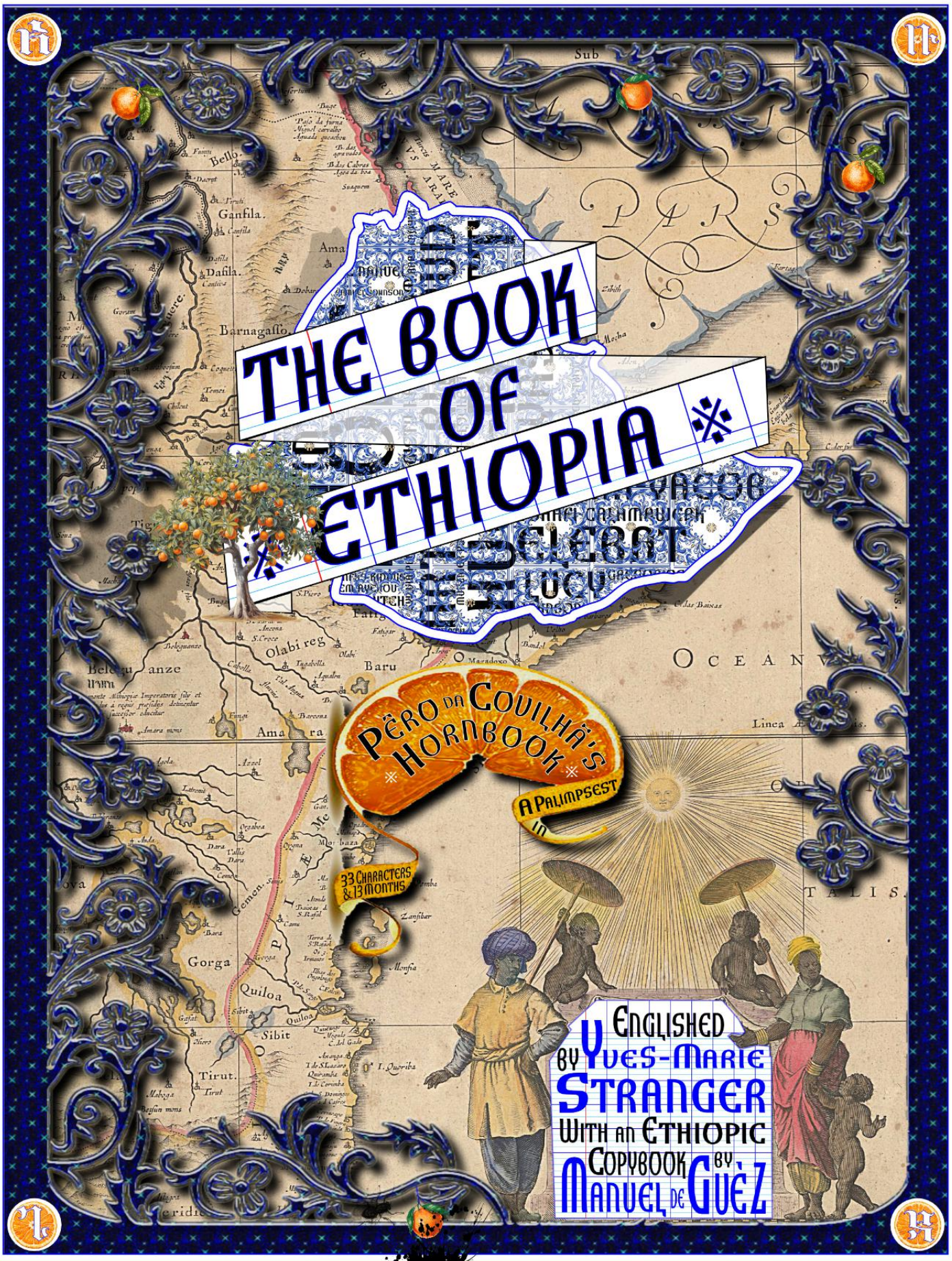
THE BOOK OF ETHIOPIA
PÊRO DA COUILHÃ'S HORNBOOK
A PALIMPSEST
33 CHARACTERS & 13 MONTHS
ENGLISHED BY YVES-MARIE STRANGER
WITH AN ETHIOPIC COPYBOOK BY MANUEL DE GUÈZ

This is an extract of

The Book of Ethiopia

Pêro da Covilhã's Hornbook

A Palimpsest in 33 fidels and 13 Months

More info: Uthiopia.com

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The Book of Ethiopia

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The Book of Ethiopia

Pêro da Covilhã's Hornbook

A Palimpsest in 33 Characters and 13 Months

Englished by
Yves-Marie
Stranger

※

Manuel de Guéz
An Introduction

How can one be Ethiopian? That was always the urgent question of Jean-Michel Cornu de Lenclos in the lands of the Ethiops. A burning interrogation, to which de Lenclos attempts to provide an answer in the biographical sketches that ensue. *'The most handsome of men,'* Homer told us, were the natives of this land of burnt faces—for thus, from the word Αἰθιοπία, was the cognomen Ethiopia derived. In those olden times, the land was a suitably far-away location for the Greek polis.

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Ethiopia provided, for Herodotus, *'the place the Gods disport themselves to sip mead on the Mountains of the Moon...'* And before early historians begin to gossip apropos the *ichthyophagi* and the *troglodytae*, the brave Perseus will deliver Andromeda on the Red Sea shore from the monster Cetus—a myth prefiguring Saint George slaying the dragon: Saint George, the patron saint of England—and, of course, of Ethiopia.

How can one be Ethiopian? What is a man for that matter? What is it that makes the fibre of an Englishwoman or an Inuit teenager? Should we still say that in Merrie England they prize their ale and that the maidens are rosy-cheeked, while in *Ultima Thule* they have a predisposition for whale blubber and like to retire under domes of ice? Of course, in this day and age, Eskimo, English and Ethiopian alike squeeze out Colgate onto the same acrylic brush.

Did the Inuit even have teenagers, before global warming began to melt down their abodes of ice? Did the English truly dance around Maypoles and eat beef stew—before making tandoori chicken their national dish? I find it hard to judge on these matters, as they are composed in equal parts of hearsay and ex-post facto thinking.

In sooth, the characters of former times are playthings to us, silhouettes that we pin to the stage to demean or enlarge, according to the needs of the day. We are constantly reshaping the past to mirror what we wish to see today.

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History is not merely a collection of great men (as a great man once said). However, in that case, what we should wish to know is—did that personage like his eggs sunny side up, or would he rather have them soft-boiled with soldiers on the side? Was he of a quick temper or of an easy disposition—and what made him hold this belief that the greats are not the swivel around which history gyrates? (Not, mark you, that I am adamant in seeking out this particular man's odium for his strict wet nurse and make of this early trauma the kernel around which Thomas Carlyle—for it is he—formed his opinions. In reality, these matters are so complex, so entwined with happenstance that all we can know is that we shall never fully know.)

Nevertheless, if great characters do not make history, then who does? It should be the unsung multitude: the yeoman bent on his plough in not-so-merry England, together with his ailing wife beset by painful childbirth, and the Eskimo who has no taste for snow and pines for sunnier climes. And, why not, a fair sprinkling of a few illustrious men, and women, too, for good measure.

Yet, what of the Ethiopian? I hear you say. What of the swarthy Abyssinian and his unique ways, and the strange lands he inhabits — the land of Sheba, Solomon and the Ark of the Covenant (for this is where the Ethiopian lives)? I should, at this early juncture, sheepishly confess that I know nearly nothing of this people, nor of the characters that would compose it. Perhaps, you will better understand if I say that I could no more vouch for an understanding of George Washington or Diogenes Teufelsdröckh—or Queequeg, for that matter—any more than I can pretend to be able to read the state of mind of King Theodoros* or that of the Lebashai Bariaw.**

Timeless Abyssinia no longer exists. In recent decades, Ethiopia has been impelled forward, as though in a motion picture sped up. The land where time stood still, embalmed in poverty, in which you could imagine having sighted a fragment of Old Israel and walking in the footsteps of biblical prophets, is no more.

'Encompassed on all sides by the enemies of their religion, the Æthiopians slept near a thousand years, forgetful of the world by whom they were forgotten.' Two thousand years of history have been steamrolled by power lines, hydroelectric dams, and Chinese gadgets. Ethiopia has decisively strutted onto the world stage, no longer a backdrop for tattered myths, but a powerhouse in the making. And if it does seem that the autarkic kingdom I first travelled to is fast becoming another strand of the same brush that is painting the world of one colour—well, so be it.

* A character who appears in the syllabary on page 181 ፡- ሀ
** Page 261 ፡- መ

For if Ethiopia seemed of a biblical essence, and if it did possess something different, it should be underlined that its one defining trait was indigence. Famine, low life expectancy, a near-total lack of health care, and a dearth of modern education, save for the moneyed elite (which, for peddling stories about biblical bloodlines, was mindful of securing Western scholarships for its offspring).

While Ethiopia itself, the plot of real estate located in the Horn of Africa, has of course not changed its bearings, the people that live there—the old Abyssinians—are seeking to become less other every day. Today's Ethiopians are more similar, less remote, and more likely to eat the same foodstuffs as the rest of humanity than ever before. And this—as we take note of those care centres, those plummeting infant mortality rates—is surely a good thing.

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For if history is not made by the famous, it is made by the multitudes—and multitudes are what define contemporary Ethiopia. The country, numbering around five million people in the time of Emperor Menelik, has now more than one hundred and twenty million citizens, with a median age of eighteen.

These new Ethiopians have grown up under the aegis of the Fairy Electric. They pack Smartphones in their pockets. McDonald's—and Facebook, Chris Rock and Taylor Swift—are household names. The monster Cetus, Emperor Zera Yacob[*] and Queen Mentewab,[**] are not.

One can therefore wonder, not only at the question of what is an Ethiopian, but if there ever was such a thing. For nations are similar to the fabled knife, that remained sharp after being in use for two thousand years (the handle was refashioned, then the blade—and this ad infinitum.) And yet we would like to believe that we are one and the same as the people of yore. In this view, the English are, at all times, the English, and the Ethiopians are, and always were, the Ethiopians. And we continue to carve up our history with this blade, not realising that it is our razor-sharp utensil—our inward eye—that is forever refocusing on the needs of the present. We only delve into the abyss of time to shed light on our present predicament—And I would vouch to say, that the English freeholder, the Inuit of Ultima Thule and the Abyssinian never did exist—or if so, never in any form that we could unravel. The past is not only a foreign land; it is a country peopled by foreigners.

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[*] Page 306 of the 'Encyclopaedia Abyssinica' (Constantinos I)
[**] Page 173 ፡- ፩ (Berhane Mogesse)

To the query, *'How can one be Abyssinian?'* I lay down for you the bare bones of the story of one Zaga-Christ, an Abyssinian grandee hailed in the literary salons of Paris in the 1630s. How Zaga-Christ reached France from his motherland remains unclear. Nonetheless, he cut a glamorous figure, and to all who would listen—and they were many—he proclaimed himself the true heir to the throne, forced into exile by a usurper.

We do not know in any manner if the tale recounted by Zaga-Christ was true. Not that it matters, as the epitaph engraved on his tombstone seems to blithely admit. You can still visit this grave, in the cemetery of Rueil, close to Paris: *Ci-gît* Zaga-Christ *King of Ethiopia, the original or the copy—De toute façon, la mort a fini les débats.* What has been laid down for posterity, etched in stone, is the story the man held dear, together with his bones, which, royal or not, must now be dust.

Which is why I can only applaud, with a trifecta of reservations, the worthwhile attempt of Jean-Michel Cornu de Lenclos to etch a number of Abyssinian lives for posterity—even though I fear the author's approach to some of these characters, hitherto only known for their hagiographies, is somewhat akin to being a bull in the Ethiopian crockery shop. As to the element of veracity, and to whether the characters laid down in these pages were birthed by women of blood and flesh, or whether their hearts pump with ink, is a moot point, and not a very useful one—de toute façon, la mort a fini les débats, n'est-ce pas? So, I shall not wade into the debate upon the mental equilibrium of Emperor Theodoros or the ethics of the kidnapping of his one and only child. Theodoros had several offspring, some of whom fared well in Ethiopia after their father's quietus. Yet not one figures in posterity's roll-call. Who sings your praises, Ras Meshesha Theodoros of Dembia? Who tends to your grave, Princess Altash Theodoros, first betrothed of King Menelik the Second?

Nor shall I quarrel with the likelihood of Sylvia Pankhurst picking up her distaste for democratic politics in the family pantry—although it does seem rather preposterous that the lady ever harboured such a disinclination for universal suffrage, as Ms Pankhurst was foremost, before becoming an ardent Ethiopianist, an English suffragette, and presently occupies a choice position in the Occidental synaxarium of secular saints.

While I (Y-M Stranger) shall defer to Manuel de Guèz on matters of lexicology, historical exactitude demands a small correction here: Zaga-Christ was buried *inside* the Church of Saint-Pierre-Saint-Paul of Rueil-Malmaison; but revolutionaries, *'emptying coffins of their contents'*, vandalised the edifice in 1792, erasing all physical evidence of the prince's burial. There is a portrait of Zaga-Christ, painted by the famed still life artist Giovanna Garzoni in 1635. Page 277 ← Sylvia Pankhurst's greatest impact on Ethiopia was without doubt her son, Richard Pankhurst, an historian specialising in Ethiopian studies who wrote extensively on all things Ethiopian. (A-tongue- in-cheek commentator once proposed that the proper definition of Ethiopian studies be *'anything written about or prefaced by Richard Pankhurst'*!)

Much is made of the penchant of characters, like the* Monk Gregorios for, say, such and such an *Edelpilzkäse*, over some other lump of cheese. It may be true that these inconsequential choices do matter in the moment. It may be true that details such as these shape the character of a man or a nation. One might recall Général de Gaulle's outburst that *'It is impossible to govern a nation in which there are two hundred fifty-eight sorts of cheese!'* (or, indeed, Ethiopians' wonted remark, *'This is our culture!'* as they lovingly finger their injera crumpet). I would emphasise that many a dinner conversation seems made from what are infinitesimal differences.

Perhaps one needs to be French to grant such importance to curds in the destiny of a nation. This brings me to my antepenultimate, and perhaps most trenchant, censure. It should be pointed out that a number of the characters in this '*Ethiopian*' Hornbook are only Abyssinian par association, a choice which may raise an eyebrow or two in some quarters. What is more, a number of the lives anthologised here, such as** Tintin (from the celebrated *Tintin and the Alphasyllabary*), are walk-ons from the pages of literature—but pace: no library, however obscure, is a universe unto itself. Books placed on the shelves converse with one another. For ink, once applied to the page, is one and the same with blood. Plutarch thought no differently — and neither did John Aubrey nor, for that matter, I shall venture, did Marcel Schwob. Neither should we falter too long on the pernickety topic of appropriation—since, if Ethiopians made the Holy Bible their own, we shouldn't feel any compunction in redrafting some of their best stories. Let's emphasize that, by paraphrasing Robert Louis Stevenson, *'No country ever cornered the market in Apocrypha.'*

If the Ethiopians were able to gift Enoch back to the world, it is because they had borrowed him in the first place. Moreover, if these 33 lives do appear to be sequential, it does not follow that they must be read consecutively. Indeed, you may start with the last before skipping to the first, or alight in the middle, if such is your fancy. Once elapsed, all pasts collapse into the same distance. No more time separates the Ascension of Our Saviour from today than divides Him from*** Lucy, the Australopithecus—or an aeon from an instant. The past is all of a piece and is buried in one shallow grave.

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* Page 149 ⊢ ৭ ** Page 285 ⊢ ৪ *** Page 53 ⊢ ৮

FINALLY, THERE IS THE NOT-so-trivial matter of the choice of the lives herein compiled to stand in as parts of the whole. Although I would have an occasional quibble, I can only bow to the right of the author, as the demiurge of this peculiar Ethiopian cosmogony, to shoehorn his characters of choice into his volume. If some of the lives portrayed seem peripheral, while others appear unfaithful to the portraits we are familiar with—so be it. The single fruit born of one man's psyche may often appear as so many apples and oranges to others, an uncanny assortment.

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YVES-MARIE STRANGER, THE SUB-EDITOR of the work, claims an overarching motif for this collection of Ethiopian lives that he has '*Englished*'[❊] (sic)—a pattern shaped by a dead man's cryptic notes. I shall advise the discerning reader to use their intuition. While the writer may attempt to press-gang the readership into serving as a postman for the monody they are sending off into the ether, the public may well choose to overlook the morbid errand at hand. The readers will then simply omit the fanciful encomium altogether (ANAMNESIS OF CORNU DE LENCLOS), as well as the scatological - minded CLIMBING LE MONT KAKA, that bookends the fictions (and no one will be the wiser if they do.) Readers may even resort to solely leafing through the book, using it as a sort of handy thumb index, a mnemonic device to commit to mind the main symbols of the Abyssinian Syllabary.

Not wishing to weigh down an already complex text, I have kept my editorial notes to a bare minimum.[❊❊] Besides inserting a few entries of the ENCYCLOPAEDIA ABYSSINICA to provide readers some counterpoints, my interventions mostly consist in a light sprinkling of footnotes to illuminate some of the more esoteric characters. I have also suppled a bare-bones translation to the historical *'graffiti'* scratched onto the palimpsest when absolutely necessary.

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❊ MANUEL DE GUÉZ seems blissfully unaware that the term *'Englished'* has a respectful pedigree. See, for instance, the first translation of *The Lusiads* into English, in 1880, that bears the subtitle '*Englished by Richard Burton*'—the same author that penned *First Footsteps in East Africa*, on his trying journey to the city of Harar. (Y-M Stranger)

❊❊ My—M de G—other minor contribution has been to insert, alongside the entries of the ENCYCLOPAEDIA ABYSSINICA, *'Angel Eyes'*. These Ethiopian sigils, in keeping with the ever-expanding eyes in Ethiopian magic scrolls and the cherubs of the Church Debre Berhan in Gondar, suggest parallel readings and offer readers some facilitive cross-references on their journey through the Abyssinian labyrinth.

P. OOO
FIDEL

ENOUGH SAID—THE TIME HAS come to pull in my horns a little. I DO NOT wish to pick a bone with the worthwhile endeavour of the compiler (Yves-Marie Stranger is himself an amateur Ethiopianist of minor repute). For I do believe that this slim volume provides some vital elements of response to the interrogation of Jean-Michel Cornu de Lenclos limned in the cri du coeur, *'How can one be Ethiopian?'* Suffice to say, that with the easement of Mr Stranger's handiwork, Cornu de Lenclos' Syllabary is a broad, unorthodox church—and an all the more vivid one for it.

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FOR ALL THIS TALK OF bygone eras, it does not follow that these figments from the past, as imaginative as they may be, do not exist in the here and now. Paradoxically, the present is the only place where the dramatis personae of the past ever do take form, for the past only lives on in the living.

Likewise for countries such as Abyssinia, which are thought to have vanished. I should know—I have sojourned there for many years myself.

MANUEL DE GUÉZ
HEAD LIBRARIAN OF MOUNT ABORA
❊ENCYCLOPAEDIA ABYSSINICA (EDITOR)

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❊ THE ENCYCLOPAEDIA ABYSSINICA, that others simply call *'Ethiopia'*, covers what MANUEL DE GUÉZ likes to call the *'Orbis Aethiopicus'*—that is, not only modern Ethiopia, but the broader Horn of Africa region including Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia, and even neighbouring zones. Some claim that it is the sole volume of the Library of Mount Abora. (Y-M Stranger)

The Hornbook of Pêro da Covilhã

13 Months of Sunshine
Astergwami: The Interpreter's Tale

'(...) The Aethiopians slept near a thousand years, forgetful of the world, by whom they were forgotten. They were awakened by the Portuguese, who, turning the southern promontory of Africa, appeared in India and the Red Sea, as if they had descended through the air from a distant planet.'

Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire
Edward Gibbon

Astergwami
The Interpreter's Tale

Astergwami (the interpreter), is what they call me. Call me Petros, the interpreter of tongues—he who transcribes and gives shape to the king's dreams. I come to his call and sit beside his leather-strap bed. He reclines, his cheeks pale with the pallor of death. Lebna Dengel, the essence of the virgin, carries more than a whiff of death over him. Emperor of Ethiopia. King of kings. The Prester, as he is known to us, has been running. And I with him. From deep valley to thorny desert, from mountaintop to mountaintop.

We have fled in a flurry of dust and fractious muleteers, retreating from one corner of the kingdom to another. A kingdom he still calls his own—but one he knows now only as a fugitive, a harried prey as marauding peasants stone his ragged column and the Turk with scimitar drawn and cannon at the ready takes whatever pot shots they like, desecrate church and noble women alike and carry off the plunder in continuous caravans toward the east, toward the city they call Harar. Somals, Noba, Argoba, Afar and even the black tribes of Bali that we called vassals but a fortnight ago—they all come in for the spoils following the banner of Ahmed, the left-handed one, whom they call the Imam. He is blessed by their faith, and the Turks see him as their best chance to drive the Christians from the highlands and chase us Portuguese out of the Erythraean Sea and past Bab al-Mandab back into the depths of the Indian Ocean—and thence to India they say, but not stopping there, all the way back to the skinny peninsula, whence we arose that they say—for they have books and know what came across and where they stopped—that they say where rightly theirs... And perhaps they were their lands in Al-Andalus and the Algarve, names which we have kept...

To be continued on page 60...

In the beginning, was a name burnished onto the landscape itself—and Lucy is that name. Lucy's face is burnt, her legs spindly, and her arms hang low by her thighs. Lucy walks, upright, along the river banks, where she seeks out frogs and nesting birds. Lucy does not know her age, though she is old enough to conceive. That spring, they banished her to a distant hill, covering her body in kaolin mixed with green leaves and blue-black berries, in honour of her first blood. After foraging from dawn to noon, Lucy steeps herself in the peat bogs along the river. She is attuned to the damp smells—decaying leaves, gassy eruptions—as she sinks into the sludge, startling warthogs into flight. The pit in which she curls up is cool, and midges can no longer alight on her splattered skin. She loses her scent in the pond, only her slight breath betrays her to the lurking apes. Lucy dreams of a shadowy cavern capped with twinkling stars. She sees herself lying on her back. In front of her rise translucent walls and on the other side of this partition, phantasma press forward, measuring her up with their gaze. These apparitions seem to be holding their breath themselves—as if they did not wish for Lucy to wake up. Lucy stirs. She is remembering headlong races in the savannah. The sound of the crackling leaves consumed to a crisp during the dry season fires. Lucy remembers breathless escapes from the inferno, crashing through the undergrowth alongside antelopes and hyenas. The horned beasts are no more afraid of Lucy and her ilk than they are fearful of brushing up against the hyena—as long as the fire lasts. This is the savannah's truce. Flee as fast and as far as your legs or wings can carry you. The blaze petering out against a barren stretch, the animals slink away, abashed. The antelopes retreat to the thickets, the hyenas to their caves, while Lucy's clan gathers in a clearing. Who is missing? Who stumbled? Who is lying on the savannah floor? That night, one of her kin picks up a red ember and places it in the glade's centre. They sleep soundly. Lucy recalls happy days in the bush—scrabbling from branch to branch, squabbling with monkeys over dove nests lined with chicks. They pluck the fluff from the birds' chests before biting into them, soft and warm as figs. The apes are hardier than Lucy's kind, and they are nimbler in the trees. But it is they, Lucy and her clan, who push the apes back toward the forests when they discover a charbroiled zebra on the plain. They tear off shreds of skin and flesh, eating the meats as much with their fingers as with their teeth. They gnaw on the bones, smashing them with rocks to suck on the marrows. Lucy looks up. She glances towards the heights to the west, a green and white wall, a mix of cliffs, boulders and foliage. This barrier marks the end of the plains, with their alluvium-laden rivers and vast herds, in which she and hers range, from rains to dry season, between overflowing waters and the droughts and their fiery thunderstorms. In the dry season of the year of her blood, a dust-laced simoon began to blow, Such as the hot tongue that precedes the lick of the flame harrying you forward. This wind blew even before the fire so that it made the grasses as brittle as dragonfly wings. When the sky's fire came down—the black clouds on the northern wall had been looming for several days—the plains erupted in a sea of flames. Her tribe's escape, along with every creature of leg and wing, was desperate. A bangarang of dust, smoke, and flame, filled with the acrid smell of fire and a thousand beasts pressed up against one another. The jackal bolted alongside the hyrax, while the leopard fled in lockstep with the baboon. The quag, black as an inkwell, alone seemed untroubled amid the fury as Lucy slid into the mire. There only remained the smoke seeping into her nose and throat, and the fiery reflections above the trees of the riverbank, to remind her of the raging firestorm. Lucy never knew the exact moment her nose stopped tingling. She never knew if she was waking or entering a long sleep, in which jewels glittered for all eternity. Lucy was inscribing herself into the landscape—a slow transformation, for before becoming a diamond, she must first be mud.

Lucy

A grotto : however cramped and dank : encloses all the space required to embrace the world :: And all of the unhappiness in the world transpires from man's refusal to make of his hollow the measure of all things ::

The Apocrypha of Zera Yacob

13 Months of Sunshine
A Preamble, by Ras Petros

THIS IS NOT A MEMOIR or a biography in any normal sense of the word. Rather, it is a thumb sketch, an attempt to recount my life and times in Ethiopia.

Indeed, taking a hint from His Majesty the Emperor HAILE SELASSIE'S memoirs — *My Life and Ethiopia's Progress* — I could have given it some such triumphant title.

But there are already those who think that I have at times displayed an inflated idea of my importance in the scheme of things. I would like to tell such people that I count myself foremost among those who are underawed by my performance in this life. '*Could have done better*' is the appreciation I would scribble if I were Saint Peter handing out the report cards upon arrival in heaven —for one can always do better.

This is not to say that I have not striven to do my best at all times, nor, indeed, that I have not seen much—the very fact that I am now past the canonical age of ninety years, ensures that, by simple arithmetic, I have indeed, as the title of many a recent Ethiopian biography suggests, seen much and witnessed a lot. But quantity rarely makes for quality. Time is a tricky concept. It is not so much that we see or experience time differently as Ethiopians, nor that other cultures, which do indeed count time differently, are essentially different in this

*Encyclopaedia Abyssinica

Ras Gugsa

LATER AS I LAY ON the ground, I'd be happy to have chosen such a good day to die, and that I elected to ride my cream Bora mount, they'd brought me from Selale, and said was the spawn of an Arab stallion brought from Egypt by way of Sudan by DEDJAZMATCH HAILE GHIORGHIS' father himself. The harvests, good that year, were on the threshing grounds, the grasses had been cut, and cattle and men alike were content. It was a balmy day; the skies were sweet blue dotted with fluffy clouds and the air was full of the dance and shrieks of a few dozen kites plunging for the offal of ten bulls slaughtered on the bright green grass.

They'd chosen a man agile and young to gallop off in front of me when my turn of gugs came—and I grudgingly had to accept that, true to his world, my ASHGAR had not done me wrong. '*Choose me some old codger who can no longer hold the reins and can't duck my spear, so I catch him immediately, and I'll have you tied to a horse that we'll whip!*' I'd told him only half-joking the night before. I wanted no repeat of last year. But this young man, I could already see, would not feign or slow his horse, but already he was off like a shot and I let my Bora go. He needed no urging, good horse! The young man, grinning from behind

* All entries from the Encyclopaedia Abyssinica are from the 2007 (EC) '*Mankusa*' edition.

respect. Time, for every one of us, flows at the same speed and in the same direction. We are born, and we experience certain tribulations that we call a life, our life. If we are lucky, we can use the aptitudes with which we have been endowed by Almighty God to make some kind of contribution to the lives of our fellow citizens, that is to say, to the human beings that live on this planet together.

For we are all, first and foremost, human beings as shown by our common ancestor LUCY, who lived 3.4 million years ago and was discovered in Ethiopia. We Ethiopians like to say that all human beings can retrace their origin to the East of Africa, and our beautiful land of Ethiopia!

I have been blessed, not only with an eventful life but also with a life in which I was afforded the opportunity to use my God-given abilities to build, from nothing but my own ideas—and the bountiful resources that lay on the ground, for all to use—the foundations of an industry that has become one of the largest employers and creators of wealth throughout the world; I am talking, of course, of tourism.

This brings me round, in a circuitous route, to the very subject of this introduction. Is it ever valid to think that one's life and times are so important, that other people should truly like to read about them, and purchase the said book—with their hard-earned money—and invest time itself—which, we all know, in this modern day and age, is ever so precious, whatever

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his shield, as he turned back to see from where would come the blunted rod, rode a thin black horse, more of a foal really, not quite three—skinny and quick, but without direction, ha! Just like his rider, I thought. No match for this wily warrior, as I came in for the close, my spear poised. As I released it aiming for the grinning young man's plain shield, I saw his smirk once last time, between the black rim of his shield and the white of the mousseline he'd tied around his head—a kite's shriek, the sweet blue sky, the fluffy clouds and I even felt the cool breeze on my nose as my faithful Bora went down. I left the saddle at the same time as I released my spear. I saw the spear closing in on the shield and my body closing in for the bright green grass, and the blue above and the kites awaiting their carrion and grisly bones. Am I, RAS GUGSA, MENELIK'S favourite and most blessed war general, am I to provide bones for these miserable birds, I thought to myself, and even though I was flying through the thin air like a wingless bird, I kept my eyes sharply on my spear, still following its course.

Like a spear aimed by my master MENELIK, me and my mounted warriors, we kicked up the dust over the new lands we conquered at breakneck speed. Some say it were the guns we'd acquired from the foreigners—the likes of that sulky RIMBAUD. Still, they were often old and Abullahi from Harrar and ABBA JIFFAR from Jimma were well equipped and rich and had their contacts with the Turks and Egyptian and even their own foreigners. No, it was never the guns, it was my horses! Good Boras like my own from Selale, and fat well bred mounts bred in Debre Berhan and Silte on the plains that stretch down to the Jemma River canyon. We rode the south, we

the culture from which we hail—in perusing the said book and plunging into the pages of another's life? True, there are such important figures as His Late Majesty, Emperor Haile Selassie who, no doubt, could use the aforementioned title, and not be seen as being an egotist (after all, a little egocentrism is part of the job description when it comes to being a king).

For myself, I know that my accomplishments have been quite minor—indeed, I think that I failed on all counts. The Ethiopian tourism industry, nascent fifty years ago, when I was first entrusted with its fortunes, has not made much of an impression on the economy of Ethiopia, it sometimes seems to me.

Nevertheless, I am fast approaching my centenary—and those near 100 years have been quite eventful. I have mixed from a very early age, with many of the important and historical figures of our country, the men that laid the foundations of the modern state of Ethiopia, in which we now live. I can also see, that the path forward is now plagued by some uncertainty, for the youth of Ethiopia, as they grapple with the distractions of all sorts of modern communication and entertainment devices that they carry everywhere about them in their pockets.

What they do not seem to likewise carry around about their persons at all times with them, is that marvellous portable device that God devised in His wisdom—that is to say their heads!

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rode the west and the east, and everywhere we went fear tingled the spine of our my master's enemies as they heard the soft thud of our ponies' hooves before we even drew up plans to sweep down on them. The fearsome reputation of our mounts and our peerless riding skills preceded us like a charge of nightmares ridden by our ghosts!

I Gugsa, of late Ras, I conquered the south, galloped into the west, and cut a swath through the east. Some rumble and say, how does an Oromo like him serve the great Menelik? What an idle question, what foolishness. Everyone knows the court is more than half our blood! Menelik's mother, I shall not speak about, for the story is as well-known as it is hush-hush, but I knew her myself as a young man, when I served in Sahle Selassie's court in the middle years of this century, and true she was very black, as black as coal! You can see where my good master Menelik didn't inherit his good looks! But she was sweet and she did know how to sway those pretty hips. As to his father—that rash young man—well, he was Oromo through and through of course: by his mother, his grandmother and probably his father too!

I don't understand why people talk like this, of Oromo and Amhara, as if we were anything different! What is it to me if I conquer pagans who speak my tongue and have yet to learn to be Christian? I shall subdue them and rob them of their cattle and we shall send them priests—but not too fast, lest they then prevent us from looting them, I added with a guffaw to my good master, and our alliance was cemented thus. My fearsome cavaliers and I, half of the spoils, the rest to the throne. I hear they now call me names, and a traitor to my race! As if any man

It seems to me that Ethiopians—and I speak of course here not so much of my generation, but of the young men and women who are today sixteen, twenty or thirty-five—to know where they want to go should first know with some modicum of certainty whence they are coming. And it is in that respect, that I have yielded to the entreaties of my friends and many acquaintances to put down on paper some of the main milestones of my life.

* This wordy preamble made; and my reader hopefully having understood that I am not proceeding with this brief work for reasons of self-aggrandisement, I would like to put forth a further caveat. If this is indeed a biography of sorts, it in no way is an accurate portrayal of events, as they unfolded. Let me spell it out for you, and come back to the idea that the essence of time is everywhere alike. Although earlier, just a minute ago I claimed that time was ever the same, and for all people and all cultures at once, this is not quite true.

Time will sometimes seems to expand, while at other times it can slow down to a crawl. I take as personal knowledge of this, how time used to run when I was a young man, full of energy and aspirations, making plans for the morrow that had to be carried out on the same day.

However, when I found myself imprisoned in the dungeons of the Menelik Palace, for seven long—excruciatingly long—years, I was to discover that time, far from being linear, as I had thought it was up to that juncture, was in reality cyclical in nature,

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had one race, but could not choose what to be! Ask my masters, the 'lions of Judah,' 'the kings of Israel!' King of Israel? Why not? I'll be the king of India, if I can get away with it. All I know is I have ridden my Bora well and thrust my spear into many chests and now my day has come. I charged into death as I charged through life, for my master Menelik, on a horse. It was a brilliant sunny day, Saint Mary's annual feast, near the river called Chancho. My spear, I saw it hit the shield, smack in the centre, and I was pleased, as I hit the green grass. It smelled good, of worms and creamy cow's milk and I believed I heard for a second the echo of my good Bora's hoofbeat—may it cast the fear of God into the pagans' hearts! Before I heard the crisp snap of my neck.

P.345 TAÏTU

Rimbaud

I always was going to board that steamer, bound for Aphinar. We all are of course, but mine was different—and, yes, we all think that too, if we bear to give it a thought. The steamer, gliding into the night, the phosphorescence of the waves in the moonlight, and some band playing somewhere, anywhere... off Zeila, for example, with the soft thud of the Indian Ocean waves meeting the slick wet sands of the African shore that I imagine to be warm and yet refreshing at once. When I set off for Harar and Abyssinia to make my fortunes they soon said I was a weird type, a violent one who got into

* I should also point out that the prose of Ras Petros (as he styles himself), is not only wordy, but that his syntax bears the mark of a hodgepodge of inflections, from Biblical Russian to 1950s American English. It also appears that *Monsieur* Cornu's editing of these '*13 Months of Sunshine*' has perhaps been at times unduly influenced by his own native language. Added to this, and for all his purported lack of confidence in his mother tongue, Ras Petros' sentence structure is at all times highly congruent with the Amharic language. (See also '*በፊት before Before: Ethiopian English to the Fore*'. (M de G, *The Encyclopaedia Abyssinica*) [በፊት ('*befeet*') or, '*before*' in Amharic. The similarity of the intial syllable brings Ethiopian English speakers to place the word '*before*' at the beginning of sentences, thus placing *በፊት before* Before ... by transposing Amharic word order into the English language]

and could slow down to a point where it no longer seemed to move at all. In those dungeon days, I discovered that my memories were a reconstructed edifice, in which highlights seemed to stand out, while whole years could go by without mention in my mental ledger book.

This also holds for the history of Ethiopia—the land of SHEBA, the land of Lalibela and the Axumite obelisks—I am, of course, myself responsible for many of the taglines, the marketing ploys, if you like, that were devised and crafted in the early 1960s, to entice world travellers to our beautiful land—the land of 13 months of sunshine itself!

Ethiopia has a biography, like all countries. And, as my best-read readers will know for themselves, it is only seldom that the history enclosed in a nation's school textbooks recounts an accurate version of the events that transpired in that country. So it is, that countries, just like individuals, have their imagined perfect biographies—the life that they would have liked to have, and not the life that they truly lived—A life in which kings were just, and history's march was unimpeded. In reality, just as any other man, even a king may not rise in the morning to be a mighty King—perhaps he has a toothache on that day? Yes, even His Imperial Majesty had his failings, I am told.

And our beautiful country Ethiopia, as well, far from being solely a glorious relation of the lives of great men, of kings and rulers and monarchs—was also built of the mundane events, and the uneventful lives of the multitudes. I do

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fisticuffs with coolies over nothing. I always was temperamental, one to boil over like milk. And yet here I am, in Marseilles, in this hospital and with my sister mopping my brow, and I can barely move, and they've cut my second leg off now, above the knee. I won't even be able to walk with crutches as they slice me up, chopping me slowly like a banana into a breakfast bowl. How will I walk? They'll have to carry me on a stretcher, to the boat, but then what, when I reach my destination, how shall I walk off the boat? I who walked so much, who rode those desert reaches of the Horn of Africa, forded swollen rivers all the while harrying my camel train servants and their slaves—yes! Their slaves! I never was one for the flesh trade, call me a prude. In ABYSSINIA, even a servant may own a slave to cook his food and warm his nights. A munificent land then, you tell me?

Well, they have an emperor that likes to sit on a throne and make sententious judgments about things he has never seen—he reads the Bible too much and I think he ends up believing the nonsense his priests spout about SOLOMON and SHEBA and the lion of Judah. He lives in a straw hut plastered with mud! King of Judah indeed... He stole my cargo of guns when I took them to Ancobar. Two years' work it had been, and when I say work... Six months frying in the sands of Tadjourah waiting for the confounded French administration to give me a laissez-passer, another four months waiting for the sultan of those whereabouts (SALEM the camel herd I call him, in my heart), to slowly increase the prices of his thin beasts and rib cage showing '*warriors*.' Followed by three months across some of the hottest deserts in the world; the salt pans of Assal, the malaria infested banks of the Awash

not know if countries can have toothaches—but they certainly do seem to have hangovers. There were periods of my life, such as my seven-year sojourn in the prison of the Imperial Palace, when perhaps things slowed to a crawl in the life of the country as well...

So, even if I am guilty as charged of delivering many of these beautiful slogans for our country—although not guilty of the fifty-six charges of embezzlement that landed me for long years in those dungeons—I can only say that the biography that you now hold in your hands, the life of the self-important Petros Hapte-Maryam, is no more an accurate portrayal of my life and times, than those pretty tourist clichés are when it comes to representing Ethiopia.

It is to reflect this complexity, this lack of literal truth, that I have chosen as the title of my story the same catchphrase under which Ethiopia has become famous over the last fifty years. A slogan that you will understand I am rather proud of: 13 months of sunshine.

So, dear reader, what you will find in this book, in this advent calendar, so to speak, are a few events and milestones that have been recalled and re-collected long after the events themselves transpired.

And, just as in those Ethiopian Royal Chronicles, that lurch from battle to battle, from important date to tragic year, I hope that you will understand that, far from wanting to enlarge myself, I am simply trying to put a little personal touch on the broader canvas of Ethiopian

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River and the tractations of the dirty and wiry haired Danakil of the interior who will say *'who are you?' 'The sultan didn't send word; hasn't paid us our safekeeping fee,'* or make bravado comments about how *'they no longer fear the Christian dog* Menelik.'

You walk all day, harassing your slovenly servants and their deadbeat slaves and whip half-dead camels, you fry in the heat only to spend the night gripped by unknown fevers.

'Where has he gone, that violent youth who didn't like critiques,' I am told they took to asking in Paris, in Montparnasse, in those dim troquets in which they like to drink coarse absinthe, for the muse they say, but really because it blunts their fright and is dirt cheap. *'He no longer writes,'* they add, *'but pushes caravans of a thousand and one slaves to the shores of the Red Sea, sent from the Negus of Abyssinia to the Khedive of Egypt.'* Fools. *'He has a... harem they call it, with ninety-nine maidens whom all speak a different tongue and whom are all equally as pleasing,'* they go on to add, their absinthe addled brains full of the idle paintings of the orientalists who spend a weekend in Algiers and come back painting Sheherazades in mousseline.

I never wrote again, and this, this beyond everything, keeps their minds reeling and will do so for quite some time to come—I am sure. He squandered his talents, ceased brutally to write those heavenly poems at age twenty-one, they will say. He chose to fatigue himself, traipsing the deserts of the Horn and all in search of gold. They will mutter, shaking their heads. And those letters, those letters! To his family, so mundane, so pedestrian. So worthy of some... well, yes, some merchant with a coarse heart.

A Preview

But I stray, far from the bedside of the King of Kings, of Lebna Dengel of Ethiopia, as he lies dying on this mountaintop of Debre Damo that they rightly call inexpugnable. I fear that indeed the only way out is up to the heavens and that we will never alight from this great stone fortress but upwards when our souls reach for the clouds, just like this mountain country from which I can no longer flee, to which I scrambled up making of stories ladders.

The interpreter, he calls me and sometimes, fondly, my interpreter. It is true that I speak many tongues, I, [illegible] a [illegible] re[illegible] M[illegible] a [illegible] de[illegible] Ca[illegible] Sp[illegible] Ca[illegible] up[illegible] m[illegible] civ[illegible] tai[illegible] en[illegible] ch[illegible] He[illegible] his[illegible] do[illegible] co[illegible] looks at me with hunger, and for all his sunken cheeks and matted hair there is a sparkle again in his eye when he sees me. Between his wheezing and his dry cough and heaving lungs that give off a rattle at every breath, he greets me saying things like—

'Petros, you are my favourite foreigner, the king's stranger you do know do you not? And if I call you interpreter it is because all who approach the King of Kings should be named and rendered intelligible, is that not, and you understand this, you who came to me forty years ago walking out of the desert half dead but trying to enter my tent without decorum and a swagger that nearly had you bastinadoed by my eager cup bearers.

I am a Portuguese! You ventured to shout in the fenced off corridor of wool that led to my chambers and you shouted and screamed—in Arabic—it was a wonder to behold: you half dead and

up limbs and you with a head of grey hair...'

To be continued on page 69...

'There's no planet B—but there's always Ethiopia. They have 230 more letters in their abugida—and a thirteenth month, just in case you run out of options.'

(The Maxims of Zera Yacob)

The Book of Ethiopia

Pêro da Covilhã's Hornbook

A Palimpsest in 33 fidels and 13 Months

Hardback
378 pages
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The Book of Ethiopia

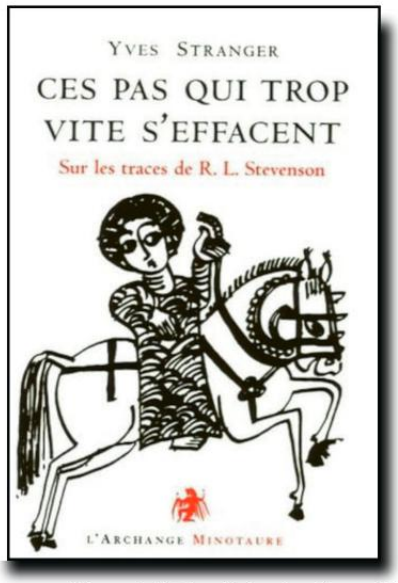
Cosmas Indicopleustes
(Cosmas-Who-Went-To-India)
was born in a fishing village built at the foot of limestone cliffs. He spent his first years reconnoitring this pile of stone, and espying the Church of the Cross, a cult that used these vaults for its sacraments. The basalt dwellings of the village abutted these calcareous crags so that the whole was most harmonious. The end of this bed of stone dipped its toes in the Sea of Marmara—a brack-

They were in awe of the squalls they weathered in this Pont-Euxin—so that they called it 'Black.' Cosmas' port was a landing post for keels sailing the Mediterranean Sea. Lo! what tempests! From this sea, the fishermen hauled tuna and bream—and fetched loads of wool and iron ore. This sea itself, according to the Cretan deckhands, was itself nothing more than a pond, when compared to the Ocean that lies beyond the Pillars. There, began an expanse that only found its limit at the confines of the world. At this endpoint, the waters gushed off the edge in a cataract, carrying off into the void whole schools of fish, whales, as well as the foolhardy, such as the sailors known as Basco, which congregate hereabouts to prey on the rich fishing banks. These chutes announced themselves by means of reefs that held back the waters, 'like a man's teeth holding back his tongué', the Cretan boys added. 'Without these reefs, all the waters would hurl themselves from the world's mouth much like the vomit of men at the Bachanals.' Cosmas was all ears for these stories, which he heard down on the wharves before returning at night to his reddish abode. He would slip into waterborne reveries in which whales plunged into the ether at ocean's end. One day, he must have been twelve years of age, Cosmas drifted off while listening to the tales of sailors who wore turbans of muslin as light as spume. When he awoke, with the imprint of the sail ropes against which he had dozed on his cheek, Cosmas saw the white cliff line fading on the horizon. He was only to see it again forty years later, upon his return to these parts, when the bed of stone was to transform itself, to his utmost contentment, into his tomb. But [illegible] had perhaps fallen asleep purposely, [illegible] the first sea, from east to west. He craft[illegible] of this port made light of their annua[illegible] lars, in a sea they called Hyperion. They returned with salted co[illegible] they bartered these goods for mediocre olive oil, in Hyperborean Isles, where lived many giants. Cosmas was not to travel those immensities, it is so. Returning to the Levant, he became a terguman. His ship masters hauled cargo by way [illegible] andria to the channel known as the 'Eritrean Sea', which means Red. There lived around this sea men who lived off depreda-tions and raw fish. Cosmas, the port child, spoke words that their ears could fathom. But having undertaken the thirteen-day footslog over this isthmus many a time, Cosmas grew weary. He was a man of waters, not of those parched barrens. So he now took up the life of a pilot in the Eritrean waters. Here, he felt at ease, both in Berenice, where he spoke the tongue of the Yemen and partook of pre-served dates, and in Adulis of the Axumites, in which he consumed raw sea creatures as is the custom of that land, and conversed in Ge'ez. In this Adulis, a banyan took him on-board and Cosmas now set his eyes on the Ocean, that the Semites call The-Mother-of-Waters, and the Hindu Our-Mother-of-All. In Hindustan, he understood what he had con-jectured at the Pillars of Hercules—that his native town was a speck of dust in the world. This truth wounded and soothed Cosmas in equal measure. He bethought [illegible] in the vestries of the Christian church on the shores of Marmara. The smell [illegible] of Mabon oil came back to his nose with the force of an unsealed barrel of anchovies. And then knew, that the world is made in the image of the Holy Covenant, such as ma[illegible] his watercraft with spices and peppers in the between Calicut and Sindh. In winter he laded [illegible] monsoons, he embarked cloth and glass flasks Hindu river of the north. At the time of the [illegible] Cosmas conceived of a world that would be his in the waters of Aden, Adulis, and Berenice, [illegible] wake of ink that [illegible] indelible—the itch anchor in these liquid quarters. He left behind a [illegible] He built the world in [illegible] of the Tabernacle to become immortal is a mortal trait after all [illegible] Manna [illegible] hint in the cle of his Christian faith, echoing [illegible] men to wh[illegible] writing shade of the porous cliffs. The handful of literate [illegible] eating pag[illegible] teased him for having a vision worthy of a fish-[illegible] had no truc[illegible] was round—had he not read Ptolemy? Cosmas [illegible] ography wa[illegible] contem-poraries never understood that his parabolic ge-[illegible] ography is [illegible] mark on the world. Today, Cosmas' Christian To-[illegible] shores of [illegible] the peoples and customs of the [illegible] mocked [illegible] continues to be [illegible] tio[illegible] fabrica-

Cosmas

Zera Yacob and some bathawi were feasting on bean sauce and injera : 'The world resembles a cylinder of sheepskin : a volume carefully shelved away by a celestial hand' : opined one of the monks of the monastery of Debre Bizen : as he slurped his beans : 'The world is shaped such as the Holy Tabernacle' : enounced the second cenobite : who had taken his robes in the monastery of Saint Mary of Zion of Axum : 'Would you pass the salt?' politely enquired Zera Yacob :

(The Apocrypha of Zera Yacob)

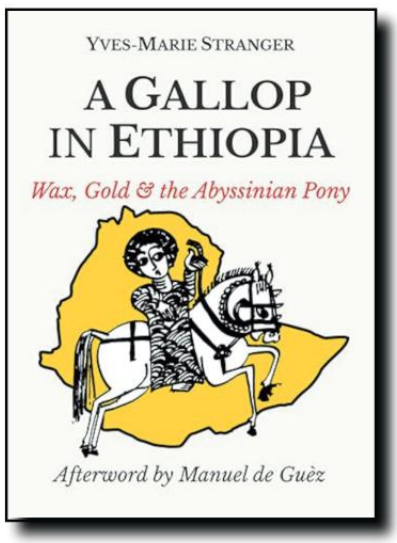


Ces pas qui trop vite s'effacent, Sur la piste de Robert Louis Stevenson, des Cévennes aux monts d'Éthiopie. L'Archange Minotaure / 2005

« C'est à B..., alors que je terminais un récit sur l'Éthiopie que je décidai d'entreprendre un second voyage, autant sur mes traces que sur celles de Robert Louis Stevenson. Je pensais qu'en arpentant le même chemin, je ne manquerais pas de faire surgir, au pas régulier d'un solide marcheur, ces souvenirs anciens. J'escomptais un règlement de la mémoire par un règlement des sens. Les échos des sentiments vécus en 1994 devaient me parvenir du fond des combes Cévenoles où ils étaient restés tapis. J'allais retrouver – c'était sûr – l'empreinte, sur les sables mouvants du passé, des pas d'un cheval blond. Échos d'un écrivain victorien et d'un sauvageon romantique maniant la littérature comme la fourche. Et peut être en aurait-t-il été ainsi si j'avais choisi une autre date de départ. En ce miroir il y eu une fêlure. [...] C'est l'histoire d'une démarche contrariée, d'une trajectoire déviée. C'est un journal qui commence le 12 septembre 2001. »

« Ce petit livre très peu connu est l'un des plus beaux et des plus émouvants récits de voyage que j'aie pu lire. Car l'auteur, qui a écrit la plupart de ses autres ouvrages en anglais, maîtrise parfaitement le français, et met ainsi la langue du récit au service de sa sensibilité tout aussi remarquable. Sa mise en abîme de deux autres voyages dans celui qu'il raconte (celui de R. L. Stevenson et le sien, quand il revint, beaucoup plus jeune, chez lui avec son cheval sur les mêmes chemins) nous fait triplement voyager : dans la littérature, dans le passé de l'auteur (dont les réminiscences réveilleront chez certains lecteurs le même type de souvenirs, de sensations et de sentiments), enfin dans une France rurale en voie de disparition. »

Olivier Rimbault



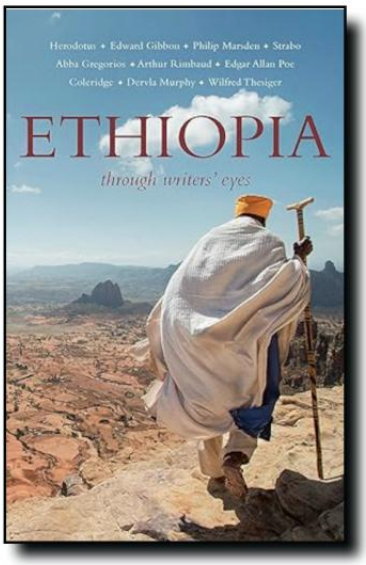
A Gallop in Ethiopia *(Uthiopia / 2022)*

A compact and vigorous book (proportionate to the short but ever ressourceful Ethiopian equine), A Gallop in Ethiopia (also available in French: Un galop en Éthiopie, la cire, l'or & le poney abyssin) is for anybody interested in Ethiopia who would like to better understand where the country is headed.

Including three interviews with people who have intimate knowledge of the country. Rahel Shawl is a well-known architect who designed many of the most iconic buildings in Addis Ababa. Beede Mekonnen is a respected businessman once jailed for the crime of being the grandson of Haile Selassie. Éloi Ficquet is a co-editor of Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia (Hurst), and a former director of the French Centre for Ethiopian Studies.

« A Gallop in Ethiopia is not a reference work (...) is like a spotlight, that briefly and idiosyncratically illuminates a variety of fascinating topics in turn. It is a type of autobiography, of a Frenchman, Yves-Marie Stranger, who moved almost by chance to Ethiopia in 2000, stayed, married an Ethiopian woman, and returned to France in 2016. In those years, Ethiopia underwent great change, as did Stranger himself, and he shares glimpses of his adventure with his readers. »

Charles Haywood @ TheWorthyHouse.com



Ethiopia Through Writers' Eyes. Edited by Yves-Marie Stranger (Eland Books / 2014)

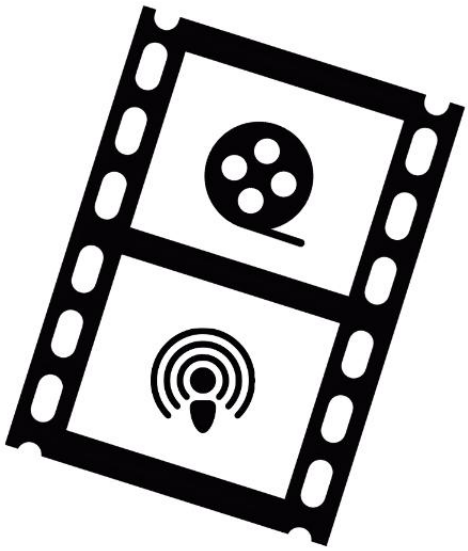
It is this intertexual play carried out on a mind's eye map, which is so fascinating to the amateur Ethiopianist, and to the visitor to Ethiopia. No country can be better grasped from the depths of an armchair, and a library is as good a place as any to make out the ancient contours of the land of Prester John, Mandeville and Rasselas, as well as the new outlines of a country that today is attempting with great vigour to shake off the modern myth it was saddled with—of Korem and the 1970s famine, of the Derg's Red Terror, and of poverty and refugee camps.

The BBC's Michael Buerk and Jonathan Dimbleby's pronouncements on Ethiopia have had as much, if not more, resonance in the modern era as all of the Classical and Enlightenment authors put together. And yet – when Michael Buerk began his famous intervention at dawn in Korem, he too harked back to the text and the myth, when he intoned on camera those now famous words: *'Dawn, and as the sun breaks through the piercing chill of night on the plain outside Korem, it lights up a biblical famine, now, in the twentieth century.'*

Including: Herodotus, Edward Gibbon, Afewerk Gebre-Yesus, Philip Marsden, Strabo, Abba Gregorios, Arthur Rimbaud, Aberra Jembere, Edgar Allan Poe, Coleridge, Dervla Murphy, Wilfred Thesiger among others.

«[Ethiopia through Writers' Eyes is] A sort of historical travel guide to a much-misunderstood country, albeit one as unreliable as any narrator; or as Stranger himself puts it in one of his illuminating essays, adapting Borges, 'one could venture to say that all countries worth their salt create their own geography – from myths, old maps, and wishful thinking.»

James Copnall, The Times Literary Supplement



:- *The Oranges of Prester John*, a film trailer.

This short takes us to the less seldom visited Birtukan sites. What is left today of the mixed culture of the Ethio-Portuguese in Ethiopia ?

The Oranges of Prester John is available on Youtube.

:- *The Abyssinian Syllabary* podcast spells out the history of Ethiopia through a series of 33 biographical vignettes with each life corresponding to one of the main 33 symbols of the Abyssinian Syllabary – or ABUGIDA.

The Abyssinian Syllabary is available on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Youtube and Deezer.

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ጋብዥ ጠቢያ ከተኔ ጋር ከሰራ ሰርዶ ሰራ ። ከዚያው ሰዉ ዉሥጥ ወሬና መሳጭ ጓደኛ አቢዶ ከቴን ተያያዘ ። አሳቡ ከመቼም አንር ሌላ ማየት ነው ። ይኸን አይተው አዛዜ አባትና ልጁን ደጅ ጋብዥ ከዚህ ሸሽቶ ወደ ይድናኦ ደጅ ሔዶ ። ከአጠገቤ ከዚህ መጠጥ ቤት ሰዉ ተሰብስቦ

ጀመርኳ። እርሱም ደስ ይበኝ እንዲል ሁሉ ሰላትህ እያወቀች ፈረታ ከወንድ ጋርከንጉሥ ጋር በሠራበገንዘ ታልሆነበትመሮ ደስ ብሏትሥጋ ሥጋ ሆነ ። ከዚህ ሠመ ደ ሃ ን ። ” ” ”

መጽሐፈ ኢትዮጵያ

Collated by the publisher Cornu de Lenclos from manuscripts discovered in Lake Tana monasteries, this volume presents a near facsimile of the 16th century hornbook of the Portuguese envoy to Prester John, Pêro da Covilhã. This hornbook is an 'abecedary' in which each character stands for one of the main 33 symbols of the Abyssinian alphasyllabary—or abugida.

From antique Axum to modern-day Addis Ababa, a symbolic cast of characters — half historical, half mythical — inhabits the pages of The Book of Ethiopia:

Lucy [ሀ], Arab Faqih [ሐ], Munziger Pasha [መ], Berhane Mogesse [ሠ], Menelik Kiddus [ሰ], The Monk Theodoros [ረ], Victor Lazlo [ሸ], Arthur Rimbaud [ቀ], King Theodoros [ተ], Leonard Cohen [በ], Umm Delombera [ቸ], Alessandro Zorzi [ኀ]... and many more.

Handed down inside Covilhã's family for five centuries, the Hornbook was completed in the mid-2000s by Pêro da Covilhã's direct descendant, Ras Petros, who appended his own '13 Months of Sunshine', a far-ranging account of the Haile Selassié imperial era and Derg regime years.

Part abecedary and part magic scroll, The Book of Ethiopia breathes a new life into the characters of the Ethiopian palimpsest.

Design by Menelik

Camões Instituto da Cooperação e da Língua
Portugal
Ministério dos Negócios Estrangeiros