



HERALDRY IN ETHIOPIAN CONTEXT: CULTURAL AND FOUNDATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

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Introduction

The present brief presentation examines a range of sources in an attempt to discover historic uses of symbology that might justify the establishment and maintenance of an Ethiopian heraldic authority, as well as the legal mechanisms that would provide legitimacy for such a body. I should point out that this is not an exhaustive review of the available sources, but rather a general overview of the key issues in considering the matter of heraldic practice in Ethiopia.

Historical Precedents

As with all rich and ancient cultures, Ethiopia has a long history of cultural symbols and graphic representations of ideas and of collective and individual identity. It must, however, be stated that heraldry, in the narrow sense of a shield and associated devices divided and charged with symbols, described with specific heraldic terminology and following a prescribed set of rules as to the configuration, coloring, and other aspects of display, did not occur in Ethiopia. This was true not only in ancient Ethiopia, but also in the context of the Empire up to 1974. Thus, it may be definitively stated that a native Ethiopian heraldry, according to that narrow definition, did not exist.



This is not to say that symbology that meets many of the same cultural functions as heraldry proper did not exist. In particular, many Ethiopian emperors, nobles, scholars, and clerics had personal seals, often of their own design, that incorporated one or more important symbols (e.g., the Imperial Ethiopian Lion), and often ciphers in Amharic or Ge'ez letters referring to names, titles, or a combination of these. Among the documented seals are those of Emperor Menelik II (as well as an example of the seal he used as Negus of Shoa, before becoming Emperor), Empress Taitu, Lij Iyasu, Ras Tafari (before becoming Emperor Haile Selassie I), Ras Makonnen (hero of the Battle of Adwa in 1896), and Dejazach Beiéné.

The only Ethiopian noble line known to the author to have borne arms in a traditional European sense during the reign of the Solomonic Dynasty, was that of HH Asfa-Wossen Asserate, and his father Le'ul Ras Asserate Kassa. These arms were designed in London by Algernon Asprey and feature a set of scales and a dove grasping an olive branch in its beak. Even so, these arms are a European heraldic "spin" on elements in the seal of Asserate Kassa's father, Le'ul Ras Kassa Hailu, Field Marshall of the Imperial Ethiopian Army, as that seal appeared in 1941.

The 'imported' arms of Le'ul Ras Asserate Kassa and his descendants are, it may be said, an agreeable fusion of European and Ethiopian tradition, but it should also be mentioned that Ethiopian Emperors have not themselves assumed arms, nor have, to the author's knowledge, other members of the Imperial Family (including those who have sponsored the establishment of an Ethiopian College of Arms). The Imperial Family and the Crown Council have used a very attractive symbolic display which includes a variety of imperial and religious symbols of the Solomonic Dynasty, as well as human "supporters" within a mantle and surmounted by the Ethiopian Imperial Crown. However, although this display is both attractive and effective, it is not heraldry in the European sense, as it lacks a shield, a helm, and other elements central to a full heraldic achievement in a European context.

In fact, as the shield was important in the Ethiopian military as late as the early 20th century, it is not unreasonable to have predicted a symbolic use of the shield, but the Ethiopian shield, which is round and often ornately decorated, does not lend itself to painting in the way that European shields did. It is possible, of course, to suggest a system of identification based on the intricate patterns of the Ethiopian shield, but as a practical matter, such a system would not be useful in battle, and there is no evidence that a system of personal or family identification based on shield decoration evolved in Ethiopia. The intricate patterns of Ethiopian shields are, however, recalled in the insignia of the Order of the Star of Honour of Ethiopia.



Meanwhile, European colonialism did, in fact, provide European heraldry in at least some part of the Ethiopian Empire. Specifically, Eritrea was given civic arms as an Italian colony in 1919: Per fess: in chief Argent, upon a Lion passant Gules a mullet Argent, and in base barry wavy of 6, Azure and Argent. These arms were in effect from 1919 to 1926, and again from 1941 to 1952. During the period of 1926-1941, the arms were altered to include on a chief Gules a fasces Or between two palm branches Vert, which added the Italian nationalist symbols during the Fascist period.

In 1952, when Eritrea gained independence from Italian colonial rule, the Italian imposed arms were discarded, but Eritrea retained a logo of an olive branch encircled by an olive wreath, reverting to a non-heraldic, but certainly more ancient, form of symbolic identity within the Ethiopian Empire.

In short, we may state that European-style heraldry has existed in Ethiopia only in the form of imported or imposed arms of external origin. In some cases, such as the present Imperial "Arms," a non-heraldic display is couched in a presentation vehicle that may make it look superficially more like elaborate European heraldic achievements, but heraldry, as narrowly defined in European context, cannot be demonstrated in Ethiopia, either historically, or in the symbols used by the Imperial Family in the 20th century, or by the present Crown Council.

Legal Authority

Even if one accepts that European-style heraldry did not exist in Ethiopia, one may well ask whether an Ethiopian heraldic authority might now be established. There are several important issues to consider in this regard:

First, any sovereign government may establish whatever heraldic authority it desires. The present Ethiopian government, were it to establish a College of Arms, would have little trouble in characterizing it as a legitimate body. (Of course, I'm well aware that it is the position of the Crown Council, and I'm sure every person in this room, that the coup that overthrew and murdered HHH Haile Selassie I was in no way a legitimate transfer of sovereignty, and that the Solomonic Dynasty retains the only legitimate sovereignty of Ethiopia's Imperial traditions.) It is also true that most authorities on honors and chivalric orders agree that a non-regnant house may continue to administer its honors and prerogatives, so far as it is able, in exile. For the most part, there is agreement that only those honors extant before the house was no longer regnant may be conferred and administered.



Heraldry, however, might also be characterized as something other than an "honor." Indeed, in several republics, heraldry is regulated without any indication of social status conferred by a grant of arms. Thus, heraldry might be simply seen as a cultural and genealogical affair.

In light of the above, it may be suggested that an Ethiopian College of Arms could be created under authority of the Imperial Crown, provided that it remained clear that such grants of arms were not 'honors' in the same sense as the Imperial Ethiopian Orders. The key point here, however, is that such a step would have to be made under authority of the Ethiopian Crown. In accordance with the reconstitution of the Crown Council by HHH Emperor (in exile) Amha Selassie I in 1993, the prerogatives of the Ethiopian Crown following Amha Selassie's death in 1997 appear to reside not with any single member of the Imperial Family, but rather corporately with the Ethiopian leaders and members of the Imperial Family named in that document. Thus, were an Ethiopian College of Arms to be established post-1997, its establishment would have to be agreed upon by these corporate custodians of the Imperial prerogatives.

This view is supported by Article 70 of the 1955 Imperial Ethiopian Constitution:

ARTICLE 70

The Emperor may in such instances as He deems appropriate, convene the Crown Council which shall consist of the Patriarch, such Princes, Ministers, and Dignitaries as may be designated by Him, and the President of the Senate. The Crown Council shall be presided over by the Emperor or by a member designated by Him.

Rationale

A further consideration, were the legal obstacles outlined above to be overcome by the sponsorship of the present collective custodians of the Imperial prerogative, would be the advisability of establishing an Ethiopian College of Arms. As demonstrated, the use of European-style heraldry was unknown to Ethiopia before the 20th century, and in the case of Eritrea, was a by-product of colonial subjugation. This would suggest a rather negative regard for heraldry from an Ethiopian perspective.

On the other hand, an official registry of Ethiopian seals would, it seems, be a culturally relevant function that could be sanctioned by the Crown Council with a demonstrable, historic Ethiopian context. Indeed, such a registry could embrace seals of heraldic origin as well, should the registry have a desire to include them, but there would be no restrictions on the symbols and languages employed, other than those guidelines that such a registry might wish to establish. Indeed, the rare examples of Ethiopian heraldry have, as we have seen, incorporated elements from much older personal seals. To ignore the historic validity of personal seals themselves devalues them by grafting their contents onto a foreign symbolic tradition.

Conclusion

Based on the history of personal identifying symbols within the Ethiopian cultural milieu, there is little to recommend the establishment of an Ethiopian heraldic authority operating purely according to European practices. It is, quite simply, not relevant to the history and culture of the peoples of Ethiopia. Rather, it calls to mind the colonial pretensions of Italy so heroically resisted in famed actions such as the Battle of Adwa. The Crown Council and members of the Imperial Family have ample cultural responsibilities, including the administration of the Imperial Orders, charitable organizations, and other significant activities. Adding to this burden a culturally irrelevant heraldic appendage seems inadvisable at best.

If the Ethiopian Crown in Exile were to establish a registry for personal seals, particularly those devised in line with long-standing Ethiopian tradition, one might view this as a worthwhile additional cultural contribution, but such a registry would not “grant” seals, but rather would record seals assumed by individuals of their own accord, as has always seemingly been the practice in Ethiopia. In addition, such seals are not hereditary in nature and therefore cannot function as arms within a line of descent, but rather only as a personal form of identification for a single individual.

Ultimately, it is within the prerogative of Crown Authority to establish a College of Arms that imitates European offices of arms. However, such an exercise in clearly non-Ethiopian symbology is, at best, a distraction from the more important, and far more relevant, cultural and traditional roles filled by the custodians of the Imperial Crown during the present interregnum.

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