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## Selassie: A very modern monarch

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*On the anniversary of the end of his rule, we examine how Haile Selassie helped bring Africa into the 20th century.*

**Jermaine Haughton, Voice Writer**

**HAILE SELASSIE (1892 - 1975) was deposed as Emperor of Ethiopia 39 years ago in a military coup, ending his more than half-a-century reign over the only African nation never to be officially colonised.**

Standing at a diminutive 5ft 4ins, Selassie was both Napoleonic in stature and resilience, defiantly seeing off the five-year fascist occupation of Ethiopia during the Second World War, belligerent in his determination for a strong and powerful united Africa and its diaspora.

Selassie - heir to a dynasty which claimed origins dating back to King Solomon - was denounced by his critics as an undemocratic, pampered leader who enjoyed life's finer luxuries and who allegedly transferred billions of pounds of public funds into private overseas bank accounts.

But his supporters will conversely argue that he was responsible for leading a largely illiterate, rural and feudal country with 2,000 languages and dialects into the 20th century.

### **God Incarnate**

To followers of the Rastafari movement, he was God incarnate. Most notable was Selassie's contribution to African unity and the pan-African movement.

A fellow African who met the emperor at the United Nations Security Council session in Addis Ababa in 1972 surmised: "Haile Selassie is one of the world's great men. He did a lot for his country and early became a respected voice for Africa and for the Third World." Indeed, in 1935, he was named **Time** magazine's Man of the Year.

Ras Habte Wold, from West Midlands-based research group Rastafari Heritage, spoke of the emperor's impact on Africa. He said: "He modernised Ethiopia and brought her out of the dark ages into the modern world. His efforts led

Ethiopia to join the League of Nations in September 1923.

"He, through the 'Power of the Holy Trinity' [which translates as Haile Selassie in Amharic language], shone a bright light of liberation that inspired black people across the world to shake off the yoke of captivity and 'down-pressure' and to stand as free men.

"This light which he shone among his own African people would also light up the lives of all peoples, tongues, colours and nations. The emperor is called the 'Father of Africa' for his work towards bringing unity amongst the African countries which had disputes, being a founder member of the OAU (Organisation of African Unity), and then wider afield championed world peace across the globe."

### **Ethiopia's First Universities**

It was Selassie who established one of Ethiopia's first universities, now Addis Ababa University, which taught political economy and law, among other subjects, as well as enabling the Ethiopian military to learn the sophisticated training techniques of allies like the United States - which were to be used against him in the military coup in 1974.

His pan-Africanism ideology was influential across the globe, reflected in the civil-rights movement in the US and in South Africa. It is based on the belief that unity is vital to economic, social, and political progress and aims to "unify and uplift" people of African descent.

Alongside other important thinkers such as Kwame Nkrumah and Jomo Kenyatta, Selassie's influence was important for the creation of the African Union (AU) in 2001, consisting of every African state barring Morocco - making it the largest and most influential pan-African organisation in the world. With economic growth among Africa's larger nations such as Angola, Ghana and Nigeria up to around four per cent, the AU is in a special strategic position, both politically and geographically.

It, therefore, suggests that the AU can play an important role in brokering important decisions for its people and overseas.

Toyin Agbetu, founder of the Pan-African human-rights organisation Ligali, argued that the unification of African people is more urgently needed within governments rather than in local communities: "The unification of Africa has been going on for many years at a trade level, with people freely selling and buying goods from different countries - sharing their experiences, language and customs. On the other hand, there is a lack of unification on a political and economic level, partly due to the living legacy of the way Africa was divided by colonial powers.

"The AU has great potential to improve the standing of the continent. Work still needs to be done, though. In the past, the AU has been used as a talking shop for politicians, while there are people who are doing some great work under the radar, who don't make the headlines."

However, Agbetu adds that it is the education of the people which is needed to drive greater cooperation among African nations. "People can create that change. We cannot wait for others to decide our futures. We all have to embrace political literacy and create leaders who can make the change we want. So far, many African countries have struggled to translate their personal relationships institutionally."

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