

The strong solidarity that puts Mandela forever in the hearts of Ethiopians (Part I)

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His countrymen call him 'Madiba' at least to show their earnest respect to the man who dared to take the lead in shouldering the greatest burden in the arduous struggle against apartheid.

His incomparable courage and wisdom to wipe-out the racist white South African regime make Madiba one of the rare people the world has ever seen - and an icon for freedom, albeit not without sacrifice – he was imprisoned for nearly three decades as also many black South Africans were imprisoned, killed and faced untold sufferings. Against the then predictions by skeptics that the struggle of Madiba and black South Africans against the Apartheid regime would get mired down the black South Africans into an intractable suffering by the mighty hand of the white regime, the struggle against Apartheid that was led by Madiba was able to bring the powerful regime to its doom.

People around the world, plausibly significant of them who called Madiba 'terrorist', celebrates the achievements and enshrined the legend with the globe's highest award – Nobel Prize Award.

Long before the entire world talked about the legacy of Mandela, while he was considered as terrorist by some and freedom fighter by others, he had enjoyed the respect and the privilege he mostly deserved in those challenging days from his fellow Ethiopians.

It was just over half a century ago on 11th of January 1962, the late Mandela put his foot in Ethiopia's soil, the land of the country inhabited with people having a vibrant

underlying sense of nationhood, identity and stubbornness against any form of aggression and repression throughout the nation's history.

As Mandela has been saying 'NO' to any form of oppression, 'NO' for oppression and colonization has been an identity for Ethiopians since antiquity. Ethiopians have repeatedly managed to defeat the aggression of colonialists – the humiliating defeat of the Italians by the black gallant people of Ethiopians at Adwa battle uplifted the spirit of the black race to fight for their freedom.

The country has become an icon of freedom while working with all nations of Africans in their endeavor for freedom. Ethiopians and their leaders in every regime, even at times with their own internal problems, have never ceased to stand with their fellow Africans in their hardest time.

It goes without saying that the late Mandela – the freedom fighter- had a long-held impression about Ethiopia's historical legacy and independence. In his bestselling Autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela wrote that *"Ethiopia has always held a special place in my own imagination and the prospect of visiting Ethiopia attracted me more strongly than a trip to France, England and America combined. I felt I would be visiting my own genesis, unearthing the roots of what made me an African. Meeting the emperor himself would be like shaking hands with history."*

His impression about the independence and the self-reliance nature of the Ethiopian people mounted another value while witnessing an incident that challenged the Apartheid mind-set of Madiba. Before landing to Addis, Mandela briefly stayed in Khartoum to board an Ethiopian Airlines flight where the entire crew was Ethiopians – blacks. It was after boarding the plane, Madiba learnt that the pilot was Ethiopian – instigating 'a rather strange sensation'.

Madiba puts his first Flight experience to Ethiopia as of the following: *As I was boarding the plane I saw that the pilot was black. I had never seen a black pilot before, and the instant I did I had to quell my panic. How could a black man fly an airplane? But a*

moment later I caught myself: I had fallen into the apartheid mind-set, thinking Africans were inferior and that flying was a white man's job.

I sat back in my seat, and chided myself for such thoughts. Once we were in the air, I lost my nervousness and studied the geography of Ethiopia, thinking how guerrilla forces hid in these very forests to fight the Italian imperialists."

He stated the country as 'the great country ... with hundreds of years of colorful history behind it, can rightly claim to have paid the full price of freedom and independence'¹.

It is plausible to say Ethiopia is the only Sub-Saharan country that is the outcome of history and geography, rather being "*l'etat importe*" *willed into existence because some colonizers drew an imaginary line on a near-empty map*².

The visit of Madiba to Ethiopia stayed for nearly 100 days filled with unique experiences. After receiving a prestigious reception on his arrival at the Bole Airport by the government's higher officials led by Brigadier General Tadesse Biru, Madeba had continued to enjoy the utmost hospitality from the government and the Ethiopian people throughout his stay in the country.

After a week stay in Addis, he attended the African economic and social development forum, which was held in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa. The event was the first opportunity for Madiba to state publicly the miseries and sufferings of black South Africans under the brutal rule of Apartheid for the then independent African leaders gathered at the forum (Addis Zemen January 1962).

¹ On February 2, 1962 Mandela attended the Pan African Freedom Movement of Eastern and Central Africa Conference representing ANC in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa in the then hall of the Organization of Africa Union and made superb speech also noting that Ethiopia has paid too much for its independence and freedom paving the way for other African nations' to independence.

² Dr. J. Peter Pham, Director, Michael S. Ansari African Center Atlantic Council, on June 20, 2013 while deliberating before US House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, on "Ethiopia After Meles: The Future of Democracy and Human Rights" recognized Ethiopia as ancient country populated by proud peoples imbued with a deep sense of history and nationhood.

Throughout his stay in Addis Ababa, his majesty Haileselassie himself had relentlessly tracked to ensure the comfort and ease of his special guest. Madiba was made guest of honor on various events and occasions.

The year 1962 was also a period when Ethiopia hosted the third edition of the Africa cup of nations. Nine African countries joined the competition which was held between 14th–21st January, 1962. Mandela attended the soccer tournament held at emperor Haileselassie I stadium, present day Addis Ababa stadium whereby Ethiopia won the third edition of CAF competition for the first time in CAF history.



Ethiopian National Soccer Team, 1962

Mandela was charmed by the tournament though he couldn't escape a feeling of melancholy as South Africa was denied the opportunity to take part in the tournament. He, nonetheless, refrained from seeking further explanation about the absence of his country in the third African cup of Nations. Contemplating the matter in his mind, he conferred with the late Yidnekachew Tesema, the father of Ethiopian football and the president of African cup of nations.

During their conversation Yidnekachew told Mandela that owing to the racial policy of apartheid, the Ethiopian football delegation raised motion appealing to relegate the team of South Africa from the third edition of the Africa cup of nations.

Of course the days earlier from the beginning of the match, CAF called a meeting upon the request of Ethiopia and passed a historic decision to revoke the soccer team of South Africa from the match. That was a genuine concern of Ethiopians. Shockingly the team of the South Africa was fully dominated by white players that justified Ethiopia's motion to relegate the later. Mandela was convinced.

Mandela had also shared the joy of Ethiopian fans when the Ethiopian football team defeated its Egyptian counterpart 4-2 to win for the first time the third African Cup of Nation of the 1962 at Emperor Haileselassie I stadium and received its award from emperor Haileselassie of Ethiopia.

Mandela's social participation was clearly observed when he attended the annual festival of baptism of Jesus Christ uniquely celebrated at the largest open field of Jan Meda, located in the outskirts of Addis Ababa. The festival was attended by his imperial majesty Haileselassie and senior officials of the regime and tens of thousands of Orthodox Christians.

On the 8th of February 1962, Mandela as a guest of honor along with other guests who participated the Pan African Eastern and Central African Freedom Conference were invited to attend a military ceremony of cadets of Emperor Haileselassie military academy. The occasion added extra inspiration in his dreams for South Africa.

Mandela explained his feelings noting: "Here, for the first time in my life, I was witnessing black soldiers commanded by black generals applauded by black leaders who were all guests of a black Head of State. It was a heady moment. I only hoped it was a vision of what lay in the future for my own country."

For Madiba it was the second time to meet the Emperor. He explained his feelings saying that *'when we attended a military parade and that was very impressive, absolutely impressive.*

And the emperor was then giving awards...to the soldiers; everyone who had graduated got a certificate... A very fine ceremony-a very dignified chap- and he also gave medals. There were American military advisors... and groups of military advisers from various countries ...And so he gave medals to these chaps too. But to see whites going to a black monarch emperor and bowing was also very interesting.'

A turning point came to Mandela when he was invited for a dinner held at the palace of emperor Haileselassie on January 26, 1962. (*Addis Zemen journal, January 26 1962*). Madiba's first impression of His Imperial Majesty was remarked by him as 'shaking with history' saying: *His Imperial Majesty, who was dressed in an elaborate brocaded army uniform.*

I was surprised by how small the emperor appeared, but his dignity and confidence made him seem like the African giant that he was. It was the first time I had witnessed a head of state go through the formalities of his office, and I was fascinated. He stood perfectly straight, and inclined his head only slightly to indicate that he was listening. Dignity was the hallmark of all his actions.

During that remarkable dinner, delegations and guest honors of the conference had the chance to converse with the emperor and then Mandela's turn to talk with Emperor Haileselassie. In his book *Long walk to freedom*, Mandela wrote the following. *'...And I explained to him very briefly what was happening in South Africa. He was seated on his chair, listening like a log...not nodding, just immovable, you know, like a statue...'*

During their short conversation, Mandela told his interest to attend military training in Ethiopia that would help him and his comrades to fight the racist regime of apartheid. After their conversation, the emperor summoned the commander of Kolfe emergency police training center, Brigadier General Tadesse Biru, one of the talented military

officers of the regime, to accommodate Mandela as one of their trainees. Mandela didn't take more time to start the training at Kolfe military training center.



From left to right Lieutenant Fekade, Brigadier General Tadesse Biru and Nelson Mandela

Kolfe emergency police training center was established in 1956. During the second Italian invasion of Ethiopia, the Fascist forced established their prison cell in Kolfe and later in 1956 the prison compound converted in to emergency police training center. It was on the 27 of January 1962 that Mandela joined Kolfe emergency training center and for the next twenty eight days Mandela made his presence stayed there. Colonel Befekadu Wakene who is now in his mid 80s was one of the police trainers for Mandela and remembers those moments when Mandela joined Kolfe emergency training center. This is the military officer who usually met Mandela.

Col. Befekadu always keeps in his mind how he was introduced with Mandela; 'I was a lieutenant by the time and I and my colleague were called by our chief Brigadier General Tadesse Biru. When we entered to his tiny office, Brigadier General Tadesse Biru was not alone. A well-built foreigner was seating in the guest chair facing the General. After exchanging salute we were immediately introduced to Mandela. My boss told us as the new guest was a new trainee coming from abroad and he was staying for 28 days for a military training. We were given the assignment to properly provide the necessary

training for him. No details of his identity and origin were explained for us. We accepted the mission and left the office.'

TO BE CONTINUED...