

THE EXILED PRINCE FROM THE WORLD'S OLDEST MONARCHY

Royal visit A representative of the Ethiopian royal family, which traces its roots back more than 3000 years, is currently on visit to Australia, writes Andrew Clark.

On the face of it, Australia and Ethiopia have little in common. A poor country of 100 million people on the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia is scarred by coups, civil wars and famine.

But links range from Australian mining investments to eucalyptus trees ringing the capital, Addis Ababa; from Australian "Whaler" horses providing mounts for the ceremonial guard, to both countries' soldiers fighting alongside in the Korean War. And then there is the Australian-founded, funded and run obstetric fistula hospital, the Hamlin Fistula Ethiopia.

Promoting the ties, Prince Ermias, President of the Crown Council and putative successor to the oldest throne in the world, believes both are "gateway" countries – Australia to Asia, and Ethiopia to Africa.

Australia is "a gateway to Asia and because of that to the world", he says. Ethiopia is the oldest state in Africa, with the oldest continuous Judeo-Christian bloodlines. It hosts the African Union, and ranks, after Brussels, as a major diplomatic capital, making it "the gateway for Africa".

Warming to his theme, Prince Ermias views Australia as "a microcosm of what the world may look like in the future because you have all types of people in this supposedly isolated and remote place".

Arriving in Sydney, "what struck me the most was the multicultural nature of Australia. I found it more visually stunning than New York". The Big Apple "is supposed to be a melting pot of the world, but when I came to Sydney Airport and I was watching all those faces I just could not believe the interaction of people".

This is one of the more intriguing foreign visits to Australia in recent years. Prince Ermias – his full name is His Imperial Highness Prince Ermias Sahle-Selassie Haile-Selassie – is retracing the steps of his grandfather, Emperor Haile-Selassie, near the 50th anniversary of a state visit to Australia in 1968.

Now 57, Prince Ermias is mingling with the 20,000-odd local members of a 3 million-strong Ethiopian diaspora, and exploring closer investment ties with Australian mining companies operating in Africa.

The intriguing nature of his tour is that, although private, it is already taking on the trappings of a state visit. While in Canberra this week, he is dining with a group of "senior ministers", attending a special parliamentary reception hosted by Defence Industry Minister Christopher Pyne, and laying a wreath at the Australian War Memorial in company with the War Memorial head, and former Liberal Party leader, Brendan Nelson.

He may be visiting a country far from his native land but it will most likely contribute to a reconciliation process between the exiled-since-1974 royal family and the Ethiopian government.

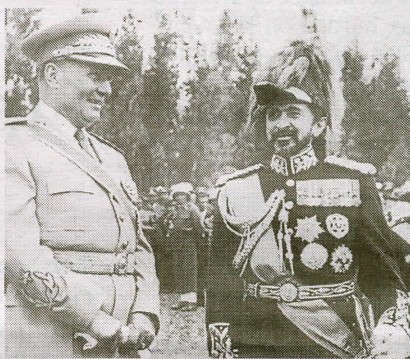
Significantly, the visit is being largely orchestrated by Greg Copley, a native of Western Australia and a figure with remarkable political, business and intelligence connections in Eurasia, the US, Middle East and North Africa, and who, like Prince Ermias, is now resident in Washington DC.

An author as well as strategic analyst, Copley, 70, is founder and president of the International Strategic Studies Association, and editor-in-chief of the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* group of publications.

He is attracted to the concept of identity politics and strengthening nation-states. More than a decade ago Copley wrote that Australia "must chart its course among giants" and cannot always expect "to be strategically at one with the US". We "must depend on ourselves for strategic survival, while retaining and strengthening our traditional friendships".



Ethiopia's Prince Ermias Sahle-Selassie Haile-Selassie (left); Greg Copley (above); the late Emperor Haile-Selassie meets with Yugoslavia's President Yosip Tito in 1955 (below).
PHOTO: BEN RUSHTON



To survive, "we need to ensure that Australia becomes a relatively great power within 50 years", Copley wrote.

Identity politics and national strength are likely to feature in the advice Copley gives to Prince Ermias, and he pointedly mentions that the Prince's Ethiopian passport was handed over by the Ethiopian Embassy in Washington 10 years ago.

"There have been times where the royal family has not been formally in Ethiopia itself, but has come back," Prince Ermias points out. Choosing his words carefully, he says: "I won't see it in my lifetime but there is, I feel, a possibility for it to return because it is part and parcel of the nation's psyche."

Pressed on the matter of a possible royal return to Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital, as Emperor Ermias, he says: "This is a difficult question [but] I believe it's possible," adding he would only return as Emperor by popular demand, and "if it is going to bring stability and prosperity" to his native land.

We are talking in a discrete room off an upper-level breakfast area in Sydney's Intercontinental Hotel, with sweeping harbour views. Prince Ermias smiles readily, enjoys a joke, and is a fine interlocutor. His conversation is direct and intellectually supple, with none of the verbal clunky-ness or rhetorical archness common among members of Europe's assorted, and inter-related, royal families.

This partly reflects a strong educational background. Prince Ermias attended boarding school in Ethiopia and the UK after the royal family was exiled when he was 14. He then became a student at the University of California, and later at Tufts University – which specialises in research and training post-graduate students for leadership – in Medford, Massachusetts.

Since then he divides his time between networking with members of the large Ethiopian diaspora in the Washington area, visiting African states, including Ethiopia, and pursuing business interests including a substantial investment in the Argonaut Company, which manufactures water purification plants and has a growing market for its products in Africa.

Impeccably attired in a pinstriped suit, he could, at first blush, be one of the many cultivated, urbane figures from northern Africa. It is nevertheless unusual, to say the least, to share coffee in the Sydney CBD with

a member of the oldest royal family in the world, and from a country where human life began about four million years ago.

The Ethiopian royal family traces its roots back more than 3000 years to the union between the Queen of Sheba, who probably came from Ethiopia or Yemen, and King Solomon of Israel. She visited Solomon accompanied by a luggage train groaning with gifts of gold, silver and frankincense that would have bested even Elizabeth Taylor.

According to both Old Testament and Ethiopian archival accounts, a magic moment took place between the two and the result was Menelik, who began the Solomonic Ethiopian royal dynasty. The union also ushered in the longest Judeo-Christian line in history, with Judaic Ethiopia converting to Christianity under the influence of the Egyptian Coptic Church around 400AD.

The monarchy ruled Ethiopia for most of that time, cementing its legitimacy in an ethnically disparate land through close ties to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and a "live and let live" approach to the country's large Muslim minority. However, it was expelled in 1974 after the communist-led Dergue (meaning Committee) seized power.

There have been coups, civil wars and famines since then but the country retains a proud history. More than any other state in sub-Saharan Africa, Ethiopia resisted colonialism, except for the period 1935-41 when it was an Italian colony.

Prince Ermias says: "People identify with Ethiopia – its resistance to colonialism, its long history, its sense of pride, sense of tolerance. Black people need that."

However, a rapidly growing population, with 85 per cent involved in largely subsistence farming, means poor people remain tragically susceptible to the vagaries of the weather, although Prince Ermias says the situation has improved.

On the other hand, tribalism "has become a problem and the country has been divided along ethnic lines in terms of creating a federation in administrative terms".

Longer term, "Africa has to move away from personalities to institutions. It has been very much dominated by personalities ... we have to create jobs because in Africa sadly the only strategy we're seeing is people crossing [the Mediterranean] on boats to find work opportunities".

But the answer is not to rely on Chinese investment. "Chinese investment in [African] infrastructure is a very positive step. But because they employ their own people there's very little in terms of generating employment or technology exchange so that becomes a handicap."

"The Chinese have a very long-term view and nobody quite understands their long-term plan. Africa has to diversify.

"You can't really disengage because when you disengage you have all the problems that exist today," Prince Ermias says, looks upwards, and smiles.