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ETHIOPIAN RENAISSANCE OR HOW TO TURN DYSFUNCTIONAL INTO FUNCTIONAL

ABSTRACT

African Renaissance is a term which is used to describe new era in African history and strongly serves propaganda reasons. The aim of the article is to analyse the role of this notion in terms of Ethiopia, i.e. how the term is being employed in Ethiopian politics and propaganda. It is stressed that even though the term itself is a new introduction, the idea of building a strong state on the basis of grand tradition has been used in Ethiopian history on several occasions. Nowadays, the best examples of references to Renaissance by the state's propaganda are to be found in symbolical meaning of the widely discussed and controversial project of construction the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on Blue Nile. Other aspects of how the term is being employed can be seen in a propaganda film material produced by the Foreign Ministry of Ethiopia in 2015 with the view to advertise the achievements of the government.

Keywords: African Renaissance, Ethiopia, functioning state, Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, propaganda.

On the 9th of April 1998, Deputy President of South Africa Thabo Mbeki delivered a speech in which he used a term coined some forty years before by Cheikh Anta Diop, the Senegalese writer and intellectual. Thabo Mbeki was talking about African Renaissance, a bold idea which was to mark a great change, and was supposed to be taking place on the continent. The African Renaissance idea suggested return to glorious past and building better future drawing on splendid tradition. The rhetoric of the Mbeki's speech was set in Pan-African mood. However, there were still some years to pass so that the "African Renaissance" term was turned into a slogan which started to live its own life and shaped propaganda across the continent. In this respect, Cheikh Anta Diop's idea brought to life by Thabo Mbeki opened new era and initiated the 21st century in the Africa's history.

In contemporary Africa, one may find several examples of how the term has been used as a symbol of new times and is reflecting a vision of great Africa. The grandiose African Renaissance Monument in Senegal¹ and Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam² seem to be the most popular among them. Both of the examples illustrate how African states create their image and how they want to construct the vision of their future. In Senegal the huge Korea-made monument is difficult not to be noticed and serves the means of propaganda well, however, apart from strictly ideological notions, does not offer much for the people of Senegal. Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam represents a different case, as it is not only a huge symbolical construction, but — at least in a sphere of declarations — it is supposed to bring wealth to the country and the people.³ It needs to be remembered that both of the projects are highly controversial and they evoke objections among the citizens of the two countries⁴ as well as negative reactions from the outside world. The Renaissance Dam is a matter of special political concern for Sudan and Egypt due to the water politics in the Nile Basin.⁵ However, the idea of

¹ The construction of this tallest statue in Africa was initiated in 2006 and completed in 2010. The cost of the project equaled 27 million US dollars.

² The project was started in 2011 and has not been completed so far.

³ On the political and economic reasons for building the dam see: H. Verhoeven, *Water, Civilisation and Power in Sudan. The Political Economy of Military-Islamist State Building*, New York 2015, pp. 236-248.

⁴ Not only the cost of the statue evoked critics towards Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade (in office from 2000 to 2012), but also his claim for 35% out of tourist revenue generated by the attraction did. Wade argued that he owned "intellectual rights" for the design of the monument. See: "Senegal: President builds \$27 million statue, claims tourism profits over "intellectual rights", at <<https://boingboing.net/2009/10/06/senegal-president-bu.html>>, 22 October 2018.

⁵ This issue seems to be one of the most discussed questions related to foreign politics of Ethiopia. The dam is a bone of contention between Ethiopia in Egypt, and the discussion is being reflected not only in media, but also in scholarly literature. Among the books devoted to the Grand Ethiopian Dam see: W. Abteu, S.B. Dessu, *The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile*, New York 2018; S.L. Milas, *Sharing the Nile. Egypt, Ethiopia and Geo-Politics of Water*, London 2013; Z. Yihdego, A. Rieu-Clarke, A.E. Cascão, *The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and the Nile Basin. Implications for transboundary water cooperation*, London 2017; T.K. Woldetsadik, *International Watercourses Law in the Nile River Basin. Three States at a Crossroads*, London 2013.

the Renaissance is not limited to the great symbolical constructions. It also relates to the manner of perceiving African future as a consequence of its glorious past.

The aim of this article is to discuss how this idea was introduced to Ethiopian politics and has been serving construction of the Ethiopian state in the 21st century. It is also to ask a question if this way of perceiving Ethiopian history and tradition, as the roots of blooming future, is a new concept in Ethiopian politics, or if we can trace such references to the past being employed by previous governments (both imperial and post-revolutionary) in legitimisation of their power and ideological projects. It needs to be stressed that it is beyond the aim of this article to discuss thesis presented by those who authored the idea of African Renaissance. Also verification of these theses from a historical point of view is not the subject of analysis here. It is the ideological power of the African Renaissance slogans and actions related to the ideas which is of interest for the author of this article.

THE BACKGROUND OF THE RENAISSANCE IN ETHIOPIA

In 1991 the government of Mengistu Haile Mariam⁶ was overthrown as a result of a civil war. The same year initiated rules of Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) which continues till today. The new government had to come up with new ideas for the country and its nation in order to build on it in opposition to what was offered in terms of ideology by the previous governments — the socialist/communist ideas of the Derg period and Semitic legacy based on the Queen of Sheba legend which served as an ideological base during imperial times. In 1991 the federal state was introduced as a new concept. The Ethiopian government's plan aimed at decentralization and creating a multinational federal state based on ethnic administrative divisions; democratization of state's politics, introducing multi-party electoral system and liberalization of the economy.⁷ As Sarah Vaughan puts it "The introduction of federalism involved re-drawing administrative and political boundaries, so as to carve up the empire state into a series of federated units drawn around the major ethnic or language groups constitutionally referred to in Ethiopia as 'nations, nationalities and peoples'."⁸ Over the years the whole idea has been strongly criticised by politicians from the opposition and foreign observers of contemporary Ethiopian affairs, including scholars. As Jon Abbink suggested the "ethnic definition of citizens [...] seems to have been extended into domains where it is completely irrelevant,"⁹ hence the stress put on ethnicity led to an increase in

⁶ Mengistu Haile Mariam was a leader of Derg (Amharic: Committee), which took over in Ethiopia after dethronement of Emperor Haile Selassie I in 1974, the event which put circa two-thousand years long history of the Ethiopian Empire to the end.

⁷ S. Vaughan, "Federalism, Revolutionary Democracy and the Developmental State, 1991-2012", in G. Prunier, É. Ficquet (eds.), *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia. Monarchy, Revolution and the Legacy of Meles Zenawi*, London 2015, p. 285.

⁸ Ibid., p. 284.

⁹ J. Abbink, "New Configurations of Ethiopian Ethnicity: The Challenge of the South", *Northeast African Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1 (1998), at < <https://doi.org/10.1353/nas.1998.0013>>, p. 63.

ethnic conflicts. However, ethnic federalism is officially employed by the Ethiopian government and also serves as an ideological and propaganda basis of the current system.¹⁰

Since 1991 Ethiopia underwent substantial changes concerning many aspects of peoples' lives and functioning of the state. The image changed from starvation- and war-struggling nation in 1990s to the fastest growing economy in Sub-Saharan Africa in 2018 according to International Monetary Fund and World Economic Forum.¹¹ During this time roads were constructed and cities were dotted with new buildings including skyscrapers in Addis Ababa, the capital city of the country. Many of the projects came to life as a consequence of economical involvement of Chinese investors in Ethiopia.¹² However, during over twenty five years which passed since EPRDF took over, there have been many opponents to the government, raising different critical voices. In 2018 Ethiopia was placed on the 15th position in the ranking on Fragile States Index. This quite high position among 178 countries, suggests serious problems being faced by the state.¹³ Over the decades, information on Ethiopian problems circulated in media and on different fora on many occasions. Elections in 2005, according to the then Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, were supposed to prove democracy in the country, but instead irregularities reported by the observers led to severe protests and eventually to death of almost two hundred people. In 2009 "A Proclamation on Anti-Terrorism" was introduced and a number of ethnic organisations fighting for independence (i.e. Ogaden National Liberation Front, ONLF, or Oromo Liberation Front, OLF) were acknowledged as terrorist groups.¹⁴ The anti-terrorism law was also used by Ethiopian government against such opposition groups as Ginbot 7.¹⁵ To continue with major Ethiopian problems of last years, the lack of freedom of the press is among them. According the Freedom House¹⁶ report, in 2017 Ethiopia was "Not free" with 86 points on a 100 points scale, where 100 points means "least free".¹⁷ The memoirs of two Swedish journalists convicted for many

¹⁰ I. Orłowska, "Forging a Nation. The Ethiopian millennium celebration and the multiethnic state", *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 19, no. 2 (2013), at <<https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12021>>, p. 297.

¹¹ See: "Ethiopia is Africa's fastest-growing economy", at <<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/05/ethiopia-africa-fastest-growing-economy/>>, 22 October 2018.

¹² Gedion G. Jalata and K. Mathews, "Ethiopia and China: Changing Relations", in A. Ylönen, J. Zahořík (eds.), *The Horn of Africa since the 1960s: Local and International Politics Intertwined*, London 2017, p. 73-87.

¹³ "Fragile States Index", *The Fund for Peace*, at <<https://fragilestatesindex.org>>, 22 October 2018.

¹⁴ "A Proclamation on Anti-Terrorism, Proclamation no. 652/2009", *Federal Negarit Gazeta*, no. 57 (2009), at <<http://www.refworld.org/docid/4ba799d32.html>>, 22 October 2018.

¹⁵ Proper name: Ginbot 7 Movement for Justice, Freedom and Democracy (Amharic: Yearbanioch Ginbot 7) is an opposition political organisation founded in 2008 by Andargachew Tsege and Berhanu Nega as a reaction to the post-2005 general elections political impasse. The organisation was declared as a terrorist group according to 2009 anti-terrorism proclamation.

¹⁶ Freedom House, according to information on its website, is "an independent watchdog organization dedicated to the expansion of freedom and democracy around the world" (*Freedom House*, at <<https://freedomhouse.org/about-us>>, 29 October 2018).

¹⁷ *Freedom House*, at <<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2017/ethiopia>>, 29 October 2018.

years' imprisonment on the basis of anti-terrorism law of 2009 shed light on the situation in Ethiopia in this respect. Johan Persson and Martin Schibbye eventually spent over a year in Ethiopian prison before being released. There they observed Ethiopian journalists convicted with high sentences for not writing according to the official guidelines.¹⁸ Another one among the main problems distressing the lives of thousands in the country is so called land-grabbing. Vast lands, mainly in western and southern Ethiopia, over the years were offered to foreign investors (mainly Indian or Turkish) causing displacement of hundreds of thousands of people living in the areas where the rural land was turned into huge farms. This activity of the state is nowadays among the main reasons of growing economic and social problems in the affected areas.¹⁹

In reaction to all the weaknesses of the country's social and political landscape, huge protests erupted in Ethiopia in 2016. They were initiated by the government's attempt to incorporate lands located in Oromia Regional State at the borders of Addis Ababa, into Addis Ababa City Administration — a separate administrative unit. In the media, the protests were reported as "ethnic violence".²⁰ However, it should be remembered that they were often caused by difficult economic conditions and low standard of living for many, especially in the country where disparity is especially high. Whatever the cause, the unrest which took lives of many lasted until this year²¹, when in March 2018 new Prime Minister, Dr. Abiy Ahmed Ali,²² took over the office, managed to calm the tensions and is looked upon as a man of change and hope.²³ Abiy Ahmed introduced many significant changes in Ethiopian politics. Not only did he pardon members of the opposition,²⁴ but — what attracted the biggest attention worldwide — the new Prime Minister declared the end of war with Eritrea and together with Eritrean leader Isayas Afeworki they signed a Joint Declaration on Peace and Friendship. The border

¹⁸ J. Persson, M. Schibbye, *438 dagar: vår berättelse om storpolitik, vänskap och tiden som diktaturens fångar*, Göteborg 2013.

¹⁹ The farms introduce mono-cultures of plants like cotton or sugarcane, or crops which had previously been not cultivated at all, like roses. Also huge factories (for example cotton factories) are being built on the traditionally rural land. On land-grabbing in Ethiopia among others see: Antoinette G. Sebastian's, Jeroen F. Warner's and Dessalegn Rahmato's chapters in F. Demissie (ed.), *Land Grabbing in Africa: The Race for Africa's Rich Farmland*, New York 2015.

²⁰ See for example: "Ethnic violence in Ethiopia leaves deep wounds", at <<https://www.dw.com/en/ethnic-violence-in-ethiopia-leaves-deep-wounds/a-41654395>>, 22 October 2018, or: "Ethnic conflict, political crisis and the future of Ethiopia", at <<http://ethioforum.org/ethnic-conflict-political-crisis-and-the-future-of-ethiopia/>>, 22 October 2018.

²¹ During the editorial process of this article, the situation in Ethiopia proved unstable and constant clashes among different groups in January and February 2019 have occurred. In this context observers most often mention Oromo fighters active in different parts of the country.

²² In Ethiopia he is commonly referred to as "Dr. Abiy".

²³ Positive reactions to the change in the office of the Prime Minister and trust into Abiy Ahmed is well manifested by common placing of his images accompanied by slogans with declarations of support on cars' windows.

²⁴ Among well over five hundred of the pardoned was Andargachew Tsegie, the leader of Ginbot 7, who was sentenced to death in absentia in 2009. See: APA News on 27th May 2018, at <<http://mobile.apa-news.net/index.php/en/news/ethiopia-pardons-opposition-leader-576-inmates>>, 29 October 2018.

was opened, Ethiopians and Eritreans were granted the right to travel freely between the countries, and many families were re-united. This spectacular political decision has been widely discussed, but from Ethiopian perspective, it guaranteed the citizens' confidence in the new government's actions and let to overcome the impasse in the country's domestic situation. The events of last months provide good atmosphere for introducing changes which are advertised as "Ethiopian Renaissance".

THE ROLE OF GLORIOUS PAST IN ETHIOPIAN PROPAGANDA

All the events presented above and the development of political situation in Ethiopia can be analysed in the context of the grand idea of African Renaissance. There is no doubt that nowadays Ethiopia desires to prove to its citizens and also to the outside world, that it has huge potential, which can be used to turn the country into a powerful one.

In Ethiopia, the idea of the renaissance itself (literally understood as "rebirth"), even if the term as such had not been used before, is not a new one. It was best vocalised by the Emperor Haile Selassie I, for whom "modernisation" and "development" were the key propaganda terms. Both "modernisation" and "development" were understood as drawing upon Ethiopian glorious past and continuation of great Ethiopian civilization.²⁵ The notion was well advertised in time of Haile Selassie, as the aim of the Emperor was to make it well known not only to his own subjects, but also to the outside world. Haile Selassie made many symbolical acts of pointing at connection between certain periods in the country's history represented by historical places (or: national heritage, as we would call them today) and the newly then constructed architectural objects which were to indicate at the glorious future of the country. Many buildings important from historical, religious and cultural point of view were endowed with modern shapes. The most sacred places for Ethiopian Christians, i.e. Mariam Tsyion Cathedral in Axum or Debre Libanos church and monastery served as vivid examples of such projects. In the 1960s both of them were offered new buildings constructed according to contemporary ("modern") architectural rules. Modern architecture in turn, was designed with references to historical buildings. This included "Aksumite" details²⁶ on many buildings or round (i.e. referring to traditional) shape of pavillons, as in case of the Ghion Hotel in Addis Ababa. Apart from such visible traces of references to Ethiopian past, in quite a natural way also

²⁵ On the topic see: H. Rubinkowska-Aniol, *Etiopia pomiędzy tradycją a nowoczesnością. Symbolika koronacji Cesarza Etiopii Hajle Syllasje I*, "Języki i Kultury Afryki", vol. 3, Warszawa 2016.

²⁶ Aksum located in the north of today Ethiopia, was the capital of the state of Aksum, which existed from circa 2nd century B.C. until circa 10th century A.D. The state of Aksum was a cradle of Ethiopian civilisation. Over the centuries until today the town of Aksum has served as an important symbol of the continuity of Ethiopian history. The more so that *Kibre Nagast* — the legend telling the history of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon — suggests that the Arch of the Covenant brought to Ethiopia from Jerusalem by Emperor Menelik I has been kept there, in: Mariam Tsyion Cathedral. Also the famous stelas and a number of ruins of historical buildings which survived till today, add to the special role of the town of Aksum, where over the centuries many coronations of Ethiopian emperors took place.

historiography played an important part in a vision of history. It was presented from a desired by the Emperor, certain point of view, to the Ethiopians and to the outside world alike.²⁷ So even though the term “renaissance” was never applied by Haile Selassie, the idea itself did not vary much from how it is understood today.

Haile Selassie’s propaganda activity which employed different aspects of architecture²⁸ was far-sighted and employed on a huge scale. It is also well known to historians interested in the subject. However, it was not Haile Selassie who was the first among Ethiopian rulers and leaders to undertake such a policy of “connecting” symbols of glorious past with a vision of contemporary good governance and promises of prosperous future. His grand predecessor Emperor Menelik II (reigned: 1889-1913), took on a similar policy. Even though Menelik’s projects were not aimed on delivering such a message to the outside world, but restricted to his own subjects, the idea could be easily noticed. The examples of Menelik’s activity in this field included reconstructions of such important churches as St. George church in Addis Ababa’s Arada (today Piassa) or churches in Ankober — historical seat of the Shewan line.²⁹ Also in the post-1974 revolution period, references to Ethiopian past achievements and antique civilisation were extensively used in propaganda of the time. On the occasions of parades organised to celebrate state holidays during the Derg time (1974-1991) the symbols of Aksum stelae, Gondar castles³⁰, and others, were heavily exploited.³¹

AFRICAN RENAISSANCE VERSUS ETHIOPIAN RENAISSANCE

As a consequence of an obvious fact – that Africa is such a big and diverse continent – no ideas, ideologies or movements would be understood or function in the same way in its different regions. It will always be a misleading simplification to talk about

²⁷ On the Ethiopian historiography as a part of ideological project see: P. Toggia, “History Writing as a State Ideological Project in Ethiopia”, *African Identities*, vol. 6, no. 4 (2008), pp. 319-343; H. Rubinkowska, “The History that Never Was: Historiography by Hailä Sellase I”, in V. Böll et al. (eds.), *Studia Aethiopica In Honour of Siegbert Uhlig on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday*, Wiesbaden 2004, pp. 221-232.

²⁸ On how the Ethiopian capital city, Addis Ababa, was employed for building a nation see: S. Dewell, *Addis-Abeba (Éthiopie). Construction d’une nouvelle capitale pour une ancienne nation souveraine. Tome 2 (1936-2016)*, Paris 2018.

²⁹ Shewa is a historical region in today central Ethiopia. Menelik (and also Haile Selassie later) came from the dynasty of Shewan rulers, whose capital in the 18th and 19th centuries was located in Ankober, the village situated 170 km north from Addis Ababa.

³⁰ Gondar served as a capital city from the 17th until mid-19th century. The period from mid-17th until mid-18th century is often referred to by historians as “Gondarine Empire” and is perceived by historians and Ethiopians alike as a time of big achievements in different fields, for which castles built in Gondar at that time stand as a symbol.

³¹ The parades were photographed by a journalist Wiesława Bolimowska-Garwacka, who visited Ethiopia as a PAP reporter during the period. I would like to thank Mrs. Bolimowska-Garwacka for sharing with me her collection of photographs and recollections from her visits in the country.

e.g. “African Islam”, “African music” or to use any other generalisation based on the idea of common features and total unity of the continent. Accordingly, there is nothing like one notion of African Renaissance. Instead, this term has been employed to serve different purposes in different manners in a number of African states as well as outside the continent.³² From another perspective however, it seems that it is possible to perceive African Renaissance as a continuation of a Pan-African ideology.³³ Like in case of Pan-Africanist thoughts, African Renaissance also carries an idea of an African nation and refers to common cultural and historical background of all Africans (including Afro-Americans).³⁴ Cheikh Anta Diop was a student in Paris when he introduced the term and idea in a series of essays published in the 1960s.³⁵ Diop wrote these essays in a then growing spirit of African unity, which influenced the Pan-African movements. The African unity is also a key idea for the African Renaissance idea. In his writings, Diop postulates to turn back to African cultures and traditions and to search for foundations of power not in foreign ideas, but in African thoughts. He wants Africans to develop an ideology based on African political experiences and political cultures from their past, instead of employing ideologies brought to the continent by foreigners and being foreign to the people of Africa. He also would like to see Africans creating African literature in African languages for African readers. It is necessary to remember that all these thoughts were created by the author of the colonial period who sought for chances of getting independence and in the situation when small groups of African intellectuals were created by the colonial powers and shaped by Western, foreign ideas and cultural rules. Cheikh Anta Diop searched for

³² A very interesting case of employing the idea of African Renaissance in popular culture can be observed on the example of “Black Panther” Hollywood Marvel movie, which smashed box office records in 2018. This case provokes thorough analysis, however, the subject remains beyond the scope of this article.

³³ Pan-Africanism is a term coined by a Trinidadian activist and intellectual Henry Sylvester Williams (b. 1867 – d. 1911), who also authored the idea of the movement and organized the first Pan-African conference in London in 1900 (on his life and achievements see: M. Sherwood, *Origins of Pan-Africanism. Henry Sylvester Williams, Africa, and the African Diaspora*, New York 2011). The idea was later developed by W.E.B. Du Bois, an American historian and sociologist (b. 1868 – d. 1963), one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1909. Also the activity of Senegalese intellectual and later President of the country, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and the Négritude movement which grew in Paris in the 1930s, played important part in construction of the Pan-African ideology. In the era of decolonisation in Africa, Pan-African ideas and movements played crucial role when “fathers of the nations” were searching for a new political shape of the continent.

³⁴ In the introduction to *African Renaissance*, Malegapuru William Makgoba, Thania Shupe and Thami Mazwai claim that “The definition of who is African today is based on three elements: history, culture and consciousness. While colour and geographic space have formed part of this definition, they are no longer adequate and are increasingly becoming redundant in today’s nonracialising and creolising world”. M.W. Makgoba (ed.), *African Renaissance. The New Struggle*, Cape Town 1999, p. IX.

³⁵ The essays were later collected and published as a book in French: *Alerte Sous Les Tropiques*, Paris: The Estate of Cheikh Anta Diop and Présence Africaine, 1990. Not many years later they were published in English in Egbuna P. Modum’s translation: C.A. Diop, *Towards the African Renaissance: Essays in Culture and Development, 1946-1960*, London: Karnak House, 1996.

an alternative to African states, so that not to allow the construction of the states basing on non-African rules or political patterns.³⁶

After decades, Diop's idea returned in new political conditions. Since the beginning of the 21st century a number of publications drawing upon the idea of African Renaissance, mainly by African intellectuals, started to be published and the idea as such started being discussed.³⁷ As Washington A.J. Okumu explains, the meaning of the term: "Renaissance" is not exclusively or primarily concerned with economic growth (...), although it may contribute to bringing that about". Okumu discusses it in the opposition to "development" understood as economic phenomenon.³⁸ Further, he writes that the "ethnocentric Western view of Africa's development is something we totally reject in the context of our Renaissance".³⁹ Eventually Okumu perceives African Renaissance as development understood "as the process of a country [sic!] moving towards greater inclusion, health, opportunity, justice, freedom, fairness, forgiveness, and cultural expression" and explains each of the terms in the course of the chapter.⁴⁰ And according to Thabo Mbeki, Africans are faced with "the challenge (...) to mobilise and galvanise the forces inside and outside government which are the bearers of the spirit, so that they engage in a sustained national and continental offensive for the victory of the African renaissance".⁴¹

This attitude towards the African Renaissance focuses on the future of the continent and people living there, but it does not include arguments related to the "rebirth" or "returning" to Africa's splendid past. The idea, which was instead well represented in Cheikh Anta Diop's essays, and later repeated by Senegalese politician and intellectual Dialo Diop. Quoting Cheikh Anta Diop, Dialo Diop argued that centuries ago peoples of Africa outrun other civilisations in many fields being "the first civilisation of antiquity, [which was] pharaonic Egypt and Nubia". Also that in Africa were "the first writing (hieroglyphics), the first obelisks and pyramids, the first domestication of animals and plants, the first scientists in mathematics, astronomy, medicine, architecture and so on, the first deep-sea navigators, the first philosophers, the first monotheistic religion with the god Ra, and, last but not least, the first territorial nation state with the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt under the rule of Amenophis IV-Akhenaton".⁴² As already stated in the introductory part of the article, historical

³⁶ On Diop's intellectual achievements see: I. Okpewho, "Cheikh Anta Diop: The Search for a Philosophy of African Culture", *Cahiers d'Études africaines*, 84, 1981, p. 507-602.

³⁷ Among others: D.N. Abdulai, *African Renaissance. Challenges, Solutions and the Road Ahead*, London 2001; Washington A.J. Okumu, *The African Renaissance: History, Significance and Strategy*, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2002; and an interesting and critical scholarly attitude in M.K. Asante, *An Afrocentric Manifesto. Toward and African Renaissance*, Cambridge 2007.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 11.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 13.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Thabo Mbeki's ideas were published in a volume edited after the conference which took place in Johannesburg in South Africa in 1998. See: M.W. Makgoba (ed.), *African Renaissance...*, p. XIX.

⁴² Ibid., p. 4.

verification of such statements is beyond the scope of this article. The ideological power of the sentences matters in the context of African Renaissance today as well as the reception of the slogans.

In terms of Ethiopia, the question arises how the notion of Renaissance is understood and employed in this country — in its politics and propaganda nowadays. As already stated, Ethiopian rulers and politicians in different historical periods had made use of Ethiopian great history. There is also no question for any Ethiopian that Ethiopian civilisation is among the oldest and richest in the world. However, as in the case of the whole continent, there is no simple answer to the question of what is the role of the Renaissance slogan in Ethiopia.

Firstly, it should be stressed, that unlikely “African Renaissance” term, there is no literature discussing “Ethiopian Renaissance” from ideological point of view. What is possible to be analysed, it is the application of the term, not a theoretical or academic discussion.

The most obvious and often used association is the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. The Google search for the term “Ethiopian Renaissance” brings dozens of hits referring to the project before any other result comes up. This fact clearly proves the significance of the Renaissance Dam from political and propaganda point of view. There is also no question that the name of the dam had been created by chance. The more so, that the project had been started with a different name which was changed later. Initially “Project X” got the name of “Grand Millennium Nile Dam Project”⁴³ and on the 16th of April 2011 it was renamed and got its present name. The change of the name took place on the occasion when The Council of Ministers approved a regulation establishing a National Council in charge of coordinating public participation for construction of the dam.⁴⁴ When the new name was given and the huge undertaking was started in 2011, the ideas presented at the Johannesburg conference were already well known to African, including Ethiopian politicians. Ethiopia, after celebrating Millennium, was at the turning point, and needed positive message to be sent to the world. The more so that the idea of the Renaissance in the case of the dam is well combined with the economic potential of the project, hence with the Ethiopian government’s plan on the renewable energy.

Still, the Renaissance Dam is not the only case of reference to the Renaissance. A certain understanding of the “Ethiopian Renaissance” is presented in a book by Bertus Praeg. “Renaissance” is understood here as a successful attempt to construct a “nation-state” in a multi-ethnic society.⁴⁵ Ethiopia is being presented as “unique in the process

⁴³ Ethiopian calendar is seven/eight years in minus in respect to Gregorian calendar. It means that year 2000 was celebrated in Ethiopia in September 2007. A so called Millennium huge festival advertised new era in Ethiopian history, also Ethiopian Millennium goals were declared by the government and propaganda of success was employed. (See: I. Orłowska, “Forging a Nation...”).

⁴⁴ “Council of Ministers Approves Regulation Establishing Council on Grand Dam”, The Ethiopian News Agency, at <<https://web.archive.org/web/20110420135619/http://www.ena.gov.et/English-News/2011/Apr/16Apr11/138447.htm>>, 3 November 2018.

⁴⁵ B. Praeg, *Ethiopia and Political Renaissance in Africa*, New York 2006.

of state-building versus ethnicity”.⁴⁶ Hence, official state ideology of ethnic federalism presented as a tool for building better functioning state and better future is being integrated in the idea of African renewal. The post-1991 politics of the Ethiopian government is being presented in the context of the Renaissance.

Another example is made by a purely propaganda piece of work. An almost 26-minute long film produced by the Foreign Ministry of Ethiopia in 2015 uses the notion of Renaissance to advertise the achievements of the government. In the film the work of farms and factories constructed as a consequence of land-grabbing and other social and economic changes taking place in the country are presented as an unambiguously positive outcome of the situation while at the same time direction for the future. Already the title of the film “Ethiopia — Land of Renaissance” refers to term,⁴⁷ which proves that the term was noticed and verified as useful by the Ethiopian government. In the film itself, which mostly presents the economic development of the country,⁴⁸ the argument of coming back to glorious past along presenting natural beauty of the country is being used⁴⁹.

IN CONCLUSION: CAN ETHIOPIAN RENAISSANCE BE USEFUL IN CONSTRUCTING A FUNCTIONING STATE?

Before attempting to answer this question, it is necessary to ask if nowadays, in the time of African/Ethiopian Renaissance, Ethiopia is already a working state or if its problems make it impossible for a state to function. Quite obviously, the answer relates to how we understand what the “functioning state” is. It also depends on one’s perspective. As stated above in “The background of the Renaissance in Ethiopia” sub-chapter, contemporary Ethiopia can be well perceived as a well-working state, while from a different point of view, as a state struggling with severe problems. Both of the visions of the situation in Ethiopia do not exclude each other. With a lot of certainty we may state that Ethiopian government is in control of its whole territory and the state institutions function well. Still, especially with all the problems of the country, the government needs non-aggressive tools to be more effective in executing its power. There is no need to discuss such obvious methods as using the role of propaganda and ideologies in nation/state-building. In Ethiopian case, ethnic federalism which was supposed to replace the Salomonic and Judeo-Christian tradition in uniting the citizens of the country, did not fully work out. The notion of the rebirth or Renaissance in Africa today is serving well to build the faith that Africans are powerful peoples, who do not have to look

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.1.

⁴⁷ “Ethiopia – Land of Renaissance”, at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ba1L6cPEPwM>>, 15 October 2018.

⁴⁸ The film is also interesting as an example of propaganda with no relation to real situations. The pictures of Addis Ababa present a clean wealthy city which resembles a vision of an American metropolis and has almost nothing in common with a real Ethiopian capital (since 0.47 until 1.05).

⁴⁹ Since 0.30 until 0.46 and 22.09 until 23.40.

upon the West, but instead are able to wake the powers who made them create great civilisations of the past and use them for the future. The same notion is also exploited in case of Ethiopia and its people.

Thus, the idea of Ethiopian Renaissance is surely needed, and also employed by the government, to strengthen the image of the country.

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