

# The Quest for ‘Decolonizing’ and ‘Democratizing’ the Archaeologies in Ethiopia

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## ***Abstract***

*The nature of the origin of Ethiopian archaeology<sup>1</sup> (ies) is contestable on many grounds. It often overlaps with Pre/Aksumite archaeology. Ethiopian archaeology-so-called historic period, which in the main concentrated on the northern Horn has suffered from spatial, temporal, and topical imbalances. However, few scholars have either considered it important or made attempts to redress it by broadening their field of vision. The misrepresentation in Ethiopian archaeology arises from the domination of expatriate scholars, who are of either Egyptology or Near Eastern training background. The absence of local training institutions that could produce capable and independent-minded indigenous archaeologists until very recently has also contributed to the problem. This paper argues that the only means of fair representations of regions (democratization) in Ethiopian archaeology (ies) is by decolonizing it, which is the function of the production of capable and independent-minded indigenous archaeologists.*

**Key words:** *decolonization, democratization, Ethiopia, historical archaeology*

## **Introduction**

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<sup>1</sup> I have used Ethiopian archaeology in this paper to mainly charter the period that has direct heritage significance to the present day Ethiopia. Accordingly, the distant past is tangentially cited in order to substantiate the pervasiveness of the hegemonic influence elsewhere in the research into the Ethiopian past such as paleoanthropology and prehistoric archaeology.

The nature of origin of Ethiopian archaeology (ies) is contestable on many grounds. From the outset, arguably, it has originated as an extension of Oriental studies or even Egyptology or Nubiology (see Finneran, 2007) and its interpretation one way or another is the function of outside influence (Phillipson 1990). Because of the above reason, the focus of the researches has ‘purely’ been on visible monumental and architectural features (see Fattovich 1978, all his works in the 1990s, 2000, 2009; Manzo 2007; Phillipson 1977, 1990, 2000, 2005, 2009). Such an influence can be traced back to the first formal archaeological campaign in the northern Horn and its focus on the so-called ‘Pre-Aksumite’ and ‘Aksumite’ sites. These pioneering archaeological research attempts in the northern Horn started under the auspices of the Deutsche Axum Expedition (DAE) of a team led by Enno Littman<sup>2</sup> by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (see Fattovich 2009; Phillipson 2009). Temporally, too, it was highly limited-the focus of research by then and afterwards could not dissociate itself from cultural developments in the first millennium BC (Burka 2011; Finneran 2007).

In its spatio-temporal regards, it needs to note the presence of special interest of the then Ethiopian regime in this archaeological research of covering the first millennium BC. Arguably, as far as the then Ethiopian regime of Menelik II was concerned, archaeological research and its interpretation was required to fill-in the quest for establishing the legend of Queen of Sheba-legitimizing force of imperial power, which was materialized in the document called *Kibra Nagast* (Glory of Kings) in the 14<sup>th</sup> century AD (see Tamrat 1972). Although we are lacking formal written document regarding the secret behind negotiation between Emperors Menelik II of Ethiopia and Wilhelm of Germany to commission the DAE project, there is no doubt that successive Ethiopian regimes were interested to establish their long line of rule through the Queen of Sheba (Tamrat

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<sup>2</sup> It did not matter whether E. Littman was an archaeologist by profession or not. It must be remembered that almost entirely the works of the latter monumentalist archaeologists in the northern horn have depended on the works of the team members of the DAE, which Littman has led. It must also be underscored that what the DAE started over a century ago in a very active state being under taken by descendant German archaeologists, as Orientalists as the DAE members, in major elite sites (e.g. Yeha and a site close to Wuqro).

1972). The Queen is (known with various names- e.g. Makeda/Saba in Ethiopia, Sheba/Bilqis in South Arabia) believed to have ruled part of the present northern Ethiopia (including Eritrea) or Yemen during the 9<sup>th</sup> century BC of the period of King Solomon of Israel. It gives reason to believe that whomever she might be called, a certain woman might have ruled or was once popular throughout the wider region. In spite of the different names, the Biblical Queen of Sheba is very significant in establishing and underwriting the Ethiopian regimes' (the royalty) legendary origin.

Incontrovertibly, for Orientalist archaeologists such as Enno Littman (and his successors), it has comparative advantage for connecting research outputs from regions around the Red Sea (see Finneran 2007; cf. footnote, 2)). For correlating archaeological finds, the research was sought to concentrate on some selected cultural features of the upper class without giving space to aspects representative of the common society. In other words, the elite and exotic goods were focuses of research agenda (e.g. see Finneran 2007). For instance, Craft<sup>3</sup> (e.g. metallurgy) archaeology was left in the backwaters of Ethiopian/Aksumite archaeology (but see Burka 2011, 2012; Burka and Giardino 2013). Thereafter, the culture-history study of the northern Ethiopian past (s) that was forced to go beyond its realms laid the foundation (or at least believed to be ancient representative) for culture-history of Ethiopian past (s) in the rest of the country (Burka 2011). Whereas the cultural developments that appeared in the first millennium BC in the northern Horn was attributed to the outside world, it has ultimately

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<sup>3</sup> The intention of the writer to cite metallurgy as an aspect in the backwaters of Aksumite archaeology arises from the clear contribution of the technology on the visible architectural features. In this line, it must be made clear that archaeologists' exploration of sites with ceramics should not be confused with their study on the workers of the trade. In addition, any archaeologist is aware of the difference between the presence of archaeological record and archaeology. In this view, it is important to note that significant archaeological data (e.g. metallurgical remains) should not be accounted for and confused with the presence of archaeological research on the topic.

used to serve as a blue<sup>4</sup> print for explaining developments in the southern parts of the region.

### **Methodology: Delimitation and Limitation**

This paper is an outcome of a review of secondary and primary sources. In the main, the work is a reflection, an interpretation, or a rewriting of works by different scholars during the period spanning the modern Ethiopian archaeological endeavor. In this regard, I join hands with writers such as Niall Fineran (2007), who in his only book attempted to address different archaeologies in different parts of the Ethiopian region but deepening his perspective starting from the period of the so-called Lucy. In line with Fineran, my endeavor is to deconstruct the metanarrative that overarched interpretation of culture-history of the Ethiopian region and the Horn from its entrenched layout by archaeologists whose project was nothing more than conformism.

In addition, in support of my deconstruction of the metanarratives that underrates Ethiopian indigenous outlooks and the continuation of the dominance of the outside project and its persistence to this period, I have picked a list of researchers who were granted sites in different parts of Ethiopia. The data was randomly picked from the recent years documented by the research directorate of the ARCCH. The focus on the recent years is deliberate since such full documentation of permits does not have long history. As a result, I have made use of the research permit requests and those who were active in 2010 and 2011. Such data was necessitated after this paper was presented at the 3<sup>rd</sup> East African Paleoanthropological Association conference held at ARCCH and comments I received from my colleagues impressed by the originality<sup>5</sup> and authenticity of the idea-mainly the terms ‘decolonization’ and ‘democratization’ of Ethiopian archaeology.

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<sup>4</sup> Please also note how both the common and the learned understand the so-called Ethiopian historical archaeology and Ethiopian civilization any time the study of the region’s past is required.

<sup>5</sup> As far as I am aware of, no one has formally raised the challenge of outside influence on Ethiopian archaeological research. Above all, such pervasive influence has never been

Nevertheless, I am aware of the limitations of this paper. For instance, there is no tangible evidence suggesting Emperor Menelik II commissioning of the DAE had to do with the search for authentication effort of the legend of the Queen upon which the pillar/legitimacy of the royalty of his regime was founded (see Glory of Kings-Kibra Nagast-very well addressed in Tadese Tamirat's *Church and State...*1972). The other limitation of the paper is lack of similar research endeavor both by expatriates and Ethiopians in this particular field. Consequently, the researcher had to look for similar endeavors in different parts of the continent such as Mali, Kenya, Tanzania, etc.

Regarding the primary data, the elements of the research permits of the years 2010 and 2011 are too general if taken as a whole. They only partly serve the focus of this research. The scope/delimitation of this paper is the recent Ethiopian past that has direct relevance to the present Ethiopian society. I have used the expression 'the recent past' deliberately to ignore the awkward categorization of the past into 'historic' and 'prehistoric', which by itself does not suffice to explain the culture history of many societies outside the West and the Near East. However, both reviewers showed interest in my 'clear' indication of the period of my focus. Thus, it is important to note that the significance of the research permits (table 1.) is to demonstrate the status of research requests that pass through the ARCCH while its main use is to demonstrate the persisting focus of research in 'historic' period and its ownership by the expatriates alone and its temporal and spatial bias.

Therefore, the paper is limited to deal with the so-called 'historic archaeology' period and partly dependent on the data drawn from the permits. The rest outside this is included to demonstrate the pervasiveness of expatriate scholars' influence in the study of Ethiopian past, be it the 'historic' or the 'prehistoric' one. The major analysis of the paper (as well as interpretation of existing publications) is derived from the table numbers

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pronounced as an academic material, in a country known to the rest of the world as defiant of any form of subjugation; in a country today where we have in many sectors we are emerging as powerful self-reliant people exemplary to the rest of African brothers and sisters.

1, 2,4,5,10,12,18,19,23, and 25. These permits of research areas focus only with historic period archaeology. Accordingly, the following list shows that in both 2010 and 2011, the spatial focus has been 1(Tigray), 2(Tigray), 4(Lailbela), 5(Tigray), 10(Konso), 12 (Tigray), 18 (Gondar), 19 (Tigray), 23 (Tigray) and 25 Bantu Tole). In this case, there were 10 permits given to the period categorized as ‘historic period archaeology’.

A closer observation of the nature of distribution of the research activities across the country shows the following reality. In the first instance, of the total of sixteen research (100%) permits on archaeology of the two years, the focus on ‘historic period’ archaeological research amounts to ten (62.5%). Of the ten (100%) archaeological research permits of the historic period eight (80%) goes to northern Ethiopia. Furthermore, from the eight (100%) research permits<sup>6</sup> of same category of the research, six (75%) of them were dedicated to Tigray. The other important component significant for our interpretation is about the owner of the projects. As the data on the historic period archaeology of sixteen permits reveals, all of them belong to expatriate scholars. We have no record of local researcher in any of the above permits selected for this interpretation.

**Table 1. Research grants for the study of the past (Source: ARCCH, Research Directorate office)**

No	Project name	Owner of the project and citizenship	Field of study	Research site	Planned date
1	Eastern Tigray pottery project	Diane Lyons, Canadian	Ethnoarchaeology	E. Tigray	April 20-June 20, 2010
2	Archaeological and Epigraphic investigation	Ewan Gajid, Poland	Archaeological	Tigray, Endaselas	March 22-April 2, 2010

<sup>6</sup> As we very well know, there is suitable research environment in Ethiopia. In this case, expatriate scholars are entitled to exploit such opportunities. Once a site is assigned to a certain researcher, there is no mechanism in place by the permitting institute to deny him/her as far as the researcher appears every season with 10% of the fund claimed to have been obtained. The researcher might not be denied the site even if the result of the work is withheld from the public indefinitely.

3	Kessem Kebena Dulecha	H. Gilbert, American	Exploration survey	Afar	April 15- May 15, 2011
4	Preventive archaeology in Lalibela	Cliartus and Laura, French	Historic archaeology	Lalibela	May 2010
5	Early state development in northern Ethiopia	Cathrine D. Andrea, Canada	H. archaeology	Gullo Mekeda, Tigray, Adigrat	May15- July 2010, April18- June 24, 2011
6	Omo Group Research Expedition	French Team by Janrina,	Paleontology, Geology, prehistoric archaeology	Lower Omo	Not specified
7	Paleontology, prehistoric and historical archaeology, ethnoarchaeology and social anthropology	American team led by Tim White	Paleontology, geology, and prehistoric archaeology	Middle Awash, Afar region	Nov-Dec 2010
8	Italian Archaeological mission at Melka Kunture and Balchit	By Marcello Piperno, Italian	>> >>	Melka Kunture, Oromia	Oct-Dec 2010
9	Archaeological survey of lower Omo Valley, Ethiopia	Timothy Clark, Engalnd	Historical and Prehistoric archaeology	Mursi area, Lower Omo	July-August 2010
10	The long term history of indigenous agriculture and conservation practices in Konso, Ethiopia	By D. Stamp of England	Historical archaeology	2-31Oct 2010	Konso, Southern NNP
11	"Gendebello VI" (complementary	By Fauvelle, Francois-	Historical archaeology	Nov. 10-17, 2010	Ifat, Walasma,

	surveys and excavations in Ifat, the capital of the Walasma sultanate)	Xavier of France			NE Shoa
<b>12</b>	Ethio-German archaeological mission to Haulti, Yeha and surroundings	Team led by Airas Nerlash from Germany	Geology, historical and prehistoric archaeology	30Oct-26 Nov. 2010, 2011	Tigray
13	Ancher-Mieso Palaentological exploratory survey	Team by Gensua from Japan	Paleontology and geology	Feb-March 31, 2010	Hararghie , Oromia
14	Late stone Age sequences in Ethiopia	By Asamrew Desse and Francoise Bon from Ethiopia and France	Prehistoric and protohistoric archaeology	Nov. 15-26, 2010	Ziway, Koka, Bulbula in Oromia
15	Paleontological and geological survey of Neogene deposits in western Ethiopia	Team led by John Caplman from America (USA)	Paleontoloty, geology, and prehistoric archaeology	Dec 10, 2010-Jan15, 2011	Chilga, Shinfa, Dinder, Gelegu in Amhara and Benishan gul
16	Paleontology, paleobotany and paleoclimate of early Miocene Mush Valley	Team led by Mulugeta Fessaha from Ethiopia	Paleontology and geology	Dec. 30, 2010-Jan 12, 2011	Mush Valley, N. Shoa (Amhara region)
17	Mieso palaeoanthropological research	Team led by Ignasio Della Tore from Spain	Paleontology, geology, prehistoric archaeology	Jan-Feb 2011	W. Hararghe (Oromia Region)
<b>18</b>	Archaeology of the pre-Gonderine Jesuit catholic mission of the 17 <sup>th</sup> c in the lake Tana	Team by V.Fernandez from Spain	Prehistorical and historical archaeology	Jan-Feb 2011	(Amhara region)



	region				
19	Archaeological and epigraphic investigation in Tigray region	Team by Ewana Gaj from France	Historical archaeology and epigraphy	17-27 March 2011 (did not conduct the fieldwork despite the permit)	NE Tigray in Tigray region
20	Exploration of cave sediments SE Ethiopia	By Zelalem Assefa from Ethiopia	Prehistoric archaeology, palaeontology and geology	May-June 2011	E. Hararghe, Meta Woreda of Goda Buticha
21	Southern Ethiopia as a late Quaternary Refugium	By Steven Brandt, from America	Prehistoric archaeology, geology	6Feb-March14, 2011	Walaita Sodo (Moche Borago, SNNP)
22	Paleontological exploration, Mursi sediments in Southern Ethiopia	By Drapiu from Canada	paleontology	May-June 2011	SNNP, Omo river eastern side
23	The Tigray ethnoarchaeological project	By Diane Lyons from Canada	ethnoarchaeology	April20-June 20, 2011 (not conducted)	Tigray Adowa Woreda
24	The origin of agriculture in the upper Blue Nile river basin of NW Ethiopia	Gedef Abawa from Ethiopia	Prehistoric archaeology	Feb23-March23, 2011	Amhara, Gorgora
25	History and archaeology, Bantu Tole	By Bertrand Hirsh from France	History and archaeology	April 15-23, 2011	Oromia, W. Shoa, Bantu Tole

					Woreda
26	An ethnoarchaeological and archaeological study of the Gamo caste system in southwestern Ethiopia	By Catherine Weedman, T. Arthur and M. Curtis from America	Prehistoric archaeology, ethnoarchaeology	1May- Agust1, 2011	SNNP, Gamo Gofa

### **The Departure**

In this paper, I argue that the nature of the origin of Ethiopian archaeological research has since been captivated by projects imposed from the outside. In other words, European archaeologists (Orientalists and Egyptologists) have always manipulated the country’s research agenda or have become reason for the absence of national research agenda by the respective institution. The mind-set of these scholars was rooted in hunting the treasure of art and experience derived from description of architecture of their tradition in the Mediterranean and Mesopotamian world (see Finneran 2007; Simoons 1965) and elite monumental architecture and exotic goods (Phillipson 1990). Their major orientation has emanated from a search for comparative culture across immediate and distant people. I am calling in this paper for the need to decolonize the colonial mind-set and its expressions in the medium of cultural studies or the scholarly quest for deconstruction of the metanarrative about the Ethiopian past (s). The metanarrative is very limited in scope and time in that the majority of Ethiopian society (the broad masses) and its past(s) is left unattended. The paper’s departure is that it is possible to ‘decolonize’ and hence ‘democratize’ the archaeology of Ethiopia by particularly recognizing its significance to address the needs of the Ethiopian society-which is diverse by its nature and needs.

Ethiopian archaeology lacked a broad-based beginning and concentrated on the study of upper classes. According to Simoons (1965:9),

(see also recent works particularly Burka 2011; Finneran 2007; Phillipson 1990), which I will deal with in the discussion section of the paper:

*It almost seems as if scholars were dazzled by the ruins of Semitic temples, palaces, and tombs at Axum and elsewhere and without further grounds ascribed to their builders other cultural innovations as well. In the Mediterranean world and Mesopotamia also, it was the treasure of art and architecture that so filled the minds of the traditional European archaeologist that he(sic) ignored the less spectacular sites, the humble villages in which agriculture developed and which gave the landscape a character that has persisted until the present day.... I am suggesting here that we may be dealing with a similar phenomenon in Ethiopia; that, by ignoring the less dramatic data, we have given the Semites credit for innovation for which there is no proof, archaeological or otherwise.*

### **The Thesis of ‘Decolonizing’ in Ethiopian Archaeology: Deconstructing the Metanarratives**

Peter Schmidt (2009:1-2) writes that ‘the colonial roots of African archaeology vary widely, as much as different species of roots vary in their root structure....’ Although the contributors of the book edited by Schmidt focused on a number of former African colonies, their discussions are far from addressing continuation of the physical presence of and subjugation by former colonists in the continent. However, Schmidt clarifies the focus of the contributors in that although much of African archaeology traces its ‘proper’ beginning in the aftermath of the liberation of most African countries the ‘post’ prefix in the post-colonial does not intend to show that there is a total break between the past and the present. The Western hegemony has continued though in different forms. In my view, the significance of the ‘post’ in the post-colonial debate is not a reserve of former colonies. Thus, Ethiopia, unlike its different history with colonial attempts, cannot be excluded from such debates.

From the outset, it is understandable that Ethiopia is the only country in Africa that could defeat colonial aggression and remained independent except for the brief Italian occupation period. Therefore, the context under which the concepts of ‘decolonization’ and ‘democratization’ are employed is different from the said setup. The fact that Ethiopia could ward off colonial aggressors and remained ‘independent’ entails only the physical sense of the word. The debate is not, therefore, whether Ethiopia has fallen under colonial subjugation. Attempts in some occasions (in the 1890s and 1930s by Italians and in the 1940s by the British) ended in fiasco. Black people all over the world have shared the pride across the globe. It is clear also that Ethiopia has played significant role in helping fight against colonialists in Africa.

Subsequently, ‘decolonizing’, does not at all refer to a coercive occupation of Ethiopia nor that Ethiopia is still under such direct occupation. ‘Decolonizing’ in this context does not refer to the kind of political independence that African countries underwent since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this context, ‘decolonizing’ is about a liberation from the structure of the colonial hegemonies that invisibly entered and remained in this land (for similar discussion and details see Chami 2009; Holl 2009; Kusimba 2009; Schmidt 2009).

Thus, if we agree that there is still colonial hegemony in Ethiopia, it is the way our archaeological research agenda has been structured. The absence of domestically funded research activities in different aspects of the past is evident from analysis of permits obtained from the ARCCH in 2010/11 for the same purpose.

It is not wrong, however, for foreign scholars to work in the country. The blame can go to the unwary Ethiopians who gave away the right of institutional development and overseeing archaeological and paleontological research activities since the 1950s (e.g. the foundation of the Antiquity Administration by the help of the French). In this foreign dominated research context, it is not loss of innocence if one finds that interpretation of finds is tuned to fit one’s research interests or if the finds are only there to promote the researcher. In the Ethiopian context, the colonialist structure has negatively affected domestic scholars so that they have in turn taken for granted that Ethiopian civilization of the first

millennium BC is an implantation from South Arabia (see Van Beek 1967; Selasse 1972)<sup>7</sup>.

How is it possible, for instance, for nationalist archaeologists to publish an alternative viewpoint in the *Journal of Asiatic Studies*, without following the 'conventional' interpretation of the Ethiopian past? This Journal is an outlet for conventional Ethiopicist scholars specializing in Asian languages, history etc. (see Finneran 2007). In contrast, nationalist Ethiopian archaeologists and culture-historians do not have established schools of thought and research outlets in the country nor are there funds or local funding agencies for this purpose. As the role of expatriate scholars in culture-historic studies was so strong, it might be less probable to publish something that is antagonistic to their views even in local research outlets, due to the fact that their doorkeepers are installed in domestic institutions.

Nationalist local scholars, as a result, should remain in the backwaters of the discourse that concerns culture-history of their respective peoples, which should have concerned them or remained loyal to the hegemonic powers. Outside Ethiopia (for instance in Kenya and Tanzania), some nationalist African scholars have reasoned out for falling behind their tenure time due to misunderstanding with their Western colleagues or professors or lab technicians on the interpretation of culture-history of their respective countries or research sites (e.g. see Chami 2009; Kusimba 2009). Despite this, these dedicated nationalist African archaeologists have shown alternative views of the same time and space to their Western colleagues (see Schmidt 2009 ed. of *Post-Colonial Archaeologies of Africa*).

In the Ethiopian context, 'Colonizing' is not only about interpretation of the finds. It would include the way those who controlled power (scientific knowledge and research funds) also decided selectively on which part of the country and time their research agenda should fall. Lack of institutional research agenda with national priority areas has led to the

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<sup>7</sup> Some may wonder whether it is now long overdue regarding the South Arabian thesis of the northern horn civilization of the first millennium BC. However, recent interpretation by German Archaeological teams working in elite sites in Tigray have continued to not only focus their finds on the so-called South Arabian influenced sites but also held similar interpretation that has been in place over half a century by similar expatriate scholars.

imposition of the expatriate researchers' personal will. Thus, the choice of research spaces and topics remains open to fund owners. There is no incident in the history of the institution since its establishment as Institute of Archaeology in 1952 where expatriate scholars were given directives where to concentrate their research during the three successive regimes to date.

It is not farfetched to imagine how expatriates have deep-rooted control on Ethiopian archaeological research in the last one hundred years since the time of the DAE in 1906. 'Colonizing' in this context is control of knowledge and the benefit from it. 'Colonizing' in Ethiopian archaeology is how those at the helm of power (e.g. research project owners) could obtain unparalleled individual and group benefit from our past. It is about educating and training their citizens in our cultural past, while leaving their disciples as technicians whose role is to echo what the theorists have put in place, as they were not equipped with **upper level** as thinkers. Although it has no direct relevance to our current discussion, similar trend is paramount in the research in human origin.

For instance, an Ethiopian fossil hunter discovered *Australopithecus afaransis* (Lucy). However, since the project, owner/leader was non-Ethiopian, the contribution of the Ethiopian fossil hunter was not acknowledged, nor did he get any benefits that Lucy brought to the world of scientific community. Ethiopians were/are limited to such low-level technician assignments and denied access to the secret of their ancestors. As a result, our capacity to challenge their desire of controlling our past is limited. Although some have benefited from access to those trainings, not all of these Ethiopians are in turn fruitful particularly in replacing themselves by arranging higher level training for Ethiopian young scholars<sup>8</sup>. They have instead served as barons<sup>9</sup> who occupied the right place at the

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<sup>8</sup> The only successful archaeologist trained in that context was Dr. Kassaye Begashaw, who selflessly worked in building an indigenous institution at Addis Ababa University, which has now become the vanguard national agenda in human resource development in the field of archaeology and heritage management. This institutional building has been under barrage of criticisms by the doorkeepers.

<sup>9</sup> It is clear who the barons are. These are individuals who were installed in domestic institutions and their role is to defend the position of their tutors and establish a suitable ground for the maintenance of their tutor's influence. These were recruited and

initial stage and remained there to protect it and to serve as brokers for their western masters (see McIntosh 2009 for similar challenges even after archaeologists were locally trained at Bamako University).

Ethiopia is a big country. Archaeology is a very wide concept, too. This calls for limiting our focus of study. I will concentrate in some of its aspects particularly focusing on the so-called pre-Aksumite and Aksumite archaeology namely the historic period archaeology. This is due to, I regard, two main reasons. The main one was that this one has a structured (or also complicated) history of our present, for instance, since Theodore Bent (1893) visited and described Aksum in the 1890s who externalized the civilization. The other is that a history of Ethiopian archaeology (its academic research) one-way or another springs from this- both spatially and temporally (e.g. Chittick 1974; Sellasie 192, Tamrat 1972). The way that this part of history structured the perceptions about our past is not new for students of Ethiopian history, however (e.g., both public and academic historians begin from northern Ethiopian past or from the so-called Sabaeen migration/colonization of northern Horn).

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handpicked by those scholars and given technician level training so that they could not liberate themselves. From the outset, they obtained the chance due to their loyalty and did not obtain the posts on competitive bases. They knew that the development of local training institution such as Archaeology and Heritage training departments meant the graduates with independent mind and the end of benefits to both the tutors and doorkeepers. Those loyal doorkeepers handicapped institutions such as the ARCCH.

### **Elitist Origin of Ethiopian Archaeological Research in Aksum<sup>10</sup>**

As I mentioned earlier on, formal Ethiopian archaeological enquiry began with the DAE by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Littman 1913). The research since then has focused on elite residential and symbolic sites. Its interpretation was obtained from archaeological finds and other artistic and architectural features of the upper class of the society during the first millennium BC. Undeniably, the upper class had always better and sometimes exclusive access to ideas and goods from distant or close by groups of similar status (see Chittick 1974; Fattovich 2009; Phillipson, 1990, 2009; Simoons 1965). Similar regal, religious, architectural, literary and artifacts from elite residential and administrative contexts in both northern Horn and the present day Yemen can substantiate this. It is clear also that no region is closed to external influences. From the Ethiopian geographical strategic vantage point, a plausible argument might be that a circuit along the Red Sea corridor in which influence went both ways can explain similarities in cultural developments (see Fattovich 1996, 1997; also Burka 2011).

The ancient remains of the upper class sites cannot reflect the real picture of the culture of a certain society nor are they representative of the whole. To depend on data from such sites and attempt to interpret society's culture-historic past solely from these is the same as presenting a shard to represent a complete pot, which is insignificant and meaningless. For successive expatriate archaeologists (linguists, historians as well), their aim was to look for a fit-from neighbors-based on meager finds from royal tombs-grave goods, architecture, art and symbolic representations. In simplest terms, the discourse about the archaeology of northern Horn has

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<sup>10</sup> Anything the last 3000 years since the first millennium BC one way or another is an elite element. Some would like to confuse a small survey of 'common' settlement sites by an American archaeologist Michels (2005). The rest either a monumental (such as by Ayele Tarekegn although assigned to the common burial sites- the so-called Gudite stele site), artistic, churches and their foundation were of upper class. Anyone who excavates Aksumite churches only deals with upper class society as we all know Christianity in Ethiopia and their worshipping sites were the gift of the top to the people and their guidance.



created ‘Sabean archaeology’ than an Ethiopian<sup>11</sup> one (see Burka 2011; Finneran 2007).

In connection with this, the way the archaeology of the northern Horn is structured namely the focus on its elite residential and monumental features has ignored the archaeology of the common. For instance, the discourse about Aksumite stele only concentrated on the origin of its decorative motifs. It did not address the artisans who carved them from blocks of granite stones and the source of the working tools that were employed. Just like the artisans are denied privilege among many of Ethiopian societies (Burka 2008, 2011, 2013; Pankhurst 2001), the imprints of their past have not been considered important constituents of the rich culture-history of the region.

Part of these intriguing aspects lends its intricacies to Ethiopian archaeology. For instance, craft<sup>12</sup> (metallurgy) archaeology is one of the most researched aspects of the discipline in sub-Saharan Africa (see Mapunda 1997). Why was archaeometallurgy left in the backwaters of the existing endeavors in Ethiopia? Was it because metallurgy was absent from the ways of the life of societies during the pre-Aksumite and Aksumite period? Why did the high concentration of artisans in and around the town of Aksum fail to trigger archaeologists working in the region in the last over 100 years? It is simply because Ethiopian/Aksumite archaeology has never been ‘democratic’.

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<sup>11</sup> The focus of most researches in these limited areas has denied history of the subaltern. The indigenous knowledge is overshadowed by exotic products hence domination the outside and their cultural elements.

<sup>12</sup> It is true that artisanship is in the realm of the disadvantaged as far as Middle Eastern and northeastern African tradition holds. The impact of the art is evident from architectural and artistic products of the empire. While, for instance, many scholars were infatuated with the royal tombs, they did not go beyond the mention of refined artisanship. They did not attempt to dig into the identity of the artisans, their social organization etc, in any of their research outputs beyond a passing remark. The knowledge was attributed to the outside. Therefore, my quest about lack of focus on craft archaeology should be seen in light of lack of interest in the subject matter by almost all archaeologists working in Aksumite sites in turn lack of interest in the ways of life of the common and the broad masses.

***‘Democratizing’ Ethiopian Archaeology***

Archaeology by its nature is ‘democratic’ as far as objects are concerned. It is too simplistic to disregard this objective reality. Archaeology *per se* is impartial to data left because of various depositional and post-depositional factors. Post-depositional factors do not prefer the remains of one class to that of the other. They do not purposefully destroy remains of common society and maintain that of the dominant class. When we mean ‘democratizing Ethiopian archaeology’, we are not against these innate characteristics of archaeology, which is free from partiality. It is humans, who play with and retrieve the choice of their own amongst a multitude of data.

Nevertheless, when we say Ethiopian archaeology is ‘undemocratic’, it means that it is short of innocence and full of deliberate maneuvers. The intent of the ‘colonizing structure’ and its domestic cohorts who lacked visions have handicapped it from addressing the aspirations of respective owners of Ethiopian multiple pasts. It is short of addressing our past spatially/temporally and topically. ‘Democratizing’ archaeology in Ethiopia is inseparable from ‘decolonizing’ it. By ‘decolonizing’ it, it is possible to allow archaeology to play its natural role, namely that of dealing with the nation’s past spatio-temporally. By decolonizing archaeology, we indigenize it-we give the resource to its rightful owners and denying the colonial structures from overshadowing national interests and be proactive in national research agendas. It is certain that we have still undeveloped archaeology. However, while it is still under capacity, while it is still at its infancy, archaeology can be an important asset to serve the present Ethiopian diverse society by impartially presenting all sorts of its past.

The newly fledgling universities and units affiliated with history and heritage management should go afield free of the debilitating structure that has taken precedence over the country’s interest to own independent training centers in the higher institutions that educate and liberate Ethiopians. Beyond academics, we can also pinpoint, where ‘democratizing’ Ethiopian archaeology would help - the public, the protectors of archaeological heritage.

In this regard, by ‘democratizing’ we mean engaging with the aspirations of the people in our study areas. Is archaeological research that has left out the major core of the Aksumite society, the **artisans**, democratic? Does not this, in the final analysis, mean paying no attention to the contributions of the ancestors of artisans for the grand achievement of the kingdom as well as its antecedents? Put differently, under global position of the relics of Aksumite past (World Heritage site), what direct benefits are the descendants of the artisans (the community of Aksum area) obtaining? Was not their voice muffled? Are not they always living on the edge of the society?

Any student concerned with Ethiopian archaeology should question the nature of archaeological research west of the Tekeze River in northwestern Ethiopia (Gondar, Gojjam, Wollega, Illu-Abba Bora, Jimma etc) and why archaeological research projects are absent west of Addis Ababa. Is it not the Nile valley, which is a crucial archaeological research area outside Ethiopia (the Sudan and Egypt)? Why did not we have archaeological research program along the Blue Nile and its major tributaries between Addis Ababa and the Sudan? Why did Ethiopian archaeology fail to be ‘democratic’-fairly distributed across the country? As far as I am concerned, local ‘barons’ should share the blame as the colonizing structure that planted them here to disavow the rights of their country men and women.

### **Remarks in Summary**

Any archaeological research program that benefits the country cannot properly be undertaken in the absence of institutional capacity. Apparently, the way our research institutions are organized does not allow them to independently overseeing the activities. In our attempt to ‘decolonize’ Ethiopian archaeology, one of the major focus areas must be on the institution that governs and oversees the archaeological research procedures. Unfortunately, this same institution owes its origin to foreign archaeologists, for instance, the French who established the archaeological institution in 1952.

As part of the ‘decolonization’ agenda, this research institution (ARCCH) should not be one passive organ that only responds to sporadic

demands by external forces. Instead, it should go beyond a permit giving organ and lay down Ethiopian research priorities in archaeology and heritage sectors that encompass all regions and periods. Besides, the institution should seek for alternative ways of establishing funding mechanisms for local scholars that empowers indigenous capabilities of the country. Although we can assume that the institution is undergoing metamorphosis, its incapacity for influencing foreign researchers to go along with our priorities, is one of the handicaps in delaying our endeavor to 'decolonize' it. As I have argued elsewhere, decolonizing is an instrument for indigenization of Ethiopian archaeology.

Ethiopian archaeological research incorporates a lot. These include the focus of its research (time and space), the interpretation of available data, and the archaeologists' preoccupation with the scientific nature of their data while marginalizing the aspirations of the public where they work. These are the keepers of the data as well as the absence of concern for indigenization of the research particularly by providing necessary training for the local staff and by building proper institution for handling the research and its use. There is a continuously worrying mind-set about the gaps in Ethiopian archaeology.

The first one is the way Ethiopian archaeological research has begun a century ago, by Enno Littman co. 1906. In other words, it is related with the *pièce de résistance* of the archaeological research. Few would wonder about endorsing the argument that the archaeology of Ethiopia has always been the archaeology of the elite. This is much less on the part of the locals than the expatriates are. Those who would like to take on the defensive remain to be challenged, and judged not on the amount of data they produced during their long period of acquaintance with the country's past but on their role to build local capacity. Much annoying for some, even worse, would be found in the critiques that were leveled against them in that archaeology of Ethiopia suffers from a total implantation of interpretations from outside. In precise terms, the archaeology of Ethiopia is endangered because it has been structured to strongly instill the view that Ethiopian ancient cultural achievements in various forms either owe to inspiration from neighbors across the seas or the result of the flock and settlement of outsiders in this ancient land to teach the people how to behave.

In line with this, I would like to structure my summary into two aspects. In the first category, I shall sum up the implication of the focus of Ethiopian archaeology or rather the neglect of 'core' topics, in this case that focuses on the last 3000 years - that creates the basis for the development of the discipline. In other words, it addresses why archaeology has been handicapped in Ethiopia. In the second part, I will concentrate on the lack but need of reflexivity on the part of the professionals towards the people whose culture-history is under investigation and the contribution of archaeology in local human resource development. The origin of this paper has a number of backgrounds<sup>13</sup>.

It is known that Ethiopian archaeological research has a long history. If we limit it to the officially recognized one, the DAE, it is over one hundred years old now. The DAE laid the foundation for the future of Ethiopian archaeological focus in time and space. The (Pre) Aksumite archaeology since the first millennium BC owes much to the DAE and subsequently to the French, the British and Italian research expeditions. What matters most, as far as I am concerned, is the consequence of those expeditions. A sane person might ask; what did this archaeology do in the nation building processes? How much did it contribute in the institutional building endeavors? How many young Ethiopians were trained as professional archaeologists for reconstructing the culture-history of the stated period and space? How many expatriates got trainings in the study of (pre)Aksumite and Aksumite archaeology? Furthermore, how much do we know about the archaeology of this period and space? What was the real focus of the century old archaeological research focusing on the northern Horn? How was interpretation of the archaeological record entertained?

As Simoons (1965) has rightly argued, this might have been rooted in the culture of Western archaeologists who lack interest in the less

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<sup>13</sup> The major one is my personal research focus-first on the Ethiopian museums (Burka 2004) and then the archaeology of metallurgy (Burka 2006, 2011). The secondary encounter was a panel discussion on World heritage sites at the University of Cheikh Anta Diop (Senegal) during the joint SAFA/PANAF conference in 2010 wherein we raised the right to benefits of people in World heritage sites emphasizing on Aksum and Lalibela.

spectacular archaeological features. This brings us directly face to face with the way Ethiopian archaeology has been structured from the beginning. We can conveniently conclude that Ethiopian archaeology (e.g. (Pre) Aksumite archaeology) is the archaeology of the elites. It has narrowed its focus on elite monumental, palace or symbolic features. In other words, it has been the archaeology of the upper class.

The significant finds at the elite archaeological sites are exotic luxury goods. The elites as it is always the case in modern society had exclusive access to foreign objects through various means of interactions, for instance, trade or exchange. It is possible also that these upper class societies share ideologies or ideological symbols from their counterparts (Van Beek 1967) in the far distances outside their hegemony as well as utilitarian ones. A good example is the way Christianity was introduced into Ethiopia. It was the religion of the upper class, not the common society (see Selassie 1972).

On the other hand, despite the lack of focus on the ancient history of Ethiopian craft, some passing remarks are intermittently made on its origin. Like the rest of Aksumite and its antecedent cultural traits, the source of the knowledge of artisanship was pointed to outside of the region (see Mapunda 1997). Whereas the source for the knowledge of copper/bronze metallurgy was attributed to the Nile Valley, iron metallurgy found its origin from across the Red Sea in Arabia (see Phillipson 1993 and reedited in 2005).

Without any detailed work on the subject, various scholars suggested various routes for introduction of the knowledge into the Ethiopian region and the Horn (for details see Burka 2011) namely the Ptolemaic Hunters (Wainwright 1942) Assumption, the Meroetic Hypothesis (Arkell 1968) and the South Arabian origin hypothesis (Phillipson 1993, 2005; Van Beek 1967). Only few have suggested its possible independent origin (Anfray 1981). Such conclusions were made without pertinent research work.

In sum, the DAE mission since 1906 in Ethiopia and (now Eritrea) laid down the bricks for the nature of the research that ensued. That foreign forceful intervention in the region in the last decades of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century probably has accentuated the way Ethiopian past(s) was conceptualized. What the DAE team put on the ground before they left was the culture-historic approach for interpretation of past cultural change-

explained by migration or diffusion. It was so chronic that no subsequent researchers were relieved from the approach that makes use of migration and settlement or diffusion as a means of cultural change in northern Ethiopia. Accordingly, the only means of liberating it from such outside-centered and by implication northern centered view of cultural development/ or even civilization is by indigenization of Ethiopian archaeology. Indigenization is only realized when we are detached from or able to overcome the mindset that is loyal to the colonizing structure and when we are able to uproot it through institutional and human resources development.

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