

The Reburial of Ras Tafari

By Hisham Aidi, Africana.com

On Sunday, November 5, the late Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia was laid to rest in an elaborate, ostentatious reburial ceremony in the Holy Trinity Cathedral of Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital. Selassie, who ruled Ethiopia from 1930 to 1974, is revered by many as a great African leader who resisted Italian colonialism and helped to found the Organization of African Unity. And he is worshipped as God by adherents of Rastafarianism, a religion that emerged in Jamaica in the 1930s and took its name from Selassie's pre-coronation life, Ras Tafari. But the late emperor has also been sharply criticized as a megalomaniacal African despot, who brutalized and impoverished his people.

The pomp and circumstance surround Selassie's funeral and reburial ceremony bore witness to Ethiopia's extraordinarily rich culture and history. "Old warriors sporting lions' manes" on their heads and carrying shields and spears formed a guard of honor for Selassie as his funeral procession weaved across the city," narrated a CNN report. "The coffin was draped in the red, gold, and green of the national flag and embroidered with Selassie's personal standard, showing on one side Ethiopia's patron Saint George slaying dragon and, on the other, the Lion of Judah. The patriarch, bishops and high priests of the Orthodox Church stood in the shade of velvet umbrellas intricately embroidered with flowers and religious scenes."

The funeral cortege left the Taeka Negast Baata Mariam Geda church at sunrise early Sunday and snaked its way along a six-mile route through Addis' Meskal Square to the majestic Holy Trinity Cathedral.

Controversy surrounds the circumstances of Selassie's death and his reburial has stirred mixed emotions. The Marxist rebels led by Haile Mariam Mengistu who overthrew the "King of Kings" in 1975 long maintained that the 83-year-old leader had died of circulatory problems. Many, however, suspected that the newly-installed military junta had murdered the aging leader and buried his remains under a toilet in the Imperial Palace. After the fall of Mengistu's "Red Terror" regime in 1991, Selassie's remains were discovered and stored at the Mariam Geda church. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church requested a reburial ceremony in which the emperor's remains would be buried in the Holy Trinity Cathedral next to other members of the imperial family, as he had wished.

Officials of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church continue to speak of the late emperor as the "Defender of the Faith" who was "chosen by God," and Selassie's descendants have formed a political party calling for the reinstatement of the monarchy. But most Ethiopians, including members of the new government, have a more ambivalent attitude toward the Lion of Judah.

Referring to the "oppression" and "brutality" of Selassie's "feudal regime," the government initially refused to allow a state funeral, and its position seemed to enjoy widespread popular support. The government finally agreed to a reburial provided the ceremony was a "family affair," but while officially conceived as a family event, the occasion's substantial political symbolism was obvious.

“Although they killed you and threw your body in an unmarked grave, they could not tarnish your image,” said Abune Paulos, the Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, before Selassie’s body was lowered into the grave in the Trinity Cathedral. Paulos noted the emperor’s “remarkable contribution to Ethiopia, the Church, Africa and the entire world.”

A few thousand people turned out to pay respects to Selassie, considerably less than the hundreds of thousands expected by the Emperor Halle Selassie Foundation which organized the event. One reason for the low turn-out is that Selassie’s dictatorial rule is still etched in the memories of most Ethiopians; many still recall the famine of 1974, which dragged on taking thousands of lives, while the “King of Kings” was shown on television feeding meat to his various exotic pets.

The reburial also ran counter to the convictions of most of Selassie’s Rastafarian followers, who believe the emperor is the earthly embodiment of God and reject the idea of his physical death. The Rastafarian movement calls for blacks in the diaspora to leave the exile of “Babylon” and return to Africa, and regards Halle Selassie’s ascension to the throne in 1930 as the fulfillment of Marcus Garvey’s directive to “look to Africa for the crowning of a king, to know that your redemption is nigh.”

Traces of Rastafarian culture—reggae music, dreadlocks, marijuana-smoking, and red, yellow, and green depictions of “the Lion of Judah”—are prevalent in popular culture today, and the religion’s themes of resistance to “Babylon” and calls for the liberation of the “sufferahs” resonate with youths around the globe, inspiring a million-strong worldwide Rastafarian movement.

“Rastafari culture combines the histories of the children of slaves in different societies,” writes Horace Campbell, a professor of African American Studies at Syracuse University and the author of *Rasta and Resistance: From Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney*. “Within it, are both the negative and the positive, the idealist and the ideological, responses of an exploited and racially humiliated people.”

Shago Baku, a London-based Rastafarian activist, did not expect many Rastafarians to attend the reburial. “There may be a few, as there are in any religion, who subscribe to something different from others within the same faith,” Baku told the BBC. “Most fundamentalists within the Rasta cause say we don’t deal with death and therefore to say that our God is dead is to deny us the right to believe in what we believe.”

“Halle Selassie is the King of Kings, Lord of Lords, and the Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah,” agrees Ras Lumumba, a self-described Rastafarian in New York. “He is everything to us Rastafarians and we will never accept that he is dead.”

The few hundred Rastafarians who did fly to the Ethiopian capital for the reburial insisted that they came “merely to observe, rather than to participate.”

Even Selassie's spiritual followers have different perspectives on the emperor's significance. While most Rastafarians see acceptance of Selassie's divinity as an essential tenet of Rasta theology, others see it differently.

"I'm a Rasta, but not a Rastafarian," says Cellon Rodney, who was born in St. Vincent but now lives in Brooklyn. "Halle Selassie was a great leader. He set a trend. But he took Africa's wealth and gave it to England—that fact has been pushed under the mat by Rastas who say he is God. He is from the line of King David, Solomon and Jesus Christ. But he is still just a man. Halle Selassie is not greater than Bob Marley. They're both prophets who took their message across...Selassie played a role in my life, Bob Marley did, but everyone teaches you something."

And while some Rasta traditionalists maintain that Selassie continues to exist on Earth as a living God, others in attendance saw the reburial as a fitting commemoration of the end of Selassie's physical life, even while his spiritual significance continues to endure.

"Halle Selassie is physically dead, but spiritually he lives," said Rita Marley, Bob Marley's widow and a guest of honor at the reburial ceremony. "Rasta people will be all loving his Imperial Majesty, Emperor Halle Selassie I. There is no end of his reign."