



Ambitious Heir

Dispensing gold coins and handing out \$200 tips, Emperor Haile Selassie was enjoying himself in imperial fashion on a state visit to Brazil when a ham radio operator in Addis Ababa flashed the bad news. "Calling everybody, calling everybody! Ethiopia is in a critical state following a coup d'état." Glumly, the Emperor lunched in his São Paulo hotel room on lobster thermidor, stared out the window and pondered the unkindest cut of all. The revolt had apparently been led by his own son and heir, Crown Prince Asfa Wassan. 44. By that night the Lion of Judah was back on his private DC-6B and bound for home.

The Discontents. The plot had been brewing for a year or more, and the plotters cut across Ethiopia's educated elite. In on the game, tacitly or actively, were Cabinet ministers, top bureaucrats, army colonels, students returning from studies abroad. They came from the class that Haile Selassie must count on to help bring Ethiopia into the modern world-but it is just this group that is most repelled by the trappings of a feudal monarchy. The plotters had no clear political coloration, though one of the ringleaders, former Ambassador to Washington Ras Imru, returned from the U.S. in 1953 bitter over what he considered to be racial snubs.

The plotters had a problem: in Coptic Christian Ethiopia, only an acknowledged descendant of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba would be accepted as a proper ruler by the 90% illiterate populace. After nervous speculation, the plotters approached Crown Prince Asfa Wassan himself, knowing that father and son have disliked each other for years. The Emperor had always favored a younger son Prince Makonnen (who was killed in an automobile accident three years ago), made it obvious that he considered Asfa Wassan none too bright, often subjected him to public humiliation. When Asfa Wassan wishes to speak to his father, he must first grovel with his face in the dirt like any other lowly subject. In August 1959 the Crown Prince agreed to join the conspiracy.

The plotters bided their time (and even put down one subplot to assassinate the Emperor last year). But Haile Selassie's trip to remote Brazil seemed ideal. One morning before dawn the Imperial Guard, led by rebel officers, seized strong points in Addis Ababa, including all communication centers. Asfa Wassan named Imru as Premier and went on the radio to explain that the purpose of the coup was to end "3,000 years of injustice ... The Ethiopian people have waited patiently to be freed of oppression, poverty and ignorance." The Crown Prince promised to set up a true constitutional monarchy, and to allow the creation of political parties-for which his father has no taste. In the Congo, Ethiopian Chargé d'Affaires Sabour Ahadou gleefully got out a statement hailing the coup as "the long-awaited revolution that marks the end of centuries of feudal oppression, injustice, arbitrary personal rule, corruption, suppression of fundamental human rights and the imprisonment of thousands of people."

In the Dirt. But they had all reckoned without the tough streak in the little Lion of

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Judah-and without his still widespread popularity. Haile Selassie flew straight for the airstrip in Asmara in Ethiopia's Red Sea state of Eritrea, which was still under command of a loyal general. As his plane grew nearer, the plotters' fortunes began to wane. They could not even secure control of all Addis Ababa and shells whistled into the center of town from loyalist army posts. In frustration, the rebels shot a few government officials they had captured and then fled into the mountains. Haile Selassie landed at Asmara to wild cheers and the usual earth-scraping bows.

Crown Prince Asfa Wassan would doubtless dip his nose an inch or two lower in the dirt on his next meeting with father. Haile Selassie made it scornfully clear that he considered Asfa Wassan only a dupe of others, "acting under coercion." The seeds of unrest among the educated minority of Ethiopians were still there and would grow. But it would take a stronger man than Asfa Wassan to snatch power from the little Lion of Judah.

THE ONCE AND FUTURE KING

Like all Ethiopian royalty, curly-bearded Emperor Haile Selassie traces his ancestry back to the match between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. His Semite-Hamite blood lines show in his stern law and aquiline nose. But in practical fact, his hold on the Ethiopian throne has been due less to ancestry than to his ability to outplot Ethiopia's best plotters.

He plotted his own way to the throne. Back in 1916, he was only an ambitious young ras (marshal) named Tafari in the eastern province of Harar when he teamed up with a female cousin in a plot that toppled the playboy Emperor Lij Yasu. Ras Tafari pursued the fugitive Lij Vasu for five years, caught him, threw him in prison and kept him bound in golden chains for 14 years until he died in 1935. Though his cousin became the Empress Zauditu, Ras Tafari gradually emerged as the country's strongman. Upon the Empress' death in 1930 he mounted the throne (with typical flamboyance, he had five pet lions chained to the coronation dais). He took unto himself the name of Haile Selassie ("Power of the Trinity") and the titles Elect of God, King of Kings and Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah.

In Exile. Benito Mussolini made Haile Selassie a world figure, known from the League of Nations to Tin Pan Alley. As his barefoot troops fell back before the 1935-36 Italian invasion, the Emperor trekked to Geneva to ask help from the League of Nations. A tiny (he is only 5 ft. 4 in. tall) but imperious figure, Haile Selassie seemed gallant and curiously impressive even in defeat. When the League declined to save his country for him, he settled down in Britain, where he checked his crown in a bank vault. Four years later, as the British army mounted an offensive against the Italians, Haile Selassie flew to Alexandria, changed to his commander in chief's uniform in the men's room at the airport, and soon went on to Addis Ababa with the conquering army.

The Emperor has found the postwar world more baffling. At first he sided with the West, sent crack troops to Korea. Then he caught the neutralist bug, and last year set off on a flurry of state visits to "our great friend" Tito, to Nasser, to Russia and Czechoslovakia. He brought back a \$100 million Soviet loan.

Presenting Face. Though Haile Selassie describes his government as "state socialism," it is in fact still absolute monarchy. To secure even the smallest government post, the applicant must go through the ritual of 'feet mahswagaht' which means "making one's

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face apparent." Each morning, the applicant lines up in front of the palace and waits for the Emperor to walk past, in hope of catching the royal eye. Eventually, if lucky, he gets an audience where, with his face pressed to the floor, he blurts out his qualifications and accepts whatever favor the Emperor is in the mood to dispense. The Emperor's powerful ally is the hierarchy of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which owns 40% of Ethiopia's land and resists any effort to alter this profitable situation.

Educated Ethiopians, including 400 who have studied abroad, are naturally resentful of 'feet mahswagaht' and other trappings of the past. But the Emperor, still spry at 68, has no intention of rushing into democracy too fast. His apologists point out that already under Haile Selassie's rule, such venerable Ethiopian customs as slavery, the cutting off of a thief's right hand and the Festival of Raw Meat (where dinner is carved from just-slaughtered cattle while the diners wait) have virtually disappeared.

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