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## Childhood Portraits of Iyasu: the Creation of the Heir through Images

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Éloi Ficquet, Wolbert G. C. Smidt (Eds.)

# THE LIFE AND TIMES OF *LĪJ* IYASU OF ETHIOPIA

New Insights

LIT

The Life and Times  
of *Lij* Iyasu of Ethiopia

New Insights

edited by

Éloi Ficquet and Wolbert G.C. Smidt

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LIT

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## Portraits of an Ethiopian prince, *Lij Iyasu*\*

Estelle Sohier

Much of the reign of *Lij Iyasu* remains obscure because his memory was elaborated during the rule of his successor and political adversary Teferi Mekwennin, king of kings under the name of *Atsé* Hayle Sillásé from 1930 to 1974. During this period, the memory of Iyasu was sullied by official historiography, or, to the contrary, exalted by his partisans in private. Accused of having put Ethiopia in jeopardy with ill thought international and local political decisions, the heir of Minilik II was portrayed by his successors as an apostate, of lax morals and of an impetuous and violent character. Concomitant to this, the publication of documents on his reign was tacitly prohibited by the monarchy. However, various materials published since the 1990s allow to shed a different light on the period, and to nuance the accusations with which the posterity of the prince has been burdened. Amongst these documents are found a certain number of photographs. The art of photography was blooming under Iyasu's period, and the prince had inherited a pictorial policy developed by his grandfather and predecessor, king of kings *Atsé* Minilik II.

The portraits discussed in this article were collected for an exhibition dedicated to *Lij Iyasu* at the National Museum of Ethiopia on the occasion of the centenary of his nomination.<sup>1</sup> They come from private collections in Ethiopia, from public archives in Italy and Switzerland, and from old and more recent publications. What knowledge do these images provide upon princely education in Ethiopia, upon the mechanisms of political transition as well as upon the complex and controversial personality of Iyasu?

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\* This article is the edited version of "Portraits of an Ethiopian Prince" in Sohier (2012).

1 "Lights and Shadows: insights in the photographic heritage of *Lij Iyasu* (1898-1935)", exhibition organised by Estelle Sohier at the National Museum of Ethiopia (November 2009-January 2010) with the support of the French Centre for Ethiopian Studies of Addis Abeba, CEMAf (Paris 1 University - CNRS), "Orientale" University of Naples and GEMDEV (Paris 8 University). The photographs are also permanently exhibited at the Museum of Dessie. We would like to particularly thank Ambassador Zewde Retta, Ato Tadele Y. Tessema, Ato Saladdin Mohammed, Ato Ahmed Zekaria, Dr Wolbert Smidt and Mr Denis Gérard who gave us the opportunity to discover and publish these documents.

### Childhood photographs: the creation of an heir (1897-1909)

Iyasu was photographed from the tender age of 4, sometimes on horseback, or reading, alone as well as surrounded by servants, or even other children, bearing weapons, flowers, books or talismans, and all this on the orders of his grandfather, *Atsé* Mīnilik II.

What purposes did the king of kings have in mind for these images?

The descendants of the king are difficult to discern, as he had no children from his first wife Bafena, or from T'aytu, wed in 1883. The king of Shewa had other wives and concubines, but none of his male descendants survived.

The oldest son, Wesen Seged, from an earlier marriage, was brought up in the king's entourage, who had thought of making him his successor. He had a genetic disorder that had impeded his growth, nevertheless, some of his portraits were staged, in order to hide his small height and enhance his princely status. Mīnilik II had however to renounce making Wesen Seged his heir, because of his handicap, and the prince passed away at the age of 23, in March 1906 (Marcus 1975: 231).

After the accession of Mīnilik to the throne of Ethiopia in 1889, his succession became the object of manifold political manoeuvres at the court (Bairu Tafla 1972). Mīnilik II hoped to acquire a grandson, by marrying his daughters Zewditu and Shewaregga, to the most influent chiefs of the country. *Lij* Iyasu was the third and last child of Shewaregga, an illegitimate daughter of the king that he recognised in his waning years. After a first union with the son of one of Mīnilik's paramount chiefs to whom she bore a son, Shewaregga was married in 1891 to *Ras* Mikā'él. Formerly a Muslim ruler, with the name of Muhammed Ali and title of *Imam*, he had converted to Christianity upon becoming governor of the province of Wello in 1878. Two children were born from this union: Zennebe Werq and then Iyasu, who was born in 1897, six months before Shewaregga passed away (Gebre-Igziabiher Elyas 1994: n. 1, p. 558).

Zennebe Werq was brought up at the king's court before being wed at the age of 10 to the son of the influential *Nigus* Tekle Haymanot of Gojjam. It seems that she died in 1903, perhaps during childbirth (Prouty 1986: 224). Her younger brother, Iyasu, was another solution to the royal succession dilemma.

### “Hidden from the Gaze of Men”

Iyasu was born on 27 *T'ir* 1890 A.M., that is to say 3 February 1897, in Desé, a town founded by his father. Iyasu then grew up in Ankober with the guardian of the state prison, *Webni Azzazh* Welde Tsadiq (Bairu Tafla 1968: 123, 125), to whom he had been entrusted soon after his birth. This transfer to Ankober placed the heir midway between the courts of his father, to the north, and of his grandfather, to the south. It brought Iyasu geographically, but also culturally and symbolically, closer to his grandfather, as Ankober was the king's birthplace and the ancient capital of Shewa.

Two series of snapshots dating from this period have been identified. The first was probably staged by Alfred Ilg, the Swiss adviser of Minilik II, the second by Doctor De Castro. The latter recounted in great detail in his travel book how the king had sent him with his Kodak to photograph his grandson in the surroundings of Ankober (De Castro 1915, vol. 2: 215-256). The king had written a letter of instruction about the staging of the images and the clothes and regalia of the prince. Iyasu, for example, was to ostensibly bear a bouquet of artificial flowers specially obtained for the occasion. The flowers were a symbolic element of church paintings. In the photographs of the king's grandson the flowers possibly were to signify the double inheritance of Iyasu, consisting in both royal power and the Ethiopian territory.



Fig.1 –Photoreportage about the education of the Prince, here reading the Psalms. Dr. L. De Castro, Ankober, 1903. Published in De Castro (1915, vol. 2, fig. 193)

Iyasu, in the photographer's frame, is posed sitting, astride a mule, as well as studying in front of a *Dawit*, the Book of Psalms (Fig. 1). The image reflects the daily life of the prince, whose "tutor is on his back from morning to night to teach him to read and write" (De Castro 1915: vol.2, 225). The presence of church clergy in some of the shots illustrates the Christian dimension of his education, especially because of Iyasu's background as the son of a Muslim convert. The costumes he wears signify his rank as prince. They also make him a "miniature copy" of his grandfather, Minilik II, of whom he bears the visual signs of recognition.

This photo shooting took place in February 1903, a few days before the commemoration of the battle of 'Adwa celebrated with great pomp in Addis Abeba. The photographs were to show the continuity of his rule to all those gathered in the capital – allies, enemies and potential foes. The photographs demonstrated the correlation between the heir's education and the needs of the crown, solving the paradox between the need to protect the prince by keeping him hidden, and the need to celebrate his origins.

### First official portraits in Addis Ababa

Iyasu was transferred to the court of Minilik II in Addis Abeba two years later, at the age of 7 (Bahru Zewde 2007: 253). He continued his education at court in order to be initiated into the protocol and to develop his social relations. More photographic shoots were organized for Iyasu and other dignitaries' sons at the *gibbi* [palace]. The visible lack of willingness with which he took part in these sessions reminds us of testimonials bearing witness to the child's aversion for official ceremonies (Ydlibi 2006: 152-153). These sessions contained an educational element: they were to teach the prince the politic symbolism of manner, clothes and other paraphernalia, but also the use of the image; they enabled him to acquire a mastery of his body and appearance that would be necessary for his future role. His early encounters with photographers also taught him the symbolic impact of this technology imported from abroad. The outside world had by then acquired a considerable importance within Ethiopian politics.

The education of the prince was all the more taken seriously as Iyasu had been chosen by Minilik II long before being officially appointed, in 1909. That seems to be proven by certain sources (Berhanou Abebe 2001: 311), amongst which several childhood photographs. Minilik II, for example, sent to the German Kaiser, Wilhelm II, a portrait of the Ethiopian heir dated 4 July 1907 (Fig. 2). This photograph served as a proof that the succession was being prepared. Its objective was probably to allay the fear of a vacancy of power after the death of Minilik II, a fear prevalent amongst the official representatives of the foreign powers in Addis Abeba.

We still have no portraits of Shewaregga, or any photographs of Iyasu as a child with his father, *Ras Mika'él*. Such documents had no place in the political sphere. The official nomination of Iyasu was done progressively, while the king's health was degrading. Minilik II suffered from several strokes, starting from 1906. In December 1909, the prince was officially proclaimed heir to the throne, and *Ras Tesemma Nadew* designated as his tutor.

### Church paintings: God, the *Abun* and the dignitaries, guarantors of the royal succession (1909-1913)

Mīnilik II had chosen Iyasu as heir from the very start of the 1900s, however, this choice was not unanimously supported at the court. *Ītegé* T'aytu was the first to try to thwart the royal plans (Bairu Tafla 1972: 16). Her supporters opposed the partisans of Iyasu as soon as the first signs of the king's physical decline became apparent. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as in earlier periods, the royal succession gave room for a "winner takes all" scramble for the crown. The heir chosen by the sovereign was only one candidate amongst others, and any perceived weakness - for example the great youth of the heir - could give birth to a power struggle, where the highest bidder won (Toubkis 2004: 231).

After his official designation to the throne, Iyasu's photographs became commonplace and were reproduced on the mural paintings of a number the royal churches.

#### *The Church and the transmission of power*

The royal church of Sīllasé [Trinity] is situated to the north of the *gibbi* in Addis Abeba. Three portraits of Iyasu can still be seen there today. He appears with Mīnilik II and the leader of the Ethiopian Church, *Abune* Matéwos. On the northern wall, the trio is surmounted by Saint Marc and a lion, an allusion to Mīnilik's royal motto, "he has conquered, the Lion of Judah". This association symbolizes the historical alliance with the Church, as the Apostle Marc is considered to be the founder of the Coptic Church, as he evangelized Egypt. A double transmission is thus represented: a vertical transmission between Saint Marc, the leader of the Church and the king of Ethiopia, and a horizontal transmission, from Matéwos and Mīnilik II to Iyasu. In a painting on a pillar of the eastern wall (Fig. 3), Iyasu holds with his right hand a sword in its scabbard, symbolising a latent force, already seen in some of his childhood pictures. The *Abun* shows the holy book and the cross, both symbols of his function, while Mīnilik II holds a stick symbolizing his power and age. The composition evokes the authority of the prince, surrounded and supported by the two principal figureheads of the country. In the third and last portrait, the heir is included in a series depicting T'aytu and Mīnilik II. Wearing a *gofer* (lion's skin) and an *anfero* (lion's mane), he is not yet a sovereign but a triumphant warrior.

The paintings of Sīllasé show a power in the making under the auspices of the Church. Starting from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the *Abun* played an increasingly political role inside the Ethiopian monarchy. Matéwos was a key figure in the transmission of power as he had sworn to excommunicate anyone who would attempt to thwart the officially sanctioned choice of Iyasu. The paintings of the palace's church underline this determination and request it to be respected. They enshrine the pact

made between the royal power and the Church, between the faithful of this place of worship, that is to say the dignitaries of the Church itself and the court. Sillasé Church was at that time one of the stages of Ethiopian political life, and harboured for example the discussions around the succession. The paintings of the church reminded everyone of the commitment undertaken before the king's disappearance.

*Wheeled throne and crown suspended in the air: the paintings of Addis Alem*

The biggest pictorial representation of Mīnilik II's transmission of power can be found in Saint Mary's in Addis Alem. Founded in 1900 by Mīnilik II, this town was planned to become the new capital of Ethiopia. The king finally renounced the idea of moving his court here, but the town became famous when a *Nībure Īd* (religious governor) was designated, making Addis Alem the new sacred city of Ethiopia, in the heart of the territories conquered by Mīnilik II.

The church, dedicated to Mary, was built on a rectangular plan, in reference to the church of Tsīyon in Aksum, and relatively spacious, which explains the width of the scene. On the western wall (Fig. 4) Mīnilik II and Iyasu are placed underneath a representation of the Virgin and Infant and the Passion of Christ. To the left of the heir to the throne, and side by side, are found *Fitawrari* Habte Giyorgis, and Gebre Sillasé, the king's chronicler and recently appointed *Nībure Īd* of the church, and finally, the *Afe Nigus* Īst'ifanos. The three dignitaries represent respectively, the armed forces, the Church, and the justice, the key institutions guaranteeing the transmission of power. The painter and his child also appear in the background. Mary's sign of benediction points towards Iyasu, who is the only one who directly looks at the viewer. The visitor is hence invited to contemplate, recognize and support the prince, and in this way joins the scene: The viewer, same as the other personalities shown in the image, looks at Iyasu and in this sense becomes an integral part of the depicted situation of adoration.

All painted portraits of the high officials are modelled on photographs. Mīnilik II's portrait, for example, was modelled on a snapshot taken by the Italian Bertolani. The painting is hence a twice-staged event, with some elements copied and others added. The throne has been equipped with wheels, perhaps to evoke Mīnilik II's paralysis, called "illness of the feet" in his chronicle (Guèbrè Sellasié 1931: 535). The king of kings continues to reign, but no longer rules. Iyasu alone stands with a lion at his feet: the motto "he has conquered, the Lion of Judah" has already almost been adopted by him.

Multiple sources bear witness to the importance of the events organized in Addis Alem at the beginning of the 1910s. The consecration of the church in 1911, followed by the commemoration of its foundation were accompanied by very large ceremonies, as six hundred members of the clergy were assigned to the service of the church (Mersé Hazen 2004: 89). Iyasu and other members of the court took part. The church was

hence conceived as a stage for the representation of power and its continuity, both both through painting and through the means of ceremony. These two means of demonstration of power complete and mirror each other. The paintings testify the represented leaders had visited the church. Through their presence, the members of the royal court could witness the unity of the state. To take part in a ceremony in this church was to worship both the saints and the state, but also to pay allegiance to a hierarchy in its current structure. Saint Mary's had no doubt been planned by Mīnilik II to be the location of his heir's coronation. Iyasu used this place of worship as a visible demonstration of his legitimacy, but he was never to be crowned there.

### Iyasu, or the quest for the perfect representation

Starting from the age of only 13, Iyasu emancipated himself. He categorically refused the new regent that the court's dignitaries tried to impose on him after the sudden death of his tutor, *Ras* Tesemma, in April 1911. In December 1913, Mīnilik II died in secret after having been hidden the public for several years, paralysed and mentally incapacitated. The death of the king of kings was not announced, as, along the lines of royal succession, his heir should have been crowned only in the moment he could affirm his power with total legitimacy. However, even if the prince had already progressively seized power, he postponed his coronation for obscure and probably manifold reasons, and in agreement with the different regional chiefs quickly summoned to Addis Abeba in January 1914. The coronation of Iyasu was delayed, but the foundations of his power were reinforced by the decision to crown his father Mik'él, who was eventually proclaimed *Nigus* of Wello and Tigray in May 1914.

This transitional period weakened the Ethiopian government. All the more the kingdom had to face domestic political upheavals in the north of the country. The uncertainty was deepened by the international context, as the outbreak of the World War I in August 1914 sent shockwaves into the Horn of Africa.

To face these challenges, the young Iyasu (17 years old in 1914) took audacious political measures. Starting from 1912, he criss-crossed the country, forging pacts with the different regional chiefs. Being experienced in the manipulation of pictorial symbols since his childhood, he started now to commission his portraits himself, and radically changed the political use of images.

#### *A master of photography*

Several professional photographers opened studios in the capital with the support of Mīnilik II, offering the monarchy better quality images than those of the amateurs who had been employed until then. Iyasu used their services and became particularly close to the two pioneers, the Armenians Bedros Boyadjian and Levon Yazedjian, to whom we owe several of his portraits.

A painter and a photographer, Yazedjian may have also served Iyasu as the chief of his secret police.<sup>2</sup> Iyasu was photographed, in private or in public, in Addis Abeba or in the provinces, alone or surrounded, and in his different roles: supreme judge of the court; royal spectator at the Addis Abeba race track; supreme armed forces commander; with his troops, his collaborators, or his associates...

*The son of two kings*

After the disappearance of Mīnilik II, new “family” portraits were made by Boyadjian. Although the prince was probably never represented with his father during his childhood, he now figured several times in his presence at the court of Desé, accompanied by Boyadjian (Smidt 2001: 372-373).

On Fig. 5, the heir to the throne poses kneeling at the feet of Mika’él whose right hand lies on the bowed head of his son.<sup>3</sup> This gesture appears as a confirmation of succession. Iyasu figures in a subservient position, but fixes the lens: this is all about his own power, emanating from his father’s position.

One can understand this posture from the texts used as reference by the Ethiopian monarchy, and particularly the Bible. It could mirror certain passages where the heir is designated by the right hand of the father (*Genesis* 48: 19), right hand mentioned many times in the Psalms: it represents the support of the father but also of God; it is linked to the idea of strength and victory (*Psalms* 139: 10). Mīnilik II is evoked metonymically in the picture’s composition, by way of his crown, brought to Desé on the occasion of the coronation of Mika’él. The crown is both a reminder of the deceased sovereign but also of the supreme power that Iyasu has inherited.

This picture illustrates the newly established closeness between Iyasu and his father, and the political role with which the latter was bestowed upon his coronation in May 1914. The two men also hereby convey several messages to their contemporaries and for posterity, by reinterpreting the political inheritance built by Mīnilik II for his heir. By putting publicly the emphasis on his paternal descent, Iyasu becomes not only a grandson of a king of kings but also the son of a king. The promotion of Mika’él enabled Iyasu to reinforce his political position inside the kingdom, by associating himself with an unwavering and powerful ally who could even out the power of the chieftains of the court of Shewa. Several sources tell us that Iyasu could have been reticent to become his father’s sovereign, as Mika’él would have had to swear allegiance to his own son upon his coronation (see Ydlibi 2006: 259). The photographs of Iyasu and Mika’él show that the filial and power relationships between the two men were problematic, and the object of negotiations both on a political and a symbolic level.

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2 Several members of the Armenian community of Addis Abeba bear witness to this. See Berhanou Abebe, 2003: 24.

3 On this coronation and the story of the crown see Smidt, 2001 and Smidt, 2007-2008.

But, by creating such images, Iyasu nevertheless emphasised what Minilik II had tried to occult: he was symbolically linking himself with the figure of his father, an ex-Muslim chief converted to Christianity by political necessity and the governor of a predominantly Muslim region of the kingdom

*Photography, a pact between enemies?*

Iyasu posed, of course, with his allies, but also with characters with whom he held more complex relationships, particularly Teferi Mekwennin. The relationship between the two young chiefs started to unravel in 1916 and broke down completely in September of the same year, when Teferi was named heir to the throne in the place of Iyasu, impeached. The two cousins had grown up side by side for some time in the *gibbi* of Minilik II. Upon the nomination of Iyasu, Teferi payed an oath of allegiance to the heir, together with the other dignitaries. The two men posed together several times in the photographic studios of Addis Abeba and in the town of Harer. They sometimes have similar poses and clothes, the pre-eminence of Iyasu signified by a few details: on one snapshot, the coloured fringe of his *shamma*, the regal bearing of his head and the forward thrust of his weapon, whereas Teferi holds his sword discreetly at his side

These photographs were undertaken inside a larger more complex and ambiguous relationship, sometimes full of tension. Iyasu told one of his advisers, Tekle Hawaryat, that he was terrified by Teferi (Bahru Zewde 2002: 167), notwithstanding his pre-eminence. On the other hand, Teferi's private secretary asserted in his correspondence, that Iyasu was his worst enemy.<sup>4</sup> These few lines suffice to evoke the nature of a complicated and complex political relationship, made up of family links, maybe a little friendship, and certainly solemn oaths, but nevertheless marked by feelings of rivalry fanned by others. The group portraits of Iyasu and Teferi seem to be the expression of a pact underwriting a consensus that was unstable but fundamental for the peace of the realm. The photographs were perhaps created to highlight to all the understanding between both men and belie the rumours of discord.

*The prince's body, a mirror for multiple identities*

The *Lij* also fostered links with political and cultural groups that had been recently incorporated into the kingdom by his grandfather. During his long expeditions throughout the country, he allied himself to the dignitaries of the peripheral regions by conducting an active matrimonial policy and by surrounding himself with Muslim followers (Mersé Hazen 2004: 159). This official political acknowledgement of the country's religious and cultural pluralism was reflected in the prince's image policy.

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<sup>4</sup> Letter from Samuel to Jarousseau from Addis Abeba the 20 April 1914. Capuchin Missionary records, Harar. (1911-1914). Miss reel. 12, archives of the IES, Addis-Abeba.

Iyasu adopted the same practises with these dignitaries that he had used with his Christian allies: he posed by their side, but disregarded the dress conventions of the Ethiopian court. In Harer, where he stayed regularly starting from 1915, he for instance posed in elegant Muslim garb, his head swathed in a turban, in the company of one of the town's dignitaries, Abdullahi Ali Tsadiq (Fig. 8). The prince had kindled a friendship with this man whom he often met and whose daughter he had wed.<sup>5</sup> These links took on heavy political implications, as it seems the Harer notable was the source of the prince's interest in Somalia, and the preference given to the Turks and Germans against the other colonial powers (Gebre-Igziabher Elyas 1994: 561). He may also have been the intermediary between Iyasu and the Somali chief Muhammad Abdallah Hasan (Bairu Tafla, 2003: 38). A trader in contact with all of the principal commercial centres of the region, Abdullahi Ali Tsadiq had already served as secret intermediary between the Somali chief and Mīnilik II, who had sent him on an official mission to the Ottoman court in 1904. The understanding between Iyasu and this Muslim dignitary was therefore in a certain manner a continuation of his grandfather's policies.

The photographs of Iyasu in Muslim dress can be compared with other images just as audacious and unexpected for a Christian prince. A photograph published by Wilfred Thesiger (1987), of unknown provenance, unveils the prince with bare feet and chest, wearing a simple wrap around his hips in the fashion of the 'Afar, whose knife he bears (Fig. 9). Yet another novelty: Iyasu was the first Ethiopian sovereign to wear an European suit (Fig. 7). These iconoclastic portraits offended the sensibilities of the Ethiopian Christian dignitaries who, if they hadn't seen the pictures themselves, had heard of them by word of mouth (Mersé Hazen 2004: 159).

All the same and despite his apparent closeness with some of his Muslims subjects, Iyasu nevertheless remained a practising Christian. Iyasu's audacious pictorial policy was therefore not – or not only – due to his inclination for provocation and to his insouciant youthfulness, as he was conversant with the creation and manipulation of symbols and images.

Donald Crummey underlined the weaknesses of the Solomonian ideology in Ethiopia, noting that at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the majority of the population of the country didn't master the Semitic language in which it was propagated (Crummey 1988: 38). The same can be said of the iconographic representations of the state which spoke, until then, only to the Christian audience. By inventing new pictorial forms, Iyasu was in a certain manner correcting this ideological lapse. Iyasu adopted the same policies towards the groups incorporated into the realm by his grandfather as he did towards the ruling class of the high plateaux. However, it seems that the photographs of the prince in Muslim or 'Afar attire for example were

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5 Testimonial of R. K. Molvaer after an investigation conducted in the 1980s (Gebre-Igziabher Elyas 1994: 560).

very limited in their distribution and were essentially destined to the political interlocutors of the prince. In adopting their guise, Iyasu was officially expressing the acknowledgement by the Ethiopian state of other cultures, a necessary step for the foundation of a real political, military and economic partnership.

On the other hand, by this means Iyasu also sought to consolidate his stature as future king of kings, in order to be recognised by the Christian chiefs, but also by other groups officially belonging to the Ethiopian polity. In accomplishing this, he was not putting an end to the ideological system on which his power was built, but, on the contrary, was seeking to adapt it to the reality of the land that had been handed down to him by Mīnilik II. The pictures were both reflections and actors of his policy. They were all the more important that the impact of symbols is exponential in a context of uncertainty and instability.

By using Muslim symbols, the prince however upset the political and institutional balance set up at the end of Mīnilik II's reign to ensure a peaceful succession with the help of the Church. His policies also stoked anxiety among the neighbouring states, England, France and Italy, that watched over the prince's alliances in these times of world war with increasing vigilance.

### **Denunciation by the image... and disappearance**

By manipulating his appearance and the political symbols of royalty, Iyasu might have played with fire, as it seems he was squeezed out by the means of just such a photograph. The *coup d'état* instigated against him in September 1916 was due to a combination of factors. The pressure brought about by the diplomats of the three Allied countries were a decisive factor in the impeachment process: the English, French and Italian legations were afraid of the pro Turkish and German proclivities of the prince. Their agitation was successful as it found a favourable echo amongst the dignitaries of the court, that the *Lij* had alienated (Mersé Hazen 2004: 125). He had brought the uneasiness of the Shewan nobility to a head by delegating a part of the royal power towards the court of his father in Wello (see Smidt, 2007), and had surrounded himself and promoted dignitaries from other regions and social classes, had committed petty gestures against chiefs from his grandfather's court, but also, had initiated fiscal investigations which sought to bring to book the grandees of the court (Mersé Hazen 2004: 162).

The day of the feast of the finding of the True Cross, the 27<sup>th</sup> of September 1916, the *abuna* Matéwos accepted to release the dignitaries from their oath of allegiance to the heir of Mīnilik II by excommunicating him for apostasy, the prelude to his impeachment. Iyasu was stripped of his rights to the crown.

The daughter of Mīnilik II, Zewditu, was crowned in his stead Queen of Kings on 11 February 1917, as Teferi Mekwennin was promoted to *Ras* and *Īnderasé* at her side. From this date onward the portraits of Iyasu are few and are all the more significant.

*A photograph for a coup?*

As a number of historians before him, Berhanu Abebe described how a doctored photograph which showed the prince wearing a turban had been used as incriminating evidence in September 1916, among others in order to encourage the *Abun* to excommunicate him (Berhanu Abebe 2003: 19-41). Produced in great numbers, this forged photograph was perhaps commissioned by the British, the famous secret agent T.E. Lawrence himself having perhaps played a role in the plot.<sup>6</sup> Uncertainties linger around this mysterious picture, as no copy of it has ever been found. Perhaps this story is the product of a blurred memory, an imaginary recreation of Iyasu's reign, a fantasy produced by the silence imposed during the reign of his successors, and beyond? What one can say is that the story of this forgery is relevant in the context of a World War characterised by an increased use of propaganda by all belligerents, propaganda facilitated by the technical improvements of fixed and moving images and new means of reproduction.

German representatives for example kindled friendships with Ethiopian chiefs and celebrated - inside their legation - all the victories of the Axis, sometimes exhibiting a full sized photograph of the Kaiser (Mersé Hazen 2004: 157). One can imagine that the portrait of Iyasu in European dress at the side of a European (German?) diplomatic delegate (Fig. 7) was undertaken in the same context. The prince no doubt believed in the victory of the Germans and Turks. In the opposing camp, different means were used by the Allies to compete with German propaganda.

*Disappearance and concealed photographs*

At the moment of the coup d'état, in September 1916, Iyasu was in the region of Harer. After an unsuccessful attempt at armed resistance, he escaped, and was finally captured many years later in a church in Tigray in January 1921 (Bahru Zewde 2007: 255). The grandson of Mīnilik II lived his last fourteen years in prison out of sight of the Ethiopian public.

He was first imprisoned in Fiché, in the domains of *Ras Kasa*, a follower of Teferi. After a failed breakout in May 1932, the prince was transferred to Gara Mulleta, where he experienced a harsher regime and enhanced surveillance. He is confined here until the middle of the year 1935, when he was probably assassinated following an order by Hayle Sillasé, while Italian troops invaded the country. But even if Iyasu physically disappeared from the public sphere when his captivity started, he was still theoretically

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<sup>6</sup> Greenfield (1965: 138) quoted by Berhanu Abebe (2001: 323).

present in the Ethiopian political scene, his successors being torn between their guilt at having the grandson of Mīnilik II endure such a predicament, and the fear of his return to power. For the prince was still popular and enjoyed potential support in the country.

One photographer alone seems to have been able to shatter this isolation leaving a thin visual trace of *Lij* Iyasu. The story of these documents is rather exceptional even if we are still left with gaps.

Two photographs show the prince crossing a river surrounded by an escort (doc. 39). The caption indicates that this river would be the Blue Nile, in the Gojjam region, after the re-capture of Iyasu in 1932. Strapped to a float and held by the men surrounding him, Iyasu still finds the time to smile to the photographer. His body is heavy and his face has aged. Sixteen years separate this picture from the last known portraits.

The third and last picture was taken before or just after his escape from the prison of Fiché. With the play of the light which structures the picture, the prince and his photographer may have wanted to evoke a decision taken, or the prince's future outside the prison cell. The length of Iyasu's hair is really quite unusual for an Ethiopian aristocrat. It physically expresses his marginalization from aristocratic society and/or a desire to resist the establishment.

Two of the three photographs were published in the last few years<sup>7</sup>, rendered public and handed over to us by *Ato* Tadele Yidneqachew Tesemma, today the trustee of these pictures and their story<sup>8</sup>. These clandestine images had been given to the father of *ato* Tadele, *ato* Yidneqachew Tesemma, by *Ato* Mekesha Welde Mesqel (1902-2001) who had been in the service of the father of Yidneqachew, the famous Tesemma Īsheté, since the reign of Iyasu. Formerly the minister of Post and Telegraphs, and an adviser of the *Lij*, to whom he was particularly close, Tesemma was a self-taught man of many talents, being notably one of the first photographers of Ethiopian nationality. Tesemma was to have a complex and ambivalent relationship with the successor of Iyasu, Hayle Sillásé, for the rest of his life.

He secretly kept these documents pertaining to the reign of Iyasu during all of his life, assisted by his secretary, Mekesha Welde Mesqel. The latter only transmitted the photographs of Iyasu from his prison just shortly after the death of Yidneqachew in 1987. Why were these pictures concealed with such precaution while their content does not show, it would seem, any elements which could pose a threat to the apparatus of State? The photographs of the prince, however, provide clues; they are a clear revelation and are *proof* of his existence on the margins of society. Different testimonials show that Iyasu was still present in people's minds, both at court and in

7 Yidneqachew Tesemma (1992-1993: 19-20); Gérard & Pankhurst 1996; Bahru Zewde (2007: 255).

8 All of the information pertaining to the photographs and their story were transmitted to us by *Ato* Tadele Yidneqachew Tesemma in November 2009. I would like to thank him here warmly.

the capital and certain regions. These photographs of the prince alive could have rekindled his memory with his partisans, but could also have enabled them to *imagine* a different political way, the prince being still alive, what is more, sane of body and mind. These documents could also have shocked the Ethiopians, reverent of the memory of the king of kings Mīnilik II and his grandson, as the conditions of Iyasu's imprisonment apparent in the pictures were unsuitable for a person of his rank. The pictures had a great potential of negative symbolism for the Ethiopian royalty at large, by showing one of their members in isolation and disgrace.

Today, these fragile and fugitive documents remind us that there are many aspects of the last years of Iyasu's life on which all the light has not been shed. His death wasn't announced publicly, the circumstances surrounding his disappearance and his burial place in November 1935, were suppressed. This concealment is comparable, in some ways, to the secrecy in which the last photographs were held. Its aim was no doubt to snuff out the memory of the prince, preventing partisanship in favour of him and his memory – both on the terrain and in imagination –, and to prevent any reuse of his physical remains by his descendants, of which several could have claimed the throne and taken the lead of contestation movements.

Irony of history, one can draw a parallel between Iyasu's tragic end and the destiny of his successor and enemy, Hayle Sillāsé, he himself having been assassinated and buried in secret in an unlikely location at the heart of Mīnilik II's palace. However, while the body of Hayle Sillāsé was found and subsequently reburied in the year 2000 with dignity after the downfall of the Derg, the location of Iyasu's tomb still remains unknown. New research into this subject would enable to reincorporate the body of Iyasu into Ethiopian society and to rehabilitate his role in the complex history of the monarchy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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The end of the reign of Mīnilik II and the reign of Iyasu were marked by great political, geographical and cultural shifts in Ethiopia. We can compare the Ethiopian court of this period to a laboratory, where the use of photography and the manipulation of visual symbols in different media played a role in the making of the heir. The use of photography by Iyasu is to be seen as a continuation of the education that he had received, marked by a political culture of an imagery rich with meaning, a great distrust towards the colonial powers, and finally an ability to put to use new technical means imported from abroad in a novel manner. His reign shall not be interpreted as a messy interlude of the history of the contemporary Ethiopian monarchy, but it illustrates the adaptation efforts of the monarchy to the unprecedented changes experienced by the kingdom.

The images commissioned by Iyasu after his accession to power were both reflections as well as agents of his attempts to manage the complex political and cultural field that his grandfather had passed down to him after his conquests. The son

of a former Muslim chief who had received a proper royal and Christian education, Iyasu was of course, himself, a product of this policy. His images show and illustrate his specific and somewhat fumbling approach in managing the complexities of his own identity and that of his country.

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Fig.2 – The first diplomatic portrait.

By Bédros Boyadjian, Addis-Abeba, July 1907.

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Fig.3 – Wall church painting: Minilik II, *Abune Matéwos* and *Lij Iyasu*  
Addis-Abeba, Old Sellasé Church, eastern wall, c. 1909.  
Painting by Kasa Arägahän. Photographed by Claire Bosc-Tiessé, 2009.



Fig. 4 – Wall church painting: From right to left: Minilik II, Iyasu, *Fitawrari* Habte Giyorgis, *Nibure İd* Gebre Sillase, *Afe Nigus İst'ifanos*, underneath a representation of the Virgin and Infant. Addis Alem, Saint Mary's church, western wall, c. 1909. Photographed by Sohier, 2009.



Fig. 5 – The son of two kings: *Lij Iyasu*, *Nigus Mikaél* and *Mınılik's crown*.  
Desé, 1914  
Photographer : Bédros Boyadjian  
Published in: Henri de Monfreid, *Le masque d'or*, Paris, 1936.



Fig. 6 – Iyasu with a warrior dress from Shewa at the age of 18.  
Addis-Abeba (?), 1915, author unknown.  
From Guèbrè Sellasié (1930, pl. LXI).



Fig. 7 – Iyasu in a European suit with an European (unidentified) diplomat  
Date, place and author unknown.

© Ambassador Zewde Retta

*It may be the only picture where Iyasu wears a European costume, and the first time that an Ethiopian ruler is dressed in a « modern » fashion.*



Fig. 8 – Iyasu dressed as a Muslim with Abdullahi Ali Sadeq's family Harar, c. 1916, author unknown.  
Courtesy of Mr Salah ed-Dinn Mohamed. Reproduction: Denis Gérard.



Fig. 9 – Iyasu in Afar's dress  
Date, place and author unknown  
From Thesiger (1987).