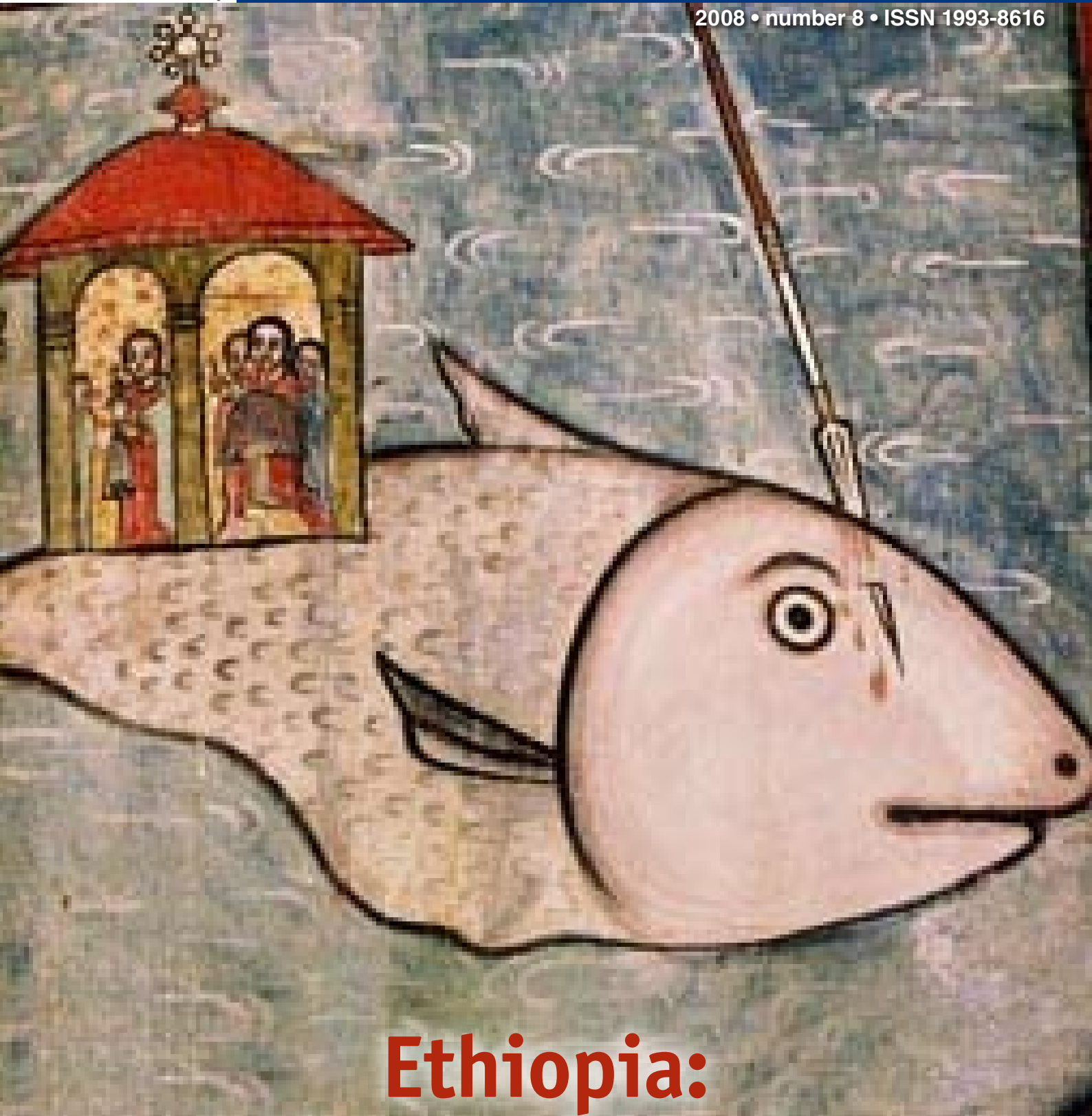




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**Ethiopia:
three millennia
of legend and history**



In honour of the recent reinstallation of the Aksum Obelisk in its original location in northern Ethiopia, the UNESCO Courier revisits a few of the country's cultural sites.

Along this off-the-beaten path itinerary, another treasure is unveiled, less monumental than the castles of Gondar, less visible than the Lalibela rock-hewn churches, but just as impressive: Ethiopia's intangible heritage.

Through these feature articles, the Courier joins in the celebration of the Ethiopian Millennium, proclaimed "a millennium for all Africa" by the African Union.

Basket work sold near the new Aksum Museum
© UNESCO/Jasmina Šopova

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Cover photograph: Wall painting at Nagra Silassie Church, detail.
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EDITORIAL

Jasmina Šopova

To mark the recent reinstallation of the Aksum Obelisk in its original location in northern Ethiopia, the UNESCO Courier revisits some of the country's cultural sites. Our travels off the beaten path lead us to another treasure less obvious, less monumental than the castles of Gondar, less visible than the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela, but just as impressive: Ethiopia's intangible heritage.

"Tangible cultural heritage can be a genuine instrument of reconciliation," declared UNESCO's Assistant Director-General for Culture, Françoise Rivière, last 4 September, during the inauguration ceremony of the Aksum Obelisk on its original site. The 17 centuries old stele, taken to Rome in 1937 by Mussolini's troops and brought back to Ethiopia by the Italian government is proof of this. Standing 24 metres high and weighing 150 tons, it is the second largest stele on the Aksum World Heritage site, close to the border with Eritrea.

"This is a global first," said Francesco Bandarin, Director of UNESCO's World Heritage Centre. "The reinstallation of Stele No. 2, in the framework of the 1972 Convention concerning the safeguarding of natural and cultural world heritage, opens a new chapter in history," he added. "It is a chapter that concerns not just Ethiopia but all of humanity."

"In a certain way, this obelisk is a symbol for all of Africa," said the Ethiopian Minister of Culture and Tourism, Mohammed Dirir, in the interview he gave the *UNESCO Courier* last May. He explained that by trans-



Saint-George, one of the most intriguing churches of Lalibela (Ethiopia)
© UNESCO/Jasmina Šopova

porting the obelisk to Rome, Mussolini was taking revenge for the defeat of the Italian colonial troops in Adua (1896) in northern Ethiopia. "But we won't live in the past," he maintained. "It is the future we must look to. We will not forget, but we have forgiven."

For the last two years, culture and tourism have worked hand in hand in Ethiopia. Dirir is convinced that his country, with its "millennia of history", must take advantage of its culture "to develop responsible tourism". When he states that cultural heritage forges the country's international image, he is not thinking only of monuments. He is referring to customs, like the coffee ceremony, and to handicrafts, the livelihood of many Ethiopians, particularly women and young people. He stresses too the notion of "shingalina", meaning both dialogue and wisdom, as well as Ethiopian hospitality and its spirit of tolerance.

Showcase projects

True, tangible and intangible heritage are inseparable, particularly in

his country. This is one reason why Rivière decided to launch another "worksite", specifically in Lalibela, the Ethiopian World Heritage site renowned for its monolithic churches carved in to the rock.

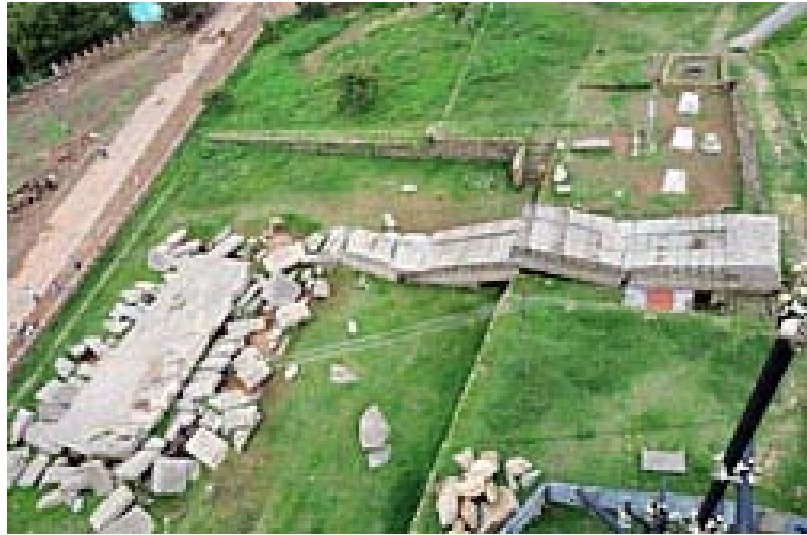
"The idea is to carry out projects integrated in world heritage sites," she explains. "These 'projects' are intended to contribute to economic and human development by focusing, according to need, on cultural tourism, safeguarding intangible heritage, promoting cultural diversity, dialogue, languages or cultural industries. We will identify one site per region to launch these projects. In Africa, it will be Lalibela, where UNESCO has been present for a long time."

The foundations for the new initiative are already there: the Organization has several conventions at its disposal, including those concerning natural and cultural heritage (1972), intangible cultural heritage (2003) and the diversity of cultural expressions (2005). "By operating in symbiosis, these instruments can transform culture into a powerful agent for development," says Rivière. ■

SILENT GIANTS

Three parks planted with giant stelae, a labyrinth of royal tombs, vestiges of the Queen of Sheba's palace, an "Ethiopian Rosetta Stone", the Ark of the Covenant containing the ten commandments... an incredible treasure, poised between myth and history, is hidden in Aksum, where the heart of ancient Ethiopia still beats.

Jasmina Šopova



The biggest monolith ever sculpted, on the ground near a 360 tonne block of stone. © UNESCO/Michel Ravassard

Slight, graceful and silent, Aksum is like an aristocrat who has come down in the world. Pillage, vandalism, arson have driven her to conceal her remaining treasures in different crannies of an old cupboard. Only the main stelae park reigns over the middle of the town, testifying to the extent of Aksum's suffering.

Except for one obelisk tilted like the leaning tower of Pisa, none of these monoliths with their carved symbols remained upright through the ages. Even the famous obelisk just reinstalled in Aksum after forced exile in Italy since 1937 was lying broken in five pieces when Mussolini's troops found it (See "The Return of the Aksum Obelisk"). But as for most of the uncarved stelae, they are still sticking straight up towards the sky.

"That's why people think the sculpted obelisks didn't fall down by themselves, but were toppled by a Jewish queen," says the young historian Redae Tesfay. "But in fact for an obelisk to last through time, the portion buried underground has to amount to 10% of its total size. And this rule was not respected." A miscalcula-

tion? Incredible, for people who showed such prowess, but apparently so.

As for legend, a queen called Gudit (the monstrous) or Esato (the fiery one), a historical character from the 10th century about whom we do not know much, is said to have invaded Ethiopia in search of the Ark of the Covenant, the sacred chest containing the two tablets inscribed with the ten commandments. Furious at not finding it, the queen destroyed the whole town and put an end to the Aksumite kingdom. In memory of this unfortunate event, women are not allowed into the Maryan Tsyon Basilica, which supposedly still houses the famous Ark.



Tomb with the false door, Aksum. © UNESCO/Jasmina Šopova

The Queen of Sheba, mysterious as ever

How did the Ark of the Covenant end up in Aksum? Well, it was brought from Jerusalem by Menelik, first king of Ethiopia, son of a king of Israel and Queen Makeda. Some say he was the born to King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. About 30 centuries ago he founded the Solomonic dynasty, of which the last Ethiopian Emperor, Haile Selassie, (1892-1974) claimed to descend.

"According to tradition, Menelik hid the Ark of the Covenant in his mother's palace, which is about three kilometers from the centre of Aksum. This hiding place was recently discovered by the archeologist Helmut Ziegert, from the archeological institute of the University of Hamburg," explains Fisseha Zibelo, the manager of the site of Aksum. The news did indeed make headlines last May.

"The Dongour Palace that you see was excavated by the French archeologist Francis Anfray and rebuilt between 1966 and 1968. It has 50 rooms; we don't know

• • • exactly what they were used for. It dates back to the 7th century but people have always called it ‘the Queen of Sheba’s palace,’” Zibelo continues. “That’s what inspired Helmut Ziegert to do more digging, and he discovered another palace below the one we knew.” Three sections of this ancient palace, thought to date back to the 10th century B.C., can now be viewed by the public. To the untrained eye, the difference between the ruins from the two periods is imperceptible.

A small road leading to Gondar (see the article “The country of the king with the protruding tongue”) separates the Dongour palace from one of the three stelae parks of Aksum. It is a vast field dotted with monoliths that are only roughly worked. Most of them are several metres high. “The blocks of stone were quarried from Mount Gobadura,” says Zibelo, pointing in the distance to traces in the vegetation left by the rollers used to transport them. After so many centuries, the grass has not grown back.

The sight is indeed astonishing: thousands of tons of stone took this path. It is enough to see the enormous slab in the central park that measures about 20 metres by seven. Its weight is estimated at 360 tons. Next to it, the largest monolith ever sculpted by humans lies broken, a wounded colossus. The legend that angels transported the stones becomes almost plausible.

Riddles and revelations

Legend easily takes root where history fails. No date, no name appears on these immense chunks of stone.

Archeologists found a magnificent necropolis under the stelae, but they arrived after the looters. The tomb with the false door, the tomb with the brick arches and the mausoleum, majestic and empty, remain mute (see box, “The three tombs”).

Even more enigmatic are the designs engraved on the obelisks. Unique in the world, these replicas of houses with several stories – with door, windows and beams – contain no inscriptions to help scientists penetrate their mystery. When not marked with a cross, they are capped by a symbol



View of Dongour Palace. © UNESCO/Jasmina Šopova

representing the sun and the moon. According to some historians, this pre-Christian symbol could refer to the local deity Mahrem, corresponding to Aries the Greek god of war, but nothing more is known.

The old coins are more loquacious. They reveal about 20 kings, show the different phases of Aksum’s economic development and situate in time the town’s conversion to Christianity. “The gold pieces are marked with Greek inscriptions because they were used for international trade,” recounts Redae, “while the words on silver and bronze coins are in Ge’ez,

which showed they were used for local commerce.” Ge’ez, now a liturgical language, is the ancestor of the Amharic language spoken today by the majority of Ethiopians.

Most eloquent of all is certainly the local “Rosetta stone,” standing today in a small specially designed building, at the edge of a steep and winding trail at a distance from central Aksum. Found by shepherds in 1982, it tells the story in three languages – Greek, Ge’ez and Sabeian – of the Nubian campaign undertaken by Ezana, the last pagan ruler and first

Christian king of Aksum. Converted around the mid-4th century, he brought the Kingdom to its peak. Human interest note: the Ge’ez text is engraved on one of the narrow faces of this rectangular slab (the other was left blank) and the scribe, running out of space, continued writing on the Sabeian side, like a school-boy finishing his sentence in the margin when he gets to the bottom of the page.

And thus, from one monument to the next, ancient Aksum divulges chapter after chapter of its past, a tapestry of legends and history. ■

ROHA THE WONDERFUL

Perched at an altitude of 2,500 metres in the Amhara region, the small village of Lalibela has been home to an astonishing gem of religious architecture for the last eight centuries. Constructed of single blocks of stone, the village's churches were added to the World Heritage List in 1978.

Jasmina Šopova



A tight concentration of churches at Lalibela.
© UNESCO/Jasmina Šopova

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The village was called Roha, “the Wonderful”, back when the very pious king Gebre Mesqel Lalibela had 11 monolithic churches hewn from the rock, linked to each other by a vertiginous maze of tunnels, their walls pierced with cavities, some of them with a foot sticking out of some saint laid to rest there several centuries ago.

The living and the dead are accustomed to rubbing elbows in this place where nothing seems impossible – not even carving an entire church, with portico, naves, vaults, upper stories, windows, out of a single block of stone. Beta Medhane Alem, the largest of the 11 churches inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, rests on 34 pillars forming a rectangle 34 metres by 24. It is practically the size of Notre Dame of Paris!

As for the double church, Golgotha-Michael, also called Debre Sinai and Golgotha: it offers one of the most spectacular views. The king, after whom the village is now named, is buried there, adjacent to the tomb of Adam – ancestor of all humanity, in the Biblical tradition. Take one step

in Lalibela, and you tumble from history into myth.

A short distance from this hillside nest of churches lies St George, the only one with a drainage system and probably the most recent of the churches hewn on the orders of King Lalibela. One can see it from a distance jutting out of the earth inside a huge pit with its roof sculpted with interconnected crosses. Standing next to it, you feel dwarfed by the cross-shaped structure, with its 12 façades rising 12 metres. Its three stories are marked on the outside by ledges and windows. “Those at the bottom have no windows because that’s Noah’s level,” says Muchaw, one of the site’s official guides. “It’s to prevent flood water coming in,” he adds with a smile.

To reach another group of churches, which, from afar, seem to be straddling each other, one must walk by a stream called Jordan, which flows past another hill crowned by a small bell hanging on a dead tree – Mount Thabor – and you cross the cave of Bethlehem: the Holy Land in miniature!

According to one of the many contradictory legends surrounding King Lalibela, he founded Roha when he returned from exile in Jerusalem and intended it to become a new holy city in Africa.

Lalibela at Risk

It welcomes some 140,000 pilgrims a year, between Christmas and Tikmet (Epiphany), says Belete, the most popular person around. He heads a staff of 20 at the Tourism and Culture Office in the village of 12,000 inhabitants, which is located some 600 km north of Addis Ababa. For Belete, tourism is the wave of the future: “Between July 2007 and March 2008, more than 8,000 tourists stayed in our 12 hotels,” he reports.

His office, funded by the Amhara Regional Council, receives contributions from the central government and from the Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage (ARCCH). Safeguarding projects on the Lalibela site are also supported by the European Union, UNESCO and several NGOs, notably Plan International. ● ● ●

• • • While one of UNESCO's main concerns is preventing the churches' deterioration due to infiltration of rainwater, Belete's first preoccupation is the disadvantaged population that lives on the site and is causing damage. It is imperative to relocate these 270 families as quickly as possible, he thinks.

Right now he lacks a specific plan and an accurate idea of cost, but he is optimistic. For this dynamic young leader, the image of a clean and well maintained Lalibela is paramount. "I spread the word in the village's five schools and it's working," he says proudly.

He is equally worried about the condition of 24 churches in the vicinity of Lalibela, 14 of which are not part of any safeguarding plan. "They should all be inscribed on the World Heritage List," he maintains. To convince me, he takes me on a tour.

One stands out because of its amazing natural setting. It was built by Lalibela's predecessor King Imrahana Kirstos.

The mysteries of Imrahana Kirstos

More than 40 minutes' drive to cover the 12 kilometres separating Lalibela from a very poor hamlet at the foot of a mountain. Then half an hour of climbing, on a slope with no visible sign of human life... except a group of women returning from the market on the other side of the mountain.

Halfway up, we leave the trail and suddenly an immense cliff looms above us like a thick cloud petrified centuries ago. A small church is

nestled there, barely visible. It is protected by a newly-constructed high wall.

The inside of the sanctuary is like a theatre: daylight only reaches one side of the church and a small royal palace of brick and earth nearby. Splendid liturgical drums are heaped on the straw-covered floor. The straw is spread over animal skins, under which are bones. "The church was built on water," explains the priest, lifting the small lid inserted in the ground to convince unbelievers.

Behind the church, the body of its architect is laid out on the bare ground, wrapped in multicoloured sheets, close to the sarcophagus of the holy king and the tomb of his holy spouse. She bore him no children. "Their union was only spiritual," says the priest, launching into an astonishing biography of the king, who every day received the visit of the archangels Gabriel and Raphael, bringing food for the 5,740 pilgrims come from the four corners of the world to admire his work and his wisdom. The precision of the numbers is also surprising.

Having shown me the cross God himself forged and gave to Imrahana



Mt Tabor at Lalibela, named after the site of the transfiguration of Christ in Galilee.
© UNESCO/Jasmina Šopova

Kirstos, as well as a triptych painted by the king's own hand, the priest lets me go off alone to explore the depths of the cave. As my eyes get used to the dark, I spot a grinning skeleton, stretched out in a long wooden box. Recovering from the shock, I see a vast ossuary spread out in front of me. It could easily contain the remains of 5,740 people.

What happened in this grotto? From what period do these bones really date? Answers remain vague. But it seems, in Lalibela, just one step is enough to take you from imagination to reality. ■



The Imrahana Kirstos church is nestled under this cliff.
© UNESCO/Jasmina Šopova



Walking Man. © UNESCO/Jasmina Šopova

THE COUNTRY OF THE KING WITH THE PROTRUDING TONGUE

The Royal City of Gondar was founded by the Ethiopian Negus Fasilides in the 17th century. Several of his successors built their palaces in the same court, forming a complex of rare beauty. The site was inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List in 1979. Not far away, the ruins of a more ancient castle left in solitude have another story to tell.

Jasmina Šopova

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An elongated figure appears against the horizon. A man is walking barefooted. He would resemble a Giacometti sculpture (Swiss), if it weren't for the tree he is carrying over his shoulder. Dead and forked, the tree's branches are twisted as if they were in pain. Its white trunk contrasts sharply against the man's dark skin. The man does not stop to catch his breath, moving so quickly that one has to run to keep up with him. Where is he off to in such a hurry, with a tree taller than he?

We are on the high plateau of Dankez in northeast Ethiopia, not far from Gondar, the beautiful imperial city founded by King Fasilides in 1632.

Dankez is a three-hour journey from Gondar. By car, one sets out over 40 km of paved road, then 30 km of dirt road, followed by 8 km or so of big yellow stones. By then, the vehicle can only crawl along until finally forced to stop near a tree in the middle of nowhere. This marks the start of a long hike by foot, first passing through an immense stretch of pasture land with vivid colours,

then through a village with houses scattered around (one of which surely belongs to the walking man) and finally through a vast wasteland dominated by a butte. Here, at an altitude of 2,700 m, the contours of

pulled by two oxen, moves back and forth placidly. Three age periods are intertwined in an instant.

This was the castle of Susenyos, Ethiopian Negus who fought fiercely



Fasilides Palace.
© UNESCO/Jasmina Šopova

the two ruins stand out in the vista set upon a lush green platform, surrounded by an endless chain of mountains.

Curiosity quickens the pace. In front of what was once a lavish royal castle, a farmer works his land. The plough,

to seize the throne in 1607, only coming to regret it bitterly, no doubt, some 20 years later. "He ended up with his tongue hanging down to his feet," says Aseged Tesfaye, a young man with a degree in tourism management, well versed in the official and unofficial stories ● ● ●

• • • from the region. “God punished him for abandoning his faith, when for 1,300 years the Ethiopian kings had all been orthodox,” he continues.

Aided in his rise to power by the wily Pedro Paez, head of the Jesuit mission implanted in Ethiopia 40 years before, Susenyos converted to Catholicism to gain Portugal’s support to fight the Muslims. A century had passed by since Ahmad al Ghazi, sultan of Harare in the southeast, had launched his holy war. The specter of the sultan, nicknamed Ahmad Gragne – the Left-handed – still haunts hundreds of piles of rubble throughout the country. But revolts proliferated against the new hated church, according to “A General History of Africa” (volume V, UNESCO Publishing, 1999). The beloved king, who had brought peace to his country, now had to subdue his subjects with bloody wars. He was finally forced to abdicate in favour of his son, Fasilides.

A town that starts with the word “go”

“After the last massacre in 1632, the Catholic church near the castle, where 60 Ethiopians were studying theology, was abandoned. Soon after, Fasilides settled in Gondar,” explains Aseged. The castle and church of the king with the protruding tongue have fallen into oblivion. Wild grass, bushes and trees grow where he once reigned.

Why did Fasilides choose Gondar? Because one day, when King Galawadewos was fiercely resisting the troops of the dreaded Ahmad the Left-Handed, a monk said to him,



Centre for Arts and Crafts at Queen Mentaweb’s Palace.
© UNESCO/Jasmina Šopova

“Find a town that begins with the word ‘go’. When you find it, you will proclaim it the capital of your kingdom.” After Gojam, Gouzara and Gorgora, came Gondar. And Dankez? “Dankez is also called Gomenge,” declares Aseged, with a triumphant smile.

When Fasilides had his palace built in this town protected by a high range of mountains, he probably never suspected that eight of his successors would reside in the same compound for another 100 years. Each added his own palace, rivaling the others in beauty. “That’s what makes the seven-hectare complex unique in the world,” says site specialist Getnet. It was added to the World Heritage List in 1979.

After pointing out the Portuguese and Indian influences on the architecture of Fasilides’s palace, Getnet explains to me how the building was badly damaged by a 1704 earthquake, looted by the dervishes of the Sudanese Mahdi in the 19th century, and bombed by the British in 1941 because Mussolini’s top army officers were headquartered there. “But the bad repairs done by the Italians during the occupation caused as

much damage as the bombing. We had to close it to the public for 11 years during a new UNESCO restoration. It reopened a little more than three years ago. You can imagine the deplorable state its ceiling was in when you see the Bacaffa palace today,” says Getnet, before showing me the home of the last king to reign in this citadel, from 1721 to 1730.

The palace of the beautiful queen

Nicknamed “The Merciless”, Bacaffa nonetheless comes off as a bon vivant when one sees how much space he devoted to his festivities: his reception hall is as large as the rest of the palace! Bacaffa is remembered mostly because he fell in love with a commoner, a young woman he supposedly met while traveling incognito around his kingdom. As Queen Mentaweb (“How beautiful you are”), the woman governed the country with a firm hand as regent when her husband died. The exceptional beauty of this woman can be admired in a mural found in the very middle of Lake Tana, the largest in Ethiopia (see “The intangible treasures of Lake Tana”). • • •

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THE INTANGIBLE TREASURES OF LAKE TANA

The country could be subject to fire and sword, but no invader ever troubled the serene peace of Lake Tana. For that reason, the Ethiopian kings safely hid their treasures in churches on the lake's islands. But upon careful observation, another treasure is revealed as one discovers the mural paintings in these churches: they can be read like a book of Ethiopian history.

Jasmina Šopova

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At dawn, coming up to Dek, the largest of the 30-odd islands and islets scattered on Lake Tana, a swarm of papyrus boats loaded with wood, as if conjured up from Egyptian antiquity, is slowly approaching us. "It's Friday, the day of the wood market in Bahir Dar," says the young guide, Wedu. "They will have to row about eight hours before they get to the town."

In our little motor boat, we have taken scarcely an hour and a half to make the same trip in the other direction. We have left behind us the source of the Blue Nile, which joins the White Nile in Khartoum, in Sudan, to form the fabulous river that is named after the Egyptian god, Hapy. We are now sailing in the middle of the largest Ethiopian lake. Bahir Dar, capital of the Amhara Region, forms a crescent on much of its bank, opposite of which are strewn the ruins of royal palaces.



Papyrus boats carrying wood to Bahir Dar market.
© UNESCO/Jasmina Šopova

"There are hundred of churches around here," says Wedu, moving his arm to trace a wide arc. But all you can see is the papyrus reeds at the edge of the water and the trees further inland on the islands. "Our kings hid a lot of their treasure here. Some are also buried here. You will see their crowns and their crosses, their robes embroidered in gold..." In the most troubled periods of Ethiopian history, Lake Tana remained a haven of peace. Who indeed would try conquering islands which seemed to contain only virgin forest?

A single gateway is visible in the distance, standing on the water's edge in a majestic natural setting. But once past the door, you realize that beauty has a price: the Narga Selassie Church, dedicated to the Ethiopian queen, Mentaweb (see the article "In the country of the king with the protruding tongue"), can only be seen after walking a long path flanked by ruins.

Its conical thatched roof rests on 29 pillars limited by the external ambulatory - *kena mahelate* - reserved for the priests during services. A

second series of arcades forms another circle where the congregation stands, the men in the northern section, the women to the south. The sanctuary dominates the centre; its walls, richly decorated with paintings, rise all the way to the roof, showing nothing of its sacrosanct inner space. It shelters, as do all Ethiopian churches, a replica of the Ark of the Covenant, the chest containing God's Ten Commandments, that Menelik, Ethiopia's first legendary king, is said to have brought back from Jerusalem 3,000 years ago (See "The silent giants").

When images speak instead of words

The majority of Lake Tana's churches were built between the 14th and 18th centuries, following the same architectural plan. The three circles represent the Holy Trinity. In Ethiopian iconography, it is always represented by three identical old men "because you cannot differentiate between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,"

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• • • the priest explains, going on to divulge a few details of ecclesiastical life.

“On a normal day, we pray three times, morning, noon and evening. But on Saturday evening, all the clergy assemble, along with the righteous people in the village, to pray all night. The prayers end on Sunday at nine in the morning, after which we give the villagers an hour of instruction.”

What kind of instruction? “We give them advice for everyday life, we tell them what to do so they will go to heaven when they die, we explain the differences between the Old and the New Testament.”

The Ethiopian church has the same respect for the Old Testament as for the Gospels, to the point that Moses and Pharaoh are habitually accompanied by Saint Michael and Saint Raphael in the sanctuary’s central paintings. On the southern face of the same circular wall, it is always the Virgin who welcomes women worshippers. Facing her, the archangel, Michael, holds scales: a crowd of small figures standing on one tray, a jug of water on the other. The



Messaret and Kesadana priests (left and right) outside the Narga Selassie Museum.
© UNESCO/Jasmina Šopova

Virgin has a finger discreetly placed on the second one.

At their feet, a “comic strip” tells a macabre tale. “This one is Balaesam. Three devils turned him into a cannibal and he ate 78 people,” explains Wedu, pointing to the monster devouring dismembered bodies. “But one day, he met a leper who was suffering terribly from thirst, and he gave him water,” the guide continues, pointing to the images. “When Balaesam died, he was supposed to go straight to Hell. But when Michael weighed his monstrous acts against his one act of kindness, Mary remembered her promise of forgiveness and made the water weigh more than the souls of his victims.”

The Seven Syrian Monks

In the churches of Lake Tana, the lower register of the sanctuary wall is devoted to Ethiopian history. Important moments in the lives of local kings and saints are portrayed in successive images, telling the people what they cannot read in the many Ethiopian manuscripts written on parchment, as these were generally written in Gu’ez language. The language died out in the 14th century and today it is used only in liturgy.

At the bottom of the wall, one often finds depictions of the Ethiopian fathers of Christianity, known as the “Seven Saints of Syria” (though historically speaking not all of them came from there). These “Saints” are credited with building the oldest monasteries in the country. One of them, called Abba Aragawi, is always portrayed with a dragon at his side. He is believed to have founded one of the strangest monasteries in the Amhara region, Debre Damo. At an altitude of 3,000 metres, it is perched at the top of a 15-metre cliff, forming a right angle

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Yered and the King, Azuwa Maryam wall painting, detail (Lake Tana).
© UNESCO/Jasmina Šopova

A PREHISTORIC TALE TOLD IN PICTURES

Not far from Addis Ababa, in the Soddo Region, is a field that contains stelae found nowhere else in the world. A cemetery was uncovered, with bodies buried in the position of prayer. We are in the very mysterious archeological site of Tiya, inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1980.

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“There are 40 stelae in this cemetery. Bodies of people aged 18 to 30 were found,” explains Senai Eshete, the custodian in charge of the World Heritage site. “It is likely they were warriors, because the sword is the most predominant image on the stelae.”

The largest stele, situated at the entrance of the site, was five metres



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high but is now broken in two. The top part can be found in the courtyard of the social sciences department at the university in Addis Ababa. “There are no fewer than 13 swords engraved on it, which means this warrior killed 13 enemies,” the custodian continues.

Another prevalent symbol is an African stool. “In fact it’s probably a head-rest – a wooden pillow, if you like – used by Africans. It symbolizes repose,” explains Eshete. He draws my attention to the symbol, “Σ”, telling me that it could represent hills, or otherwise represent a woman.

If these were indeed warriors, there were obviously women in their midst.



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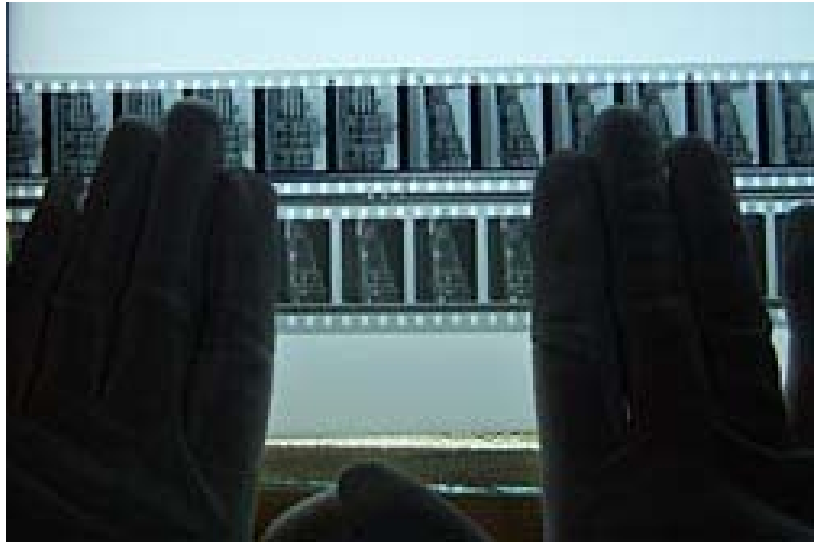
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Two “Ethiopian Amazons” are there to prove it. All the feminine attributes are represented on these stelae.

No one has been able to determine with any certainty the age of the stelae, but the analysis of human remains suggests that they are from the period between the 10th and 15th centuries. The bones and jewels discovered in the tombs have been deposited in the Ethiopian National Museum, while the small improvised museum on the site keeps an unsorted collection of ethnographic objects. ■

SAVING THE CUBAN *NOTICIEROS*

Duplication on 35 mm film and appropriate storage are the only reliable means of preserving our audiovisual heritage, according to Franco-Brazilian director and screen writer Alice de Andrade, who is concerned about digital materials, formats and equipment becoming obsolete. Daughter of the famous director Joaquim Pedro de Andrade (1932-1988), a leader of the *Cinema Novo* movement in Brazil, she recently restored 14 of her father's films. The project took four years.



Analysis of negative and positive newsreel images, film preservation workshop, Cuba. © Ana Ines Manzano

Alice de Andrade, *Franco-Brazilian director and screenwriter*

Passionate advocate of the preservation of cinematographic heritage, she launched an ambitious project this summer: preserving nearly 1,500 Cuban short films that recap

the history of the 20th century. They form the substance of her next 70-minute documentary: A Cuban Memory of the World. This significant cinematographic collection has

submitted its candidacy to UNESCO's Memory of the World Register.

On 1 January 2009, Cuba will mark the 50th anniversary of its Revolution. Cinema was a major vehicle for the revolutionary enthusiasm of the early years, and films were made to proclaim the ideals of justice and solidarity. Less than three months after the revolution the Cuban government founded the *Instituto cubano del arte e industria cinematograficos* (Cuban institute of cinema art and industry, ICAIC).

Then, in 1987, Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez (1982 Nobel Prize winner) inaugurated the *Escuela Internacional de Cine y TV* (EICTV) with Fidel Castro, in San Antonio de los Baños, near Havana. ● ● ●



Santiago Álvarez and Fidel Castro during the filming of a Noticiero. © ICAIC

● ● ● Cuba was still at that time a major centre of Latin American film production. Coppola, Scorsese, Scola, Taviani, Sorín, Jarmush, Tarantino, Storaro are only some of the great names who taught there. Students came from Africa, Asia and Latin America: Juan Carlos Cremata, Eryk Rocha, Camila Guzmán Urzúa, Tanya Hermida, Vicente Ferraz attended the “school of the three worlds”, as it was called back then. Today it is the “school of all the worlds”, open to everyone.

I learned film-making in this melting pot of cultures and personalities at a time when Cuba was undergoing the greatest crisis in its history, just after the fall of the socialist block in the late 1980s.

I did not go back to Havana until 16 years later, for the presentation of the entire restored collection of films made by my father, the Brazilian director Joaquim Pedro de Andrade. Four years of working as the technical coordinator for the high resolu-

tion digital restoration of his 14 films turned me into a passionate advocate of safeguarding cinematographic heritage. In the interim, economic hardship and the climate of the island had combined to let salt-peter and mould wreak havoc with Cuba's film collections. Kept in poor conditions, they required urgent action.

I then proposed setting up a workshop to safeguard this heritage as part of EICTV, which had all the resources for such a project. Several teachers had even participated in the production of the now-endangered films, and were therefore directly concerned by their fate. And the school has the infrastructure and equipment needed for the analysis of film material, a prerequisite for restoration: editing and cutting facilities, a film department, photo laboratory, screening rooms and sound studio.

Last summer we put on the first Cinematographic Conservation

Workshop, with the support of the International Federation of Film Archives of the Ibermedia Programme for the development of Spanish-American audiovisual production, as well as Cuba's National Commission for UNESCO. At the same time the ICAIC, with the Cuban Film Archives and EICTV, launched a safeguarding campaign for the *Noticieros Latinoamericanos ICAIC*.

Noticieros Latinoamericanos: unique perspective

The *Noticieros Latinoamericanos ICAIC* were weekly news magazines, presenting the latest regional and international headlines in a direct and original style. Between 1960 and 1990, Cubans were wild about them, crowding into the island's 60 cinema theatres to catch the week's news update. Some of the audience would even leave after the *Noticieros Latinoamericanos ICAIC*, not staying to watch the film that followed.

Armed at first with rudimentary cameras and leftover film reels, the ICAIC “image warriors” filmed bombings, uprisings, revolutions and political coups all over the world, as well as profiles of great Cuban artists. That was how they learned the art of film-making. Increasingly well-equipped as they went along, they ended up as the years passed writing the history of the 20th century, from a unique perspective.

Thanks to Santiago Álvarez (1919-1998), exuberant and innovative director who embodied the spirit of the *Noticieros Latinoamericanos ICAIC* adventure, a number of “iconoclastic” documentaries ● ● ●



Noticiero film crew covering Peru earthquake (1970). © ICAIC

• • • were produced. Some became world-famous: *Now!*, *Hanói*, *Mardi 13*, *Ciclón*, *79 printemps* ou *Hasta la victoria siempre*. In all, 1,493 *Noticieros Latinoamericanos ICAIC* were made over 30 years, each about 10 minutes long.

Countering the irreversible

Our cinematographic safeguarding workshop analyzed 33 of these last summer. For three weeks in the San Antonio de los Baños coconut grove, seven eminent international experts volunteered their services to develop a recovery strategy for the Cuban film archives. They trained 35 Latin-American apprentices, most of them Cuban.

Besides courses in theory, we prepared film material that we sent to Mexico for restoration (the ICAIC lab

is excellent, but out of commission since 2005). In only one week, 9 editions of the *Noticieros* were duplicated on silver emulsion (35 mm) film. We then screened and analyzed the restored films. A unified and motivated working team was formed and I am proud to say, without fear of contradiction, that all who participated in this adventure will remain forever committed to conserving moving images.

It is important to stress that everyone realized this film collection was threatened and on the brink of suffering irreversible damage. The collection urgently needs to be copied onto silver emulsion 35 mm film, still the only reliable material for preserving our audiovisual heritage. The new technologies represent considerable resources, but are fraught with risk – materials, formats and equipment are expensive and become rapidly obsolete.

The ICAIC, which has just received one million euros from the Junta de Andalucía (Spain) to rebuild its film storage facilities and fix up its film laboratory, was receptive to our project.

Now the Cuban government must invest as much energy as it initially put into the production of the *Noticieros* into their conservation. It took 30 years to create the collection, and it will take at least 10 to save it.

The ICAIC will again take on its pioneering role in global film-making, this time through the conservation and promotion of its film heritage.

This article appears in the UNESCO Courier this month to mark World Day for Audiovisual Heritage on 27 October.

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• • • It is thought to be the only portrait of the queen done in her lifetime.

Mentaweb's palace in Gondar has been transformed today into a culture and handicrafts centre. Aschalew Worku Tassew, chief of the culture and tourism department, expresses pride: "With the help of the World Bank, more than 130 people have been trained for different jobs. There are now seven handicraft associations, headed by a federation. They have begun to export their products to Frankfurt, Germany. This work is bringing in average monthly revenues of 3,000 birr (about 250 euros) per

person." Looking calm and serious, Tassew also talks about the numerous restorations completed or underway at Gondar. But his expression darkens when he mentions Dankez: "The condition of the ruins is alarming. At this rate, the Castle of Susenyos will be lost in two years. A team of Spanish archeologists recently produced a report that can be used for future restoration. We need international aid."

If nothing is done, nature could overcome stone and erase forever the vestiges of a fascinating chapter in Ethiopian history. And the verses inspired by Gondar in the 1930s, by the French writer and ethnologist

Michel Leiris will echo all the more poignantly in the devastated landscape:

"Huts of straw and stones,
Among ruins falling away in pieces
For days on end,
I was in love with an Abyssinian woman,
Bright as straw,
Cold as stone,
Her voice, so pure, twisted my arms and legs.
At the sight of her,
My head cracked,
And my heart crumbled.
It too
Like a ruin."

ATAHUALPA YUPANQUI : ARTIST OF THE ESSENTIAL

“He had a striking look, as they say, an Indian look... His hair stayed black until the last minute... He had very penetrating eyes, you felt naked in front of him... He was very tender...”

He was born 100 years ago, in Campo de la Cruz, in Buenos Aires province. He died in 1992 in Paris. He was the bard of the dispossessed. Lone traveler, he rambled through the Andes on the back of a mule, saving Amerindian musical treasures from oblivion. Then he travelled all over the world with his guitar, acclaimed wherever he went. He collected some 12,000 songs. His name is Atahualpa Yupanqui. He led an exceptional life during which, to use Andrea Cohen’s phrase, he lived three lives.

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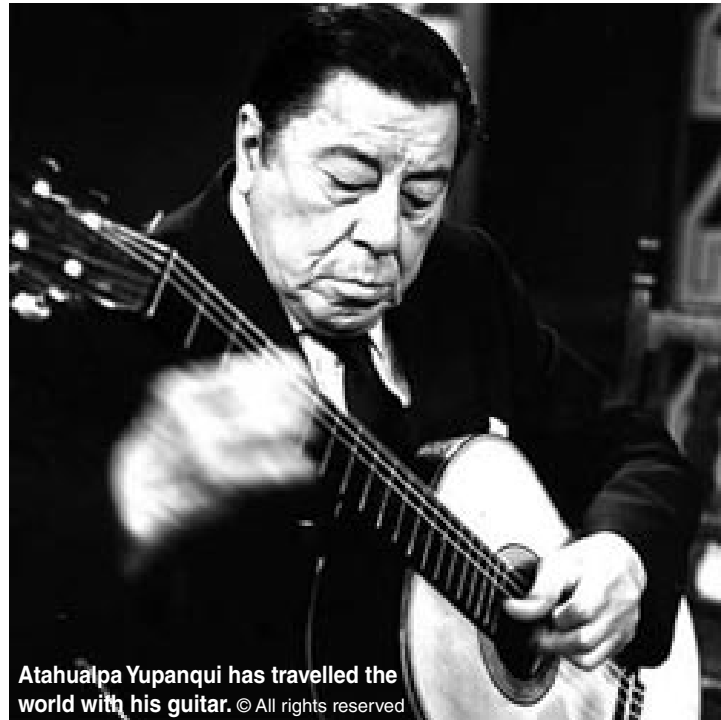
Andrea Cohen, *French-Argentinean pianist and composer.*

Andrea Cohen, who wrote this tribute to her famous compatriot, produced a radio show on him in 2005, for France Culture, Radio France’s cultural station.

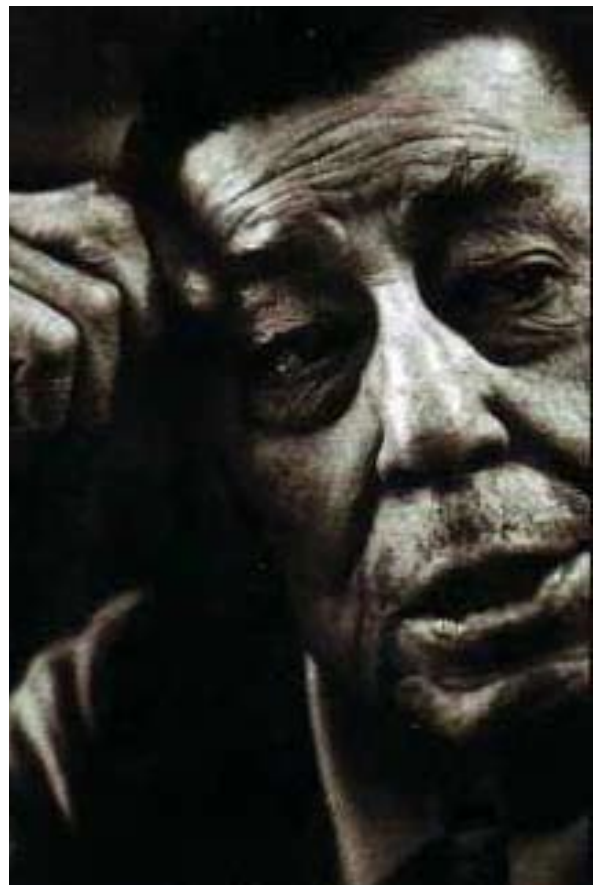
Atahualpa Yupanqui is undoubtedly the most renowned and emblematic of Argentinean exiles in Paris. The most cryptic too. He did indeed leave Argentina, but it remained inside him, piercing through each of his verses and his tunes. He was the embodiment of all that is Andean, down to his name. The man whose birth 100 years ago we are today commemorating was not named Atahualpa Yupanqui, but Héctor Roberto Chavero. His father came from an old Argentinean family, his mother was Basque and he was born in Buenos Aires province.

The choice of the symbolic pseudonym, consisting of the names of two Inca emperors, expresses his claim on an ancestral culture deeply rooted in the soil of Indian America, where there were no borders divides between Argentina, Bolivia and Peru....It is with this special identity that he grew to become a bard of the universal.

It might seem a paradox for an artist of his calibre, who left his country because of his political affiliation with



Atahualpa Yupanqui has travelled the world with his guitar. © All rights reserved



Atahualpa: an Argentinean in Paris. © Flickr



• • • the Communist Party, to decide to live in exile for the rest of his life. It seems he needed distance, isolation or silence, to preserve his art.

Atahualpa Yupanqui's three lives

Reading Atahualpa Yupanqui's biography, you see he had several lives. In his first life, he wrote poems and set them to music, travelled around Argentina, lived with farmers and collected popular songs, acquiring a repertory that was to remain his primary source of inspiration.

In his second life, around the late 1940s, he left for France, lived in Paris, met poets and artists who were Communists like him: Eluard, Aragon, Picasso. It was during this time that his talent as a poet and as a musician was spotted by Edith Piaf, who invited him to perform the opening act for her show at the Théâtre de l'Athénée. The French public was immediately smitten. He then began to go on his first tours through Eastern Europe.

Finally, in Atahualpa's third life, he was a singer, poet and composer known and recognized the world over. He was also adulated in his native land, where some of his verses became proverbs. Still today, Argentineans say «las penas son de nosotros, las vaquitas son ajenas» ("troubles are ours, cows belong to others").

I am nothing more than silence

When I did my radio show on Atahualpa, I met people who knew him and were his friends, the pianist



Atahualpa Yupanqui's grave in Cerro Colorado cemetery, Córdoba, Argentina.©

Miguel Angel Estrella (note, a UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador) recalled during our interview on how his friend Atahualpa would come and visit him in his Paris apartment, stand next to the piano and say "Purify my soul, Miguel, play me some Bach, play some Bach."

On a less personal note, I went to meet one of his French fans, virtuoso organist Louis Thiry, who knew Atahualpa Yupanqui only through recordings. He declared himself "fascinated by the truth that emanates from his music," and went on to explain "the brilliance is hidden, the playing remains simple, without pretension or artifice... Both in voice and instrument, he goes directly to the essence."

I also talked to Françoise Thanas, one of his long-time Parisian friends who translated Atahualpa Yupanqui's poems and wrote a book about him. She remembers him as a silent man. "Silence, modesty, those are words that suit him," she said, before reciting an excerpt from a poem that sounds like a portrait of the artist:

"Like mud, I am seen
And I have the sky within me.
Like stone, I am felt
And I am silence
Nothing more."

Angel Parra, another exiled Latin American artist, close friend and neighbour of Atahualpa, completes the portrait. "He had a striking look, as they say, an Indian look... His hair stayed black until the last minute... He had very penetrating eyes, you felt naked in front of him....He was very tender...." And Parra adds, "He was in exile just about everywhere."

As for myself, I would like to end this tribute by quoting the words of one of my favourite songs, Los hermanos, which to my mind best sums up Atahualpa Yupanqui's personality: "Yo tengo tantos hermanos que no los puedo nombrar /Y una hermana muy hermosa que se llama libertad." ("I have so many brothers I cannot name them and one very beautiful sister called freedom.") ■

Next Month

HUMAN RIGHTS AND MEMORY

The November Issue of the UNESCO Courier will focus on the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Through the concept of “memory”, the issue will reflect on the challenges and obstacles to enjoying human rights.



Work exhibited at UNESCO (September 2008).
© UNESCO/Michel Ravassard

PARTNERS

The World Heritage Centre offers assistance to States Parties in preparing nominations, advising them on the proper format and necessary maps and documentation. Once the completed nomination files are received, the Centre reviews them to check if they are complete, and then transmits them to the appropriate advisory bodies for evaluation. The Centre maintains the official archive

of all nominations in electronic and paper versions for research purposes.

World Heritage, quarterly magazine published in English, French and Spanish, contains feature articles and news about World Heritage sites accompanied by stunning photographs and detailed maps. ■



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• • • with the ground. As legend has it, the only way to build it, of course, was to be carried aloft by a dragon. Today, the only way to reach it is to climb up by rope, which the monks do regularly with remarkable ease. Women are banned from climbing the rope, and few men are allowed to enter, if they dare to venture up there.

Another recurring scene in the Lake Tana churches shows a seated king with his scepter planted in the foot of a man standing at his side. “This

is Yared,” says the guide, Wedu. “He was not a good student and was thrown out of school. One day when he was wandering around he saw an insect trying to climb a tree. Six times it tried, six times it fell. The seventh time it made it. And Yared grasped the value of perseverance. He went back to school. He was so gifted he composed a new form of music. It became the music of our prayers.”

Enthralled by the beautiful singing, the king is unaware he has planted his scepter in the singer’s foot. And

the singer, swept up in the enthusiasm of his own singing, feels no pain. In what book could you find a better definition of the art of music?

Just like Queen Mentaweb or Abba Aragawi, Yared really existed. He lived in the north, in Aksum, which was the capital of an immense empire when Christianity arrived 1,600 years ago. Ever since, his sacred music casts a spell over the adamantine light of Ethiopian dawn. ■

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