepting the position as the organisation's first president on 25 May 1963. The extract reads: 'Today, we look to the future calmly and

¹ Yohannes Woldemariam, "The romantic rewriting of Haile Selassie's legacy must stop," *LSE Blog*, February 4, 2019.

² Martin Plaut, "Emperor Haile Selassie's AU statue joins a growing list of Africa's troubled memorials," *Quartz Africa*, February 25, 2019.

³ Ethiopia Observer, "Emperor Haile Selassie statue unveiled," *Ethiopia Observer*, February 10, 2019.

courageously. We look to the vision of an Africa not merely free but united.... History teaches us that unity is strength.⁴

The statue was unveiled by Chairperson of the AU Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat, in a ceremony attended by numerous high profile African Leaders, including Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, Ghana's President Nana Akufo-Addo, Rwanda's President Paul Kagame and descendants of the Emperor himself.⁵

Haile Selassie I was crowned Emperor 'the Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Elect of God' and 'King of Kings (Negusa Negast) of Ethiopia in November 1930.⁶ With the exception of the Italian invasion (1935-1941), he remained in power for almost four decades until 1974.⁷ The Ethiopian Imperial family claimed lineage dating back to the Biblical King Solomon and Queen Sheba.⁸

Ethiopia emerged as a bastion for the anti-colonial movement on the continent, given that they had never been colonised but only briefly occupied by Italy. Selassie's June 30, 1936 speech in Geneva, Switzerland to the full assembly of the League of Nations entitled 'Appeal to the League of Nations' was a revolutionary moment for the oratory of African liberation.⁹ It was the first time a leader of an Independent African state had addressed a full session of the League to stop what has been described as a 'modern, brutal colonisation' from a fellow member state.¹⁰ In the famous speech, Selassie waived an early warning sign against rising fascism and received 'worldwide coverage' that gained him considerable international stature as a result.¹¹

This well documented and high-level advocacy at the League of Nations and triumphant return to power precisely five years after the Italian occupation began earned him a reputation within Africa and abroad, 'as a strong leader who stood up to colonial powers.'¹² From that point on, Ethiopia as a nation became symbolic of 'independence and resistance against colonialism.'¹³

The monument, honouring Selassie, was commissioned by the African Union for their premises. Deputy Chairperson of the African Union Commission Kwesi Quartey, reflecting on the choice of Selassie, stated that:

⁴ Abdur Rahman Alfa Shaban, "Haile Selassie I: Ethiopian emperor celebrated by AU, worshipped by Rastafaris," *Africa News*, February 12, 2019.

⁵ Mildred Taylor, "AU unveils Haile Selassie's majestic statue in Addis Ababa," *Face2FaceAfrica*, February 11, 2019.

⁶ Robert Steele, "Two Kings of Kings: Iran-Ethiopia Relations Under Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and Haile Selassie," *International History Review* (2021): 3.

⁷ Pablo Arconada Ledesma, "Against The Emperor: Analysis of the Student Protests Evolution During the Reign of Haile Selassie I (1960-1974)" *Revista Universitară de Sociologie* 1, (2019): 77.

⁸ Asfa-Wossen Asserate, *King of Kings: The Triumph and Tragedy of Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia* (London: Haus Publishing, 2015), 6.

⁹ Philippe-Joseph Salazar, "Haile Selassie, Appeal to the League of Nations," *African Yearbook of Rhetoric* 2, no.3 (2011): 9.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Robert Steele, "Two Kings of Kings: Iran-Ethiopia Relations Under Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and Haile Selassie," *International History Review* (2021): 3.

¹³ Getachew Metaferia, "The Ethiopian Connection to the Pan-African Movement," *Journal of Third World Studies* 12, no.2 (1995): 303.

The commemorative statue of Emperor Haile Selassie is an important recognition of the Emperor's contribution to Africa's liberation and unity leading up to the founding of the Organization of African Unity in 1963.¹⁴

The statue was further intended to honour Ethiopia's long-standing commitment to the Pan-African movement. With Quartey further remarking that:

This [Addis Ababa] is Africa's diplomatic capital and symbol of Pan-Africanism. We extend our appreciation to the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia as well as the good people of Ethiopia, for their commitment to the AU.¹⁵

Centrally, the monument was erected as a testament to Ethiopia and Selassie's role in the creation of the OAU, a process that was both long and heavily contested at the time. In the mid 20th century, following the immediate aftermath of a wave of decolonisation across the continent, ideological divisions were rife, and the continent was jettisoned into various ideological blocs, most notably the Casablanca group led by Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, the Monrovia Group led by Nigeria's Tafawa Balewa and the Brazzaville Group led by Cameroon.¹⁶

The OAU emerged as a compromise between the three major ideological groupings of Africa; its charter proclaimed the organisation's goals to 'safeguard and consolidate the hard-won independence to fight against neocolonialism in all its forms' and desire 'that all African States should henceforth unite so that the welfare and wellbeing of their peoples can be assured.'¹⁷ The OAU's creation was a watershed moment for the Pan Africanist movement. The definition of this movement is varied on 'account of the sociological complexity of the phenomenon,' however, it is generally understood to refer to a 'continental self-awareness'¹⁸ in light of European colonialism and could be loosely defined as follows:

The ideology of democracy and human rights in an African federal framework ... (whose purpose is)... a government of Africans by Africans, which respects racial and religious minorities who wish to live in Africa with the black majority.¹⁹

Pan-Africanism gained prominence in the twentieth century with a series of conferences originating in 1900 in London, but gradually expanding and shifted to the continent itself.²⁰ Following the independence of Ghana in 1956, the Pan-African movement rapidly accelerated. In April 1957, the first 'Conference of Independent African States' was convened in Accra by Prime

¹⁴ African Union, "Commemorative Statue of Emperor Haile Selassie set to be unveiled at the AU Headquarters," *AU Press Release*, January 22, 2019.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Michael Abiodun Olanrewaju and Victor Osaro Edo, "An Assessment of the Transformation of the Organization of African Unity (O.A.U) to the African Union (A.U), 1963 – 2007," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 21 (2012): 42.

¹⁷ OAU Charter, Addis Ababa, 25 May 1963, preamble.

¹⁸ Fikru Gebrekidan, "From Adwa to OAU: Ethiopia and the Politics of Pan-Africanism, 1896-1963," *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 6, no.1/2 (2012): 71.

¹⁹ Fatsah Ouguergouz and Abdalqawi Yusuf, *The African Union Legal and Institutional Framework: a Manual on the Pan-African Organization* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2012), 10.

²⁰ Kelechi Johnmary Ani and Victor Ojatorotu, "Pan-Africanism, African Union and the Challenge of Transformative Development in Africa," *Journal of African Union Studies* 6, no.1 (2017): 14.

Minister Kwame Nkrumah, followed by the 'All African Peoples Conference' in December that year.²¹ This conference represented the first time 'African affairs were discussed at an African inter-governmental level.'²² The eight countries present (Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Liberia, Libya, Morocco, Sudan and Tunisia) formed a Union of African United Independent States, with the motto 'Independence and Unity' and resolved to 'be united in cooperation and negotiations in economic, political, social and cultural relations.'²³

However, by 1960, when Ethiopia hosted the Second Conference of Independent African States, the initial unity of the Pan-African movement came to take on differing ideological interpretations amongst African statesmen. Nkrumah emerged as the leader of the Casablanca Bloc (Ghana, Egypt and Morocco), which called for immediate unification of the continent under an African Federation.²⁴ Calling for the creation of the Union of African States, with 'no economic, political and other barriers' a radical approach to the future of the continent.²⁵ This directly contrasted the Monrovia (Nigeria and Liberia) and Brazzaville Bloc (Cameroon and Francophone countries) who favoured a more loose political association.²⁶

The next conference hosted in Lagos, Nigeria in 1962, marked a critical ideological split between the different blocs, complicating negotiations for the OAU and causing heavy contestation.²⁷ The purpose of the conference was to draft the charter of the OAU. However, due to its hosting in Nigeria, members of the Casablanca group boycotted the conference due to the hosts' membership to the Monrovia bloc, delaying the process.²⁸ At the Lagos conference, Selassie espoused a neutral position stating that his country belonged to only one bloc, 'the African bloc.'²⁹

As a result, Ethiopia and Addis Ababa specifically emerged as neutral territory, given the rife political divisions between the different blocs. The following year on 22 May 1963, Ethiopia hosted both the Casablanca and Monrovia blocs in Addis Ababa, where they 'agreed to ensure the rise of African unity.'³⁰ Selassie spoke 'on the need for African unity as a road to development.'³¹ His proposal called 'for the creation of a supranational political body that would pave the way

²¹ Fikru Gebrekidan, "From Adwa to OAU: Ethiopia and the Politics of Pan-Africanism, 1896-1963," *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 6, no.1/2 (2012): 82.

²² Kelechi Johnmary Ani and Victor Ojajorotu, "Pan-Africanism, African Union and the Challenge of Transformative Development in Africa," *Journal of African Union Studies* 6, no.1 (2017): 16.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Fikru Gebrekidan, "From Adwa to OAU: Ethiopia and the Politics of Pan-Africanism, 1896-1963," *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 6, no.1/2 (2012): 82.

²⁵ Kelechi Johnmary Ani and Victor Ojajorotu, "Pan-Africanism, African Union and the Challenge of Transformative Development in Africa," *Journal of African Union Studies* 6, no.1 (2017): 17.

²⁶ Fikru Gebrekidan, "From Adwa to OAU: Ethiopia and the Politics of Pan-Africanism, 1896-1963," *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 6, no.1/2 (2012): 82.

²⁷ Kelechi Johnmary Ani and Victor Ojajorotu, "Pan-Africanism, African Union and the Challenge of Transformative Development in Africa," *Journal of African Union Studies* 6, no.1 (2017): 17.

²⁸ Fikru Gebrekidan, "From Adwa to OAU: Ethiopia and the Politics of Pan-Africanism, 1896-1963," *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 6, no.1/2 (2012): 82.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Kelechi Johnmary Ani and Victor Ojajorotu, "Pan-Africanism, African Union and the Challenge of Transformative Development in Africa," *Journal of African Union Studies* 6, no.1 (2017): 17.

³¹ Ibid.

toward complete unity in a step-by-step process,' this satisfied neither bloc and was deemed either 'too intrusive' or 'too weak.'³²

However, it was the least controversial and divisive proposal. Subsequently, the Ethiopian proposal presented by Selassie was signed by the thirty-two heads of states present on 25 May 1963, creating the OAU.³³ Given his ability to overcome these contentious ideological divisions, Selassie gained high esteem as an African statesman and Pan-Africanist.³⁴ The engraving on the statue is a direct extract from this very event and marks the formal beginning of Addis Ababa as the centre of African diplomacy.

Selassie at Home: Centralization, the 'Ethiopian National Question' and Famine

While Selassie initially enjoyed strong support as a Pan-African visionary on the regional level, his legacy in Ethiopia remains controversial due to his internal democratisation policies. Following his return to power in 1941, he reigned over the entirety of Ethiopia, 'with the exception of Eritrea, which, due to its historical characteristics, had its own institutions.'³⁵ However, this quasi-independent status of Eritrea changed drastically under Selassie's rule. His key role in 'cementing the unity of the divergent groups' through the OAU, 'was not simply an act of continental statesmanship in which his country gave something in return for a larger unity', it was in fact 'a shrewd, calculated move in pursuit of a meticulously worked out foreign policy.'³⁶ Six months before the creation of the OAU, Selassie forcibly annexed Eritrea, in direct contravention of UN Resolution 390(V), which formally federated Eritrea with Ethiopia.³⁷

At the first OAU conference, Selassie presented a *fait accompli* of a 'United Ethiopia', which he would use as a later pretext, that the colonial borders were not applicable to Ethiopia and that escalating tensions in the region were an 'internal affair' in which the OAU should have no involvement.³⁸ Selassie further justified this to the Ethiopian Parliament on his twenty-seventh coronation anniversary, stating:

There is nothing new and startling in the reintegration of Eritrea with its motherland. With the passage of time, a territorial boundary artificially erected by the hand of man has been broken down by the Almighty hand of God ... The unity of our Empire is not merely the work of man, but of God Almighty Himself.³⁹

³² Fikru Gebrekidan, "From Adwa to OAU: Ethiopia and the Politics of Pan-Africanism, 1896-1963," *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 6, no.1/2 (2012): 82.

³³ *Ibid.*, 83.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Pablo Arconada Ledesma, "Against The Emperor: Analysis of the Student Protests Evolution During the Reign of Haile Selassie I (1960-1974)" *Revista Universitară de Sociologie* 1, (2019): 77.

³⁶ Bereket Selassie, "The OAU and Regional Conflicts: Focus on the Eritrean War," *Africa Today* 35, no. 3/4 (1998): 64.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Awet Tewelde Weldemichael, *Third World Colonialism and Strategies of Liberation: Eritrea and East Timor Compared* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 24.

In 1961, the armed struggle over Eritrean Independence began with the creation of the Eritrean Liberation Front, eventually escalating into the Eritrean Independence War (1961-1991), resulting in one of the longest-running conflicts on the continent.⁴⁰

Aside from battling against Eritrean liberation, Selassie gained further notoriety as the 'moderniser' of Ethiopia. Throughout his reign, he demonstrated a 'strong commitment to royal absolutism, while at the same time publicly espousing modernisation and economic development'⁴¹ This internal centralisation and modernisation of Ethiopia was a project with 'explicit identification of Ethiopia with the Amharic language, the culture and customs of the northern highlands and Orthodox Christianity' despite the fact that large segments of the country's population are from various heterogeneous national and religious groups.⁴² As Africanist Keller emphasises, Selassie's social policy largely ignored 'the national question' the state provided the non-Amharized ethnic groups with 'only meagre social services and even fewer opportunities to improve their life chances.'⁴³ There was thus no 'conscious policy of national political integration save for the Amharization of certain select groups.'⁴⁴ In Ethiopia's social and economic policy under Selassie 'Amharas, Tigres, and Amharized-Oromos were favoured over other groups,' as a result of this resentment of the internal 'Amhara-Colonialism' of ethnic groups was deep-seated.⁴⁵ This centralisation has largely come to form part of the ongoing Ethiopian 'national question', which continues to haunt the politics of the country in the present day.

In 1955 Ethiopia became a 'constitutional monarchy' with quasi-representative institutions.⁴⁶ In order to legitimise this transformation, Selassie rewrote the constitution, effectively limiting the power of parliament and consolidating his supreme authority.⁴⁷ This modernisation was undertaken with the objective of achieving a 'centralised absolutist state' under Imperial control. To centralise control, Selassie 'replaced the traditional administrations, dislodged the local nobility from power, and increasingly concentrated power at the centre, thereby triggering resistance that usually had an ethnic dimension.'⁴⁸

In order to fund these reforms, resources were extracted in the 'form of taxes to meet the growing budgetary needs for building modern state structure.'⁴⁹ Grievances over this extractive economic model and changes in local government structures lead to numerous uprisings against imperial rule, most notably the 1942, Tigrian 'Weyane' rebellion, the 1960 Gedeo Uprising (also known as

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Edmond Keller, "Ethiopia: Revolution, Class, and the National Question," *African Affairs* 80, no.321 (1981): 540.

⁴² Mulugeta Gebrehiwot Berhe and Feseha Habtetsion Gebresilassie, "Nationalism and self-determination in contemporary Ethiopia," *Nations and Nationalism* 27, no.1 (2020): 98-99.

⁴³ Edmond Keller, "Ethiopia: Revolution, Class, and the National Question," *African Affairs* 80, no.321 (1981): 534.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Article 4 for example holds: "By virtue of His Imperial Blood, as well as by the anointing which He has received, the person of the Emperor is sacred, His dignity is inviolable and His power indisputable. He is, consequently, entitled to all the honours due to Him in accordance with tradition and the present Constitution. Any one so bold as to seek to injure the Emperor will be punished." *The revised constitution of Ethiopia : proclamation promulgating the Revised Constitution of the Empire of Ethiopia* (Berhanena Selam Printing Press of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I, 1955)

⁴⁸ Mulugeta Gebrehiwot Berhe and Feseha Habtetsion Gebresilassie, "Nationalism and self-determination in contemporary Ethiopia," *Nations and Nationalism* 27, no.1 (2020): 99.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

the 'Michille war'), the 1965 Bale rebellion and the Gojjam peasant rebellion of 1968.⁵⁰ To complicate matters further, in 1972, a severe drought hit Ethiopia resulting in a widespread famine. It is estimated that around two million people were affected by the famine⁵¹ that resulted in a death toll in 1974 of as many as two hundred thousand people.⁵²

In 1974, Ethiopia underwent a revolution, whose underlying factors were an amalgamation of the most controversial factors of Selassie's rule, driven largely by 'an anti-feudal uprising, a nationalist-secessionist war in Eritrea, and a struggle by oppressed identity groups for emancipation and equality.'⁵³ The revolution consisted of multiple sectors of society and consisted of widespread civil unrest⁵⁴ eventually resulting in elements of the armed forces, led predominantly by the radical Derg wing, overthrowing the Selassie government and assassinating the Emperor on April 24 1974.⁵⁵

History of the Contestation

The legacy of Haile Selassie remains controversial both inside and outside Africa. The first controversies over commemorating Selassie at the AU stem back to 2012. Beginning in 2009, China, as a gift to the AU, funded and constructed the Unions new headquarters in Addis Ababa. This \$200 million project completed construction in January 2012 and brought with it questions over what commemorations should be displayed on the new premises.⁵⁶ Leading to an eight-year-long debate over whether Selassie should be commemorated at the AU for his role as a Pan-Africanist, despite his controversial rule of Ethiopia.

Nkrumah or Selassie? The Politics of Commemoration

The first controversies surrounding whether Selassie should be displayed at the AU date back to the headquarters inauguration. The first statue to be unveiled at the official opening of the new AU premises in January 2012 was a three and a half meter bronze statue, cast in Ghana of the 'Osagyefo (The Redeemer) Kwame Nkrumah' former president of Ghana and leader of the Casablanca group.⁵⁷ The statue created by Don Arthur, was done so at the request of the AU, after intense lobbying by the Ghanaian delegation in honour of his 'greatness' and 'leading role in the African liberation struggle.'⁵⁸ The dedication on the base of the statue, much like Selassie's, is an

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Pablo Arconada Ledesma, "Against The Emperor: Analysis of the Student Protests Evolution During the Reign of Haile Selassie I (1960-1974)" *Revista Universitară de Sociologie* 1, (2019): 84.

⁵² Robert Steele, "Two Kings of Kings: Iran-Ethiopia Relations Under Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and Haile Selassie," *International History Review* (2021): 10.

⁵³ Mulugeta Gebrehiwot Berhe and Feseha Habtetsion Gebresilassie, "Nationalism and self-determination in contemporary Ethiopia," *Nations and Nationalism* 27, no.1 (2020): 99.

⁵⁴ Edmond Keller, "Ethiopia: Revolution, Class, and the National Question," *African Affairs* 80, no.321 (1981): 544.

⁵⁵ Teshome G. Wagaw, *The Conflict of Ethnic Identity and the Language of Education Policy in Contemporary Ethiopia* (Kalamazoo: International Conference on Contemporary Development Issues in Ethiopia, August 16-18, 2001)

⁵⁶ BBC News, "African Union opens Chinese-funded HQ in Ethiopia," *BBC News*, January 28, 2012.

⁵⁷ Carola Lentz, "Ghanaian Monument Wars: The Contested History of Nkrumah Statues," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 227, (2017): 551.

⁵⁸ GNA, "Kwame Nkrumah statue unveiled in Addis Ababa," *Ghana Web*, January 29, 2012.

extract from the speech given by Nkrumah at the OAU opening conference in May 1963: 'Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hands unto God, Africa must unite.'⁵⁹

Despite enthusiasm from the Ghanaian delegation, the statue immediately caused controversy in Ethiopia. An online petition soon went viral in Ethiopia demanding that the statue of Nkrumah either be joined by one of Selassie or removed in its entirety.⁶⁰ The petition stressed that a monument to Selassie should have preceded that of Nkrumah as he was 'a longer-standing supporter of African liberation than Nkrumah was.'⁶¹ A group of Ethiopian expatriates further sent a letter to AU Deputy Chairman Erastus Mwencha stating that Selassie possessed the 'legal, moral, historical and diplomatic legitimacy to have his statue erected next to Kwame Nkrumah.'⁶²

Politicians within Ethiopia were quick to criticise the exclusion of Selassie. Former opposition party chairman Gizachew Shiferaw expressed that he 'was deeply saddened' and that 'no one deserves more recognition than Haile Selassie when it comes to fighting for the African cause. Not Nkrumah, not anybody else.'⁶³ Ethiopian scholars and politicians became vocal in questioning why their Government had not suggested the construction of Selassie's statue.⁶⁴

The issue further escalated in February 2012, when Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi addressed the lower house of the parliament to defend the inclusion of Nkrumah. Stating in the debate that: 'We as Africans should be proud of Nkrumah for his Pan-African movement ...It is a shame not to accept his role ...It is only Nkrumah who is remembered whenever we talk about Pan-Africanism.'⁶⁵ The prime minister avoided directly commenting on whether Selassie should be included, given that the Zenawi government had never shied away from criticising the legacy of Selassie, publicly referring to him as a 'feudal dictator.'⁶⁶

Opposition leaders were quick to construe this as a political decision. With opposition leader Yavob Hailemariam stating that 'It is Haile Selassie who is described by African leaders as the father of Africa, not Nkrumah.'⁶⁷ The perceived animosity of the Zenawi government towards Selassie soon gave rise to speculation that they 'had been the stumbling block' in erecting a statue.⁶⁸ With Hailemariam stating that 'our government, because of its hatred for Selassie, failed to campaign for him, while Ghana proposed to the AU to have Nkrumah's statue. This is a historical mistake by our government.'⁶⁹ The lack of clarity on the internal discussions surrounding the choice of Nkrumah led many such as Historian Mesfin Tariku to remark that: 'We have no idea on the criteria used to choose Nkrumah.'⁷⁰ Despite the accusations that his government's

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Daniel Howden, "Ethiopians give lacklustre welcome to Kwame Nkrumah statue," *Independent*, February 14, 2012.

⁶¹ Kylie Kiunguyu, "African Union set to unveil commemorative statue of Emperor Haile Selassie I," *This is Africa*, February 3, 2019.

⁶² Aaron Maash, "Long live the king! AU's lavish new home hit by statue row," *Reuters*, February 10, 2012.

⁶³ Ibid..

⁶⁴ Janet Shoko, "Ethiopia's conundrum: A statue for Nkrumah or Selassie?" *The Africa Report*, February 8, 2012.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Aaron Maash, "Long live the king! AU's lavish new home hit by statue row," *Reuters*, February 10, 2012.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Janet Shoko, "Ethiopia's conundrum: A statue for Nkrumah or Selassie?" *The Africa Report*, February 8, 2012.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

animosity towards the former emperor was the reason for the snub, Zenawi was adamant that 'there is nothing political about the statue' and that Nkrumah was the 'automatic choice as an African symbol.'⁷¹

While debate roared for the inclusion of a statue of Selassie, so too did fierce criticism over his legacy in Ethiopia. Counter-petitions and correspondence to the AU Commission, by the Ethiopian Pan-African Society, outlined that while the statute of Nkrumah was fully supported, Selassie was not a Pan-Africanist and that his cruelty was such that any letter 'simply cannot list all the crimes of the ex-emperor.'⁷² Testifying to the divided legacy Selassie continues to have in his home country.

Reinvigoration of the Selassie Debate 2012-2019: The Role of Ghana

In 2012 a key political event rocked Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi, who had been head of government since 1991, passed away on August 20th, ushering in a new period of debate within Ethiopia over which political legacies should remain relevant. On the eve of the AU's 50th-anniversary celebration on March 21st 2013, the campaign for the erection of a Selassie statue at the AU once again revived. Ethiopian President Girma sent a letter to the AU stating that a: 'statue must be erected to commemorate the Emperor who was the first leader of Africa-- I think he deserves a statue.'⁷³

This was further fueled by a petition circulated by the Queen of Sheba Research Foundation, which called the exclusion of Selassie from the AU 'akin to dissociating Dr Martin Luther King from the Civil Rights Movement.'⁷⁴ In this period, a group of 'Ethiopian elders, opposition politicians and scholars' continued to write to the AU Commission 'voicing their disappointment at its decision to ignore the deposed emperor.'⁷⁵

The debate remained relatively subdued after this, until 2017 when Ghana controversially advocated for the inclusion of Selassie at the AU. Like Ethiopia, Ghana had also undergone key political changes, with the election of new President Nana Akufo-Addo of the New Patriotic Party (NPP), who was sworn in on January 7th 2017. Historically the NPP has always been ideologically linked to Nkrumah's key political rival Joseph Danquah.⁷⁶ Controversy soon arose when a quote attributed to former Ghana Special Advisor on Corruption, Daniel Batidam, spread across social media, causing immense controversy. Portions of the statement revealed that Ghanaian President Akufo-Addo had proposed a motion for the erection of new statues at the AU Headquarters. The quote read: '...it took a Ghanaian leader (Akufo-Addo) to propose the erection of other statues to

⁷¹ Aaron Maash, "Long live the king! AU's lavish new home hit by statue row," *Reuters*, February 10, 2012.

⁷² Asrat Deferes, "An open letter to acting AU Commission Chairperson: Say no to Haile Selassie statue at AU," *Pambazuka News*, February 23, 2012.

⁷³ Cision, "African Union charged with rewriting OAU and Pan-African History, says Queen of Sheba Research Foundation," *Cision* May 28, 2013.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Daniel Howden, "Ethiopians give lacklustre welcome to Kwame Nkrumah statue," *Independent*, February 14, 2012.

⁷⁶ Mark Langan, "Ghana's first president accurately predicted what Africa's former European colonizers would do," *Quartz Africa*, February 3 2018.

stand with the statue of Nkrumah at the AU Headquarters.⁷⁷ Batidam later clarified in a Ghanaian radio interview that Akufo-Addo explicitly proposed the inclusion of a statue of Selassie next to the one of Nkrumah.

This statement caused outrage in Ghana, evoking intense criticism in Ghana from rival factions ideologically aligned with Nkrumah and the Nkrumaism ideology within the new Ghanaian parliament. They accused Akufo-Addo of attempting to distort history. They further questioned why a Ghanaian president would propose to erect a statue, arguing that the existing statue of Nkrumah 'should have been allowed to enjoy the enviable slot of standing alone at the iconic office in Addis Ababa.'⁷⁸

This statement was quickly denied by the Ghanaian government's head of communications, Eugene Ahrin, who stated 'for the avoidance of doubt, President Akufo-Addo, has never made any such proposal at any AU meeting.'⁷⁹ This account meant to appease the Nkrumaism factions in the Ghanaian parliament later turned out to be inaccurate in light of an interview given by Ghanaian diplomat and current deputy chairperson of the AU Commission Kwesi Quartey. Recalling the proposal, Quartey, who was present at the 2017 Summit, stated:

When the summit was almost ending, we were sitting on the podium when I saw Nana's flag, so I told the Chair 'Ghana Ghana'. And you know Nana speaks well, he gave a background and as soon as he suggested it [that a monument is erected for Haile Selassie at the AU HQ] the room burst into applause and acclamation. The Chair of the meeting then was the Guinean President, who said that Mr. President, you have your answer.⁸⁰

Quartey insists that contrary to the opposition of factions of the Ghanaian parliament, the role of President Akufo-Addo, in advocating for the statue, has 'boosted Ghana's image' and greatly enhanced diplomatic relations and 'friendship' between Ghana and Ethiopia and was a 'true recognition of Haile Selassie as a founder of Pan-Africanism.'⁸¹

Decision-Making Processes

The continued campaign by Selassie supporters, bolstered by Ghanaian advocacy, proved successful. In 2017, according to Quartey's account, the AU Commission approved the erection of a statue of Selassie after a strongly supported proposal from Ghana.

This was, however only officially announced on April 22nd 2018 in an address given by Quartey at the Adwa Pan-African University Conference. In his address, Quartey stated that Ethiopia has long been a symbol for the emancipation of Africa, and it was due to this that:

⁷⁷ Joy Online, "How Haile Selassie got to stand next to Nkrumah at the AU HQ – Inside story," *Joy Online*, February 12, 2019.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ghana Web, "Akufo-Addo never proposed erection of two statues beside Nkrumah's at AU Headquarters – Arhin" *Ghanaweb*, December 16, 2018.

⁸⁰ Joy Online, "How Haile Selassie got to stand next to Nkrumah at the AU HQ – Inside story," *Joy Online*, February 12, 2019.

⁸¹ Ibid.

Ghana was always uncomfortable to have the statue of Kwame Nkrumah alone at the Headquarters of the African Union without that of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie the First, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Elect of God, Emperor of Ethiopia. This error will soon be rectified. The last Summit agreed by acclamation to erect a statue of His Imperial Majesty Emperor Haile Selassie at an appropriate location in the AU Headquarters.⁸²

In January 2019, the AU released a press release focused on the meeting between Quartey and Princess Mariam Sena Asfaw Wossen, granddaughter of Emperor Haile Selassie I, confirming the installation of a Selassie monument to be unveiled at the upcoming summit. The Princess welcomed the decision to erect the monument, stating that 'this historic decision is an illustration of the unity of purpose by African leaders.'⁸³

After this proclamation, controversy once again stirred. Despite the active role of civil society in Ethiopia in pushing for the Selassie statue, the public was not united in their perception of Selassie as a representative of Pan-Africanism. The new Ethiopian government's support for the statue did not settle the issue of Selassie legacy for many Ethiopians. Mirroring increasingly intense internal debates within Ethiopia about the country's interpretation of history and its political future, civil society groups from both Ethiopia and Eritrea continued to publically raise doubts about the propriety of honouring Selassie at the AU.

In response to the statue's unveiling, civil society groups in Eritrea and Ethiopia sent numerous letters of complaint to the AU Chairperson. One Nation Eritrea wrote to express 'disappointment and dismay at the message of this utter disregard for the ideals of freedom and equality the African Union should stand for.'⁸⁴ They averred that not only was Selassie not a symbol of Pan-African unity, in the same manner as Nkrumah, he was in fact 'simply a feudal king who sought to consolidate his power at the expense of his subjects.'⁸⁵ Further emphasising that any monument to him presents a distorted and romanticised image of his rule, the organisation continued by listing numerous atrocities and massacres that occurred under his rule and proposed that other figures, such as Nelson Mandela and Patrick Lumumba should be commemorated as Pan-African idealists in his stead. Concluding that;

If the African Union wants to be a symbol of unity for Africa and its people, as its name implies, it looks utterly ridiculous to erect a statue of a man who considered himself and brain-washed many others that he was elect-of-God, the descendant of the Biblical King Solomon or even a divinity, the incarnation of God himself.⁸⁶

The Commission did not respond to these criticisms, and the official unveiling of the statue marked the opening of the 2019 AU Summit attended by numerous high profile African diplomats and heads of state. Finally, appeasing eight years of lobbying by some Ethiopian civil society and

⁸² Kwesi Quartey, "Statement of Amb. Kwesi Quartey, Deputy Chairperson of the African Union Commission, at the Adwa Pan-African University Conference," *African Union*, April 22 2018.

⁸³ One Nation Eritrea, "Message to the African Union," *Eritria1nation*, February 10, 2019.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

politicians for the inclusion of a Selassie statue at the AU headquarters while simultaneously reigniting fierce debates both within and outside of Ethiopia over Selassie's legacy. The AU website maintains their description of Selassie as an 'OAU Founding Father', and any opposition from member states surrounding the decision to erect the statue has not been voiced publicly.

Summary and Conclusions

The lack of transparency by the AU Commission on the criteria and decision-making process surrounding the erection of both the Nkrumah and Selassie statues caused political tensions in both Ethiopia in 2012 and Ghana in 2017. After the death of Zenawi in 2012, a renewed debate about the historical and political legacy of the Imperial government arose. One that the statue of Selassie fed into, indicating how secretive decisions at the supra-national level can have ramifications on the national level. The objections of Eritrean and Ethiopian critics of Selassie were largely sidelined in light of larger regional diplomacy between Ghana and Ethiopia. Nevertheless, Selassie himself remains controversial. On June 30 2020, a statue of Haile Selassie in Cannizaro Park in London was destroyed by over 100 protesters, while in the same month, a statue of Selassie father Makonnen Wolde Mikeal was also torn down in Harar, a city in eastern Ethiopia.⁸⁷ The actions were perpetrated by members of the Oromo Ethnic Group who brought attention to the fact that they were 'oppressed under Haile Selassie's reign and their language and traditional religion banned.'⁸⁸

Conversely, in 2019 Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who came to power in 2018, opened a new 'Unity Park' museum that displays all of Ethiopia's past leaders, including those deemed controversial such as Selassie and Mengistu.⁸⁹ The park is located in the former palace of Emperor Menelik II that had been closed to the public since Selassie's overthrow in 1974 and displays a wax figure of the emperor alongside an accompanying description of his 'contributions to the contributions to the country's development.'⁹⁰ While, as of 2020, the site of Selassie's former Jubilee palace is currently undergoing renovations to be turned into a museum, evidencing a shift of commemoration and re-romanization of the Imperial era.⁹¹

These two events occurring within quick succession of each other underscore that the tensions over the historical and political legacy of the Imperial government under Selassie remain particularly acute. Selassie within Ethiopia remains both a figure of celebration for some and a source of contention and oppression for others. His inclusion at the AU thus brought renewed attention to the controversial legacy the Pan-Africanist leader left behind both at home and abroad.

Research contributed by Jadé Botha

⁸⁷ BBC, "Haile Selassie: Statue of former Ethiopian leader destroyed in London park," *BBC News*, July 2, 2020.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Economist, "An imperial palace, a prison—and now a symbolic museum," *Economist*, November 9, 2019.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

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In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

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The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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