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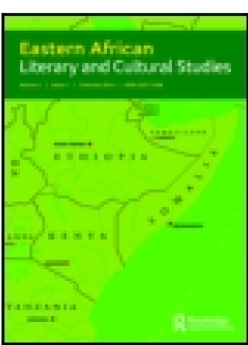

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Modernisation from the Shadows: Conspiracy, Monasticism and Techno-Utopia in the Amharic novel *Dertogada*

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ABSTRACT
The Amharic novel *Dertogada* (2009) was a smash hit in Ethiopia, launching Yismake Worku's career as one of the most popular Amharic writers of the last decade. This paper explores *Dertogada*'s huge cultural influence by tracing its unique synthesis between the Amharic literary tradition, American spy thrillers and conspiracy novels, and postcolonial critique. *Dertogada* is a projection into the future of a series of questions about modernisation and the Ethiopian state that preoccupied Amharic authors throughout the twentieth century. We suggest that the conspiracy novel provides a model for connecting a technologically advanced surveillance state with an older, sacralised notion of the state based on the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. It is the very movement between techno-utopia and ancient religious wisdom, we argue, that lends the novel its particular popular nationalist impetus.

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Introduction

> *'Do not say, "A conspiracy,"*
> *Concerning all that this people call a conspiracy,*
> *Nor be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled.*
> *The LORD of hosts, Him you shall hallow;*
> *Let Him be your fear'*
> –Isaiah 8:11

Published in 2009, *Dertogada* was an immediate sensation in Ethiopia. The first edition soon sold out, and the novel went through at least five reprints in a single year. It is not hard to see why. A page turner, *Dertogada* has plot twists in virtually every chapter, with sudden revelations, cliff-hangers, and a skilled use of suspense. Mystery, love, sex, shootouts, high-tech planes, a lost treasure map, ancient monasteries, a good dose of explosions, all packed in a grand

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narrative of national revival — *Dertogada*'s readers have it all. Yismake Worku, 22 years old at the time, was quickly projected to national fame. *Dertogada* was followed by four sequels; an English translation by Zelalem Nigussie was published in 2012.[1]

The core plot of the novel revolves around the efforts of multiple international spy agencies to capture the services of an Ethiopian-born rocket scientist, now working for NASA, named Shagiz Ejigu (modelled after the real NASA scientist Kitaw Ejigu, to whom the book is dedicated). Mossad and the CIA are both trying to kidnap Shagiz, whose genius will offer significant techno-military advantage to whichever country retains his services, and we are told that 'China, Japan, Iran, India, Pakistan, South Korea, Israel, and Russia had the deepest desires and the fattest wallets to make this man work for them' (28).[2] Almost every country, that is, except Ethiopia. The Ethiopian state, wrapped up in petty political infighting and ethnic politics, is ignoring its men of genius, and other countries are reaping the benefit. The solution is Dertogada — a mysterious word with no apparent meaning tattooed on the backs of Engineer Shagiz and our male protagonist, Doctor Miraje. The tattoo is the key to a code, which leads Miraje and Shagiz to the real Dertogada, a secret agency of Ethiopian scientists and patriots housed in an underground base beneath an island monastery on Lake Tana. The plot's two female leads, Zipporah and Meroda, are tracking the engineer on behalf of Mossad and the CIA, respectively. Like Shagiz, they are skilled operatives only recognised outside their own country. Eventually they too will be recruited by Dertogada and return to serve their country.

Dertogada's plot is that of a thickly convoluted mystery thriller. But the tone is prophetic, and Yismake draws numerous parallels between himself and the Biblical Isaiah. In the preface he describes a visit from 'a mighty angel sent form the Celestial Author' (iv) who commands him to write the novel beginning with the words *Maher shalal hash baz* ('speed to the spoil, hurry to the plunder'). The citation is Isaiah 8, and speaks to the coming Assyrian invasion of Israel and Syria. Isaiah's message to Judah can be read to mean: the invasion is coming. Do not collaborate with the conquerors, but trust to God. An analogy to the Italian invasion of Ethiopia is certainly intended. We can read 'hurry to the plunder' quite literally: the protagonists' coded tattoos will lead them not only to the secret agency of Dertogada, but to recover a treasure looted by Italian occupation forces. *Dertogada*'s uniqueness lies in its transposition of this overtly nationalistic espionage thriller plot into a prophetic register rooted in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

Central to Yismake's intellectual project, according to Sara Abdella Kedir, is the 're-mythologizing' of the nation. *Dertogada* paints a compelling picture of national reawakening. The Dertogada operation will lead Ethiopia from dependency to unity, self-reliance and development: 'All of Ethiopia's parts will be joined. […] Trade, education, freedom, economy, and science will all flourish. Civilization will be our sign. […] We will transform Ethiopia into a developed state out

of its slumber!' (356–7). This nationalism alludes to the political culture of Haile Selassie's rule (r.1930–1974). The nationalism of these decades identified Ethiopia with the Orthodox Christian religion, the Amharic language, and in general the cultural traditions of *habesha* groups living in the Ethiopian highlands, where *Dertogada* is set. These cultural traits only belonged to a section of the Ethiopian population, but were repackaged as 'national' and normatively imposed on all citizens through policies of cultural and linguistic assimilationism. This nationalist ideology was exclusionary and authoritarian. The 'unity' it professed to achieve entailed the imposition of the culture and religion of the ruling class on Ethiopia's multiethnic citizenry (Walleligu 1969). It was accompanied by forms of economic extraction and agricultural expropriation, which combined produced longstanding grievances on the part of peripheral groups towards the centre (Donham 2002). The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) that came to power in 1991 posed as mouthpiece for these grievances, and enacted a constitutional reform that restructured the state along ethno-federalist lines. In embracing the homogenising nationhood of Haile Selassie's years, Yismake takes a position against the EPRDF's legal redefinition of Ethiopia as made of several different 'nations, nationalities and peoples'.

If modernisation has been the central concern of most Ethiopian intellectuals for more than a century, we argue, *Dertogada* presents a unique spin on modernisation through the framework of the espionage techno-thriller. Yismake's Ethiopia is, to all outward appearances, poor and politically troubled; but under the surface it contains boundless social and technological potential. The ability to play with this duality is key to the novel's success in Ethiopia. Because this form plays with the hidden and overt elements of political reality, with state institutions and state secrecy, it allows for an imagination of Ethiopia that goes beyond its public face, reimagining nation, tradition, monasticism, and gender relations together.

A Monastic Techno-Utopia: Secrecy and the Code

The Dertogada project will not revive the Ethiopian nation by democratic means, but by the actions of a secret group of highly educated patriots working in their country's interest. For Yismake, the possession of an effective secret service is the *sine qua non* of a modern state, and the secret service is only agency capable of transcending petty politics in the national interest. Ethiopia is lacking in this regard: 'until this day Ethiopia has had no permanent agency of intelligence that is not liable to change as the regime changed' (343). The operatives of Dertogada demonstrate their potency to recruits through technology: stealth spy planes and advanced medical facilities capable of performing face transplants. The index of development is not just technology, but stealth technology and the capacity to operate in secret. *Dertogada* shares this preoccupation with the Anglo-American techno-thrillers by such authors as Tom Clancy and Robert

Ludlum, many of which have been available in Amharic translation for some time and may be a direct influence. But Yismake's twist, and part of the novel's particular resonance in Ethiopia, is to draw a parallel between the modern spy agencies and the monastic traditions of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

While the Church's reputation is hidebound, conservative, and traditionalist, Yismake presents the monastic tradition as something dynamic, a source of profound technical as well as spiritual knowledge, not just comparable to the technoscientific tradition but in many ways its superior. From many points of view, this is not such a wild fantasy. Yismake himself is said to have been raised as a monastic student, like many of Ethiopia's finest Amharic writers. Monastic training demands rigorous discipline from its students and introduces them to philosophical modes of thought not widely known beyond the specialist schools (Cowley 1989). The monastic tradition is a repository of medical, astronomical, and botanical knowledge. It is not a tradition against modern science, but a potent system of knowledge in its own right (Boylston 2018, 154). For Yismake, it is the natural place to integrate technoscience usually coded as 'foreign' into the Ethiopian national project.

Most importantly, the monastic scholarly tradition is accustomed to guarding its secrets closely. Yismake describes monastic social system as already being akin to a bureaucratic secret service: 'beyond and above this system of authorities, there were other monks with a sense of extraordinary conservative natures to keep the secrets of the country. These were part of the complicated ever-unwinding net of the monastic system, following every move with watchful eyes' (226). In the Orthodox tradition, the secrecy of knowledge is a factor of its sacred power (Malara 2020). Monks, as custodians of this wisdom, must become symbolically dead to the world, and abandon their families and places of origin (228). They are, by this logic, the only people who can be trusted with matters of state, and the only ones capable of transcending ethnic politics for the project of a Greater Ethiopia. In *Dertogada*, this means that monasteries must also become the home of spy planes and espionage technology.

This is an elegant solution to a problem that has animated the spy thriller genre since its beginnings: who can be trusted with the secrets of state, if not the state itself? Here *Dertogada*'s literary debt is more obviously to *The Da Vinci Code*, also long available in Amharic translation. Like *The Da Vinci Code*, *Dertogada* begins with its protagonists being presented with a code (tattooed on their backs in this case), and their efforts to break the code will drive the plot towards its denouement in an ancient church. As in *The Da Vinci Code*, the secret knowledge will be revealed to have been in plain sight all along, hidden in works of art for those initiates smart enough to see it. Miraje solves the code on his back, and proves he is worthy of joining Dertogada and finding the treasures that lie below the monastery.

It is important to understand, then, how *The Da Vinci Code* relates to its predecessors in American spy fiction. The Cold War technothriller was a paean to

American technological superiority and therefore to inevitable triumph over the Soviet Union (Elhefnawy 2019, 91). After the fall of the Berlin wall, with a lack of obvious enemies for America, the technothriller finds itself grasping for new threats, which remain somewhat amorphous. After 9/11, *The Da Vinci Code* found huge popularity, especially as compared to the very moderate record of Dan Brown's previous novels. For *The Da Vinci Code*, the enemy appears to be the collapse of meaning itself. *The Da Vinci Code* reveals an ancient, stable wisdom, kept safe by a small group of trustworthy custodians. The actual content of that wisdom turns out to be almost irrelevant and certainly to demand no political change (Schneider-Mayerson 2011, 198). But there are, somewhere, symbols whose meaning is fixed and reliable. Their guardians are no longer ex-military action men, but blazered (and strangely desexualised) arts professors.

In *The Da Vinci Code* and in *Dertogada*, the code is a device to ensure that only the worthy have access to the sacred knowledge that transcends political conflict and postmodern breakdown. The code is a moral test of wits, because it is absolutely essential that the code remain restricted. If made public it would, by definition, lose all power, because it would become part of the popular politics that have broken meaning in the first place. The theme is even clearer in Brown's *Lost Symbol*: 'The Ancient Mysteries cannot be shouted from the rooftops' (cited in Schneider-Mayerson 2011, 199).

Implicit in this genre — which we might call, following Brown himself, the symbological novel — is an insistence on the importance of sacred knowledge, combined with a critique of the institutions charged with preserving that knowledge. For Brown, famously borrowing from Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh among others, the Catholic Church has supressed the true Christological story of the sacred feminine. In *Dertogada*, while overt criticism of the Church is avoided, there is a clear distinction between the monasteries, which are the true guardians of knowledge, and the Patriarchate, which has been implicated in the petty politics of regime change since the fall of Haile Selassie. The tension between monastic scholars and the patriarchate is not new in Ethiopian Orthodoxy. But *Dertogada* — both the novel and the secret organisation — has no desire to overthrow the patriarchate or unseat the government. Working in secret, the Dertogada operatives can achieve their aims behind the scenes, without becoming involved in politics.

But if *Dertogada* makes the case for a shadowy network of monastics looking over the secrets of the state, it is striking that none of the main protagonists are actually monks — though most are raised by monastic father figures. Miraje and Zipporah are both adopted by monks on Lake Tana and raised in the church's traditions. But when they are caught in a romantic tryst, both are banished and neither will return until they become members of Dertogada. Miraje becomes a doctor in the United States; Zipporah, revealed to be Beta Israel and therefore Jewish, is taken to Israel during the historical Operation Solomon, and later

recruited by Mossad. Each has the skills, talent, and discipline learned from the monastery, but goes abroad to learn medicine and espionage. Their return is the synthesis that *Dertogada* so clearly advocates. Not monks, but monastically trained patriot scientists. It is quite common for students raised in church schooling to follow secular life paths and achieve highly in the arts and sciences. Obvious examples would be Yismake himself, and the poet Laureate Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin, whose work features prominently in *Dertogada*.

If *Dertogada* builds on *The Da Vinci Code*'s sacralisation of the spy novel, it is important to note that this genre has had metaphysical implications from its birth in the early twentieth century. According to Luc Boltanski (2014, 13–15), the spy novel as developed in England and France reflects the growing role of the state in adjudicating and stabilising the nature of reality itself. The tension and anxiety of the spy novel come from the realisation that there are things going on beyond the control or comprehension of the state — in particular, flows of influence, money, and technology that move through and beyond the boundaries of the state and require some kind of other, shadowy force to regulate. The role of the state is to authorise and stabilise social reality, but the official reality is threatened by a deeper, hidden reality — the backstage manoeuvrings by which actual power is transacted.

In the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition, we would emphasise, it makes manifest sense that monastic scholars would be the competent agency to deal with the mysterious forces that lie behind overt reality. There is even a name for this dynamic: *sem-enna werq*, the 'wax and gold' literary technique whereby the reader has to decipher the text's 'golden' meaning by melting its 'waxy' surface (Levine 1965, Mohammed 2011). The allusion is to the casting of jewellery in wax moulds — wax (*sem*) refers to the outer meaning, and gold (*werq*) to the deeper truths hidden within. The derivation is theological, and refers to *qine*, the improvised poetry performed by monastic specialists, in which divine truths are revealed indirectly through allusive language. If the spy novel makes official state reality appear as a shadow-play that conceals the real goings-on of the world, the Ethiopian monks might respond that they have known this for centuries. But no artistic work before *Dertogada*, to our knowledge, has made the connection quite so explicit.

Postcolonial Reversals: Sunken Treasures

Dertogada draws from the tradition of the symbological novel, but its critical postcolonial themes also resonate with many concerns of Afrofuturism. The plot of a powerful nation concealed under a misleading cloak of poverty makes *Dertogada* a compelling antecedent of the movie *Black Panther*. The similarities did not go unnoticed by the Ethiopian public, some of whom drew explicit parallels between the two works on social media. The Ethiopia of *Dertogada* and the Wakanda of *Black Panther* are African countries despised by outsiders for their

apparent poverty but that, unbeknownst to the rest of the world, hide advanced scientific facilities while maintaining distinctively local traditions. In both cases, the concealment of a high-tech society is facilitated by geographical seclusion — an ‘impenetrable forest’ in the case of Wakanda, and an impervious mountain range in the case of Ethiopia. The argument that Ethiopia has always been geographically isolated from the rest of the world was used by successive generations of Ethiopian intellectuals, including Afewark Gebre Iyasus (1868–1947) and Kebbede Mikael (1914–1998), to explain the country’s underdevelopment, and Wakanda is presented as equally isolated. Already from this premise, the two works aim at comprehensively renegotiating the role of Wakanda/Africa and Ethiopia in the world. Internationally, both nations are treated as peripheral and looked down upon by Westerners. Against this economic marginality and Western racism, both *Black Panther* and *Dertogada* enact a classic postcolonial ‘writing back’.

Dertogada explicitly denounces aid as a tool of Western neocolonialism aimed at keeping Ethiopia poor and facilitating the expropriation of its resources (151). Similarly, at the beginning of *Black Panther* we learn that Wakanda does not accept aid, and the postcolonial reversal comes full circle in the final scenes of the movie in which T’Challa announces at the UN that Wakanda will offer aid to other countries in turn. The announcement takes the UN assembly by surprise. ‘What can a nation of farmers possibly offer to the rest of the world?’ a white man asks T’Challa, causing the Wakandan king (and the viewers) to chuckle. In *Dertogada*, we find the same racist mocking of Ethiopia as an agricultural and technologically underdeveloped country. ‘Why do you [Ethiopians] need the engineer [Shagiz]?’ a CIA agent asks Miraje, ‘Do you want to yoke him and plough the land with him? Is not the money we donate you in aid enough to buy farm animals? Why do not you leave him alone and use your donkeys?’ (119). The face of neocolonialism in *Black Panther* is Ulysses Klaw, and his equivalent in *Dertogada* is a remarkable semi-historical character named Mormordino Busky. Ulysses Klaw’s naked racism and naked desire to plunder Wakanda’s wealth is the same as Mormordino Busky’s naked racism and desire to plunder Ethiopia’s wealth. Klaw calls Wakandans ‘savages’, accusing them of not deserving the vibranium; Mormordino’s speeches are a deluge of racist insults. Both villains are eventually betrayed and killed by the black man they used to treat as their subordinates.

Mormordino has no redeeming qualities. A Sicilian Mafioso settled in Ethiopia and in cahoots with corrupt government officials, he is venal, violent, amoral, and out to amass as much wealth as possible. Mormordino is the fictional son of the historical Mario Buschi (‘Busky’ in the Amharic script), and Italian builder and entrepreneur who first arrived in Ethiopia during the Italian occupation and coordinated, among other things, the fascist theft of the Axum obelisk. Haile Selassie did not hold this against him, and after the war gave Buschi a concession to start a navigation company on lake Tana and refloat the boats that the retreating

Italian troops had sunk in the lake in 1941. This is according to the historical record. Yismake's own fictional twist is that one of the sunken boats contained a treasure of looted gold and diamond (270). Buschi's navigation company was just a cover to attempt to retrieve the treasure (269–70), and his fictional son Mormordino is out to bring his father's plan to fruition. Meanwhile, the Dertogada operatives are also trying to find the treasure.

The centrality of the Italian occupation and neocolonial plunder in *Dertogada*'s plot is a point of departure from the canon of Amharic literature. The argument that Ethiopia was never colonised is generally qualified by emphasising the brevity of the Italian occupation and the lack of long-lasting effects. Haile Selassie was restored to the throne, after all, and he could pick up from where he had left off. Literary works of the post-occupation period tended to dismiss the impact of the Italian occupation, depicting a country that, heroic and united, collectively fought against the fascist invaders (Marzagora 2018). *Dertogada* presents a much more complex picture. Whether 1941 marks the 'liberation' of Ethiopia is up for debate. Mario Buschi exemplifies someone who made money for himself first with Mussolini's blessing, then with Haile Selassie's. Yismake narrates a history in which Italian economic exploitation lasted well after the official end of the occupation. *Dertogada*'s Ethiopia is far from uncolonised and far from independent. The scenes in which Mormordino comfortably collaborates with Ethiopian ministers are an indictment of the government's complicity.

'Most of them are working only to bring about their own prosperity', is Abba Jenberu's verdict on the Ethiopian government (279), and Mormordino is moved by the same individualist philosophy of greed. He wants more power and more money for himself, and has a Social Darwinist way to justify it: 'According to the law of nature, whoever wins shall get the reward. The divine will not involve itself in such wars. When the lion kills and feasts upon the buffalo, the divine has nothing to do with it. 'The fittest survive' is the greatest law in this world. You are either predator or prey' (229). Mormodino's self-interest unveils the failings of the Ethiopian establishment, and his critiques of Ethiopian culture are notably similar to Yismake's: 'You brag about the greatness of your country', he tells Ethiopian nationalists, 'while you are always hungry and cling for dear life' (231). In the political thought of twentieth century elites, Eurocentric and racist narratives about Ethiopia's backwardness were always feared as dangerous and never brushed away nonchalantly. The intellectual elites themselves tinkered with Social Darwinism. Workneh Eshete 1925 speech for the opening of the Teferi Mekonnen School, for example, warns about the 'universal law' whereby 'no individual nation can survive for long without basic knowledge. It will either lag behind or advance forward. If that nation lags behind, it will be overtaken by a stronger nation' (quoted in Garretson 2012, 127). Mormordino, then, mirrors the fear that, for all the historical glories flaunted by Ethiopian nationalists, Ethiopia has not been one of the strong. It is only after reading about the existence of the futuristic Dertogada facilities that the readers can sigh of relief and maybe

chuckle retrospectively at how wrong Mormordino had been all along. Only then Mormordino's sly voice is exorcised, and, now powerless, can be killed once and for all.

Mormordino's rapacity — and by implication, Social Darwinism — is also a forceful rejection of religious morality, a disfigurement which is embodied in Mormordino's slave, Diwola. Diwola is a grotesque but, to our eyes, rather sympathetic character. He is a violent man, badly scarred by a fire which killed his mother, and abandoned by his father. He rises to become Mormordino's right hand man through violent cunning, and endures Mormordino's constant racist insults because he has a clear, pragmatic sense of where his own advancement lies. From an Orthodox perspective, Diwola is both misguided and utterly immoral, but he is so through his own independent reasoning. For example, he knowingly perverts the dietary rules which are critical to Orthodox life (Ephraim 1995; Boylston 2018). He loses a finger in a fight and then hides this finger in Mormordino's soup, reasoning that it is better to eat human meat than animal, since humans eat pure things while animals eat trash. He also reasons that the Popes of Rome should be sacrificed so that snakes might have their legs back (169) — it is rebellious and grotesque thinking, but there is both a religious logic and a sense of justice to it.

Diwola is a kind of perverted religious thinker, and we feel that, had his life gone differently, he could have been a great philosopher monk. Indeed, he disguises himself as a monk to get closer to the lost treasure, and is ironically referred to as Father Diwola for much of the novel. He compares his life history, rejected by society and by his father, to that of monks, but sees the monks as weak: 'monks despised by the world sing a song about them despising the world: [Diwola] would not sing with them!' (210). He does not like life in the monastery, and sees God as yet another master who demands his obedience. On top of obeying Mormordino, 'here I am also a slave for the divine Trinity' (227). Diwola sees no benefit in Jesus ('what benefits did I get from His kingdom anyways?', 209), but aims to build his own kingdom, eventually usurping Mormordino: 'Let any vagabond wait for a new world when he fails in the existing world, but not for Diwola. For me Jesus and Mormordino are the same!' (209). Like any good thriller antagonist, Diwola will die violently while trying to steal the treasure. But not before killing his master Mormordino. In his perverse way, he is one of the most self-actualised characters in the novel, which is also his doom, because the true heroes of Dertogada must learn to submit to something greater than their individual aspirations.

Gender Reversals: The Monk's Breasts

Dertogada's plot is made even more disorienting by the frequency with which characters appear in disguise. Fake monks are a theme, as we have seen. Gender switching, both by means of disguise and by role reversal, is even more

common. The first time we meet Meroda, she enters the scene as the nameless victim of an attempted gang rape on the part of Derg soldiers (94). Miraje and Xangida intervene to save her, only to discover that she is a spy whose bravery and ingenuity vastly surpasses theirs. Meroda quickly proceeds to save the two men in turn, guiding them through a perilous undercover journey away from the Ethio-Eritrean warzone into Sudan. Meroda does not only rescue the 'bachelors in distress' from war, but also explicitly feminises them in the process. 'Do not you want to be women just for one day?' she teases them as they escape the front, before offering them women's clothes and make up to travel in disguise (101). The two men are not enthusiastic, but comply, and Meroda makes fun of them at the end of the day: 'Ok girls. Are you not tired of being women now?' (103).

The most dramatic reversal, though, is enacted by the character of Zipporah. Zipporah's senior colleague in the Mossad is Anania, who is introduced as someone who 'was determined to taste the blessings in between her legs, or even force her into giving it to him' (43). Later in the story, Anania acts on his violent plan. While he and Zipporah are in a club, he spikes her drink, confident that 'the drug would make her faint in his arms. Then he would take her to the room he rented earlier' (233). Zipporah, though, immediately realises that Anania has tampered with her wine in order to rape her, and she is furious. She drives him to her apartment, locks him up in chains, and arranges for a sex worker to come to the apartment and sexually force herself upon Anania, to whom in the meantime she had administered a Viagra-like drug. An eye for an eye: Zipporah rapes the man who attempted to rape her. 'You wanted it, you got it', she scathingly tells him before leaving him, still chained, alone in the apartment (237).

The temptation to read this scene against the story of the Queen of Sheba is irresistible. As told in the *Kebra Nagast*, the ur-text of Orthodox Ethiopian monarchy, the Queen of Sheba travels to Israel to receive the law from King Solomon. He wants to possess her; she refuses. He agrees, but stipulates that if she accepts water (and hence hospitality) from his home, she must accede to his demands. Solomon tricks Sheba into eating spicy food so that she will become thirsty. She takes a drink of water and has to sleep with him. From this union, the *Kebra Nagast* narrates, is born Menelik I, Ethiopia's first Emperor. Compare this widely known legend to Zipporah's story — raised in a monastery but revealed to be Jewish, she is transported to Israel where she is recruited by the government. An agent of that government tries to seduce her and, upon refusal, uses drink to try to rape her. Instead of consummating the union, she has a European woman force herself on the man, and returns to Ethiopia where she will be united with her true love. We note also that where Sheba was the 'wife' of Solomon, Zipporah was the name of the wife of Moses. This multi-layered play of reference is exemplary of the wax and gold dynamic, and we do not doubt that there are further allusions we have missed. But the ultimate point seems to be that the political and metaphysical grounds of Ethiopian sovereignty are changing.

Both Meroda and Zipporah, then, survive a rape attempt, and promptly seize power back from the men who had victimised them. These striking gender reversals speak to ancient literature but are also subversive vis-à-vis twentieth-century Amharic fiction. In most novels from the 1950s and 1960s, women are portrayed alternatively as modernity's greatest sinners or modernity's greatest victims. Women who disobey the authority figures of God, king, father and husband are generally condemned by the writers to a life of misery, and the devout wife is juxtaposed to the dissolute sex worker. Assefa Gebremariam's novel *Endewettach Qerrech* ('She went out and never came back', 1953/54) tells the story of young woman who betrays her husband and is punished by God for her sin. She suffers from alcoholism and tuberculosis, and eventually dies of syphilis far from her family and without friends. Women who break the moral laws of modesty, virginity and obedience are not always represented as dissolute sinners. More often, they are depicted in a pietistic way as the innocent (if naïve) victims of male moral recklessness. Daniachew Worku's masterpiece *Adefris* (1969/70) depicts a protagonist who, in his existential paralysis, cannot chose between educated, upper class Ṣiwane and the timid, lower class Roman. Both women love him, and he irresponsibly flirts with both at the same time. His sudden death leads Ṣiwane to become a nun and Roman to become a sex worker.

A nun and a sex worker: these would have been the respective destinies of Zipporah and Meroda as well. Zipporah grew up in a female-only monastery, Meroda was herself the daughter of a lower-class sex worker and we are explicitly told that 'prostitution would have been her fate' (125). But instead of fulfilling the destinies that befell other women in Amharic literature, Zipporah and Meroda were recruited by secret organisations that rewarded them for their skills and accrued a formidable degree of power that allowed them to fight not only foreign intelligence agencies, but also patriarchal structures of oppression. Besides her obvious bravery and heroism, Meroda is portrayed as a sex positive woman who embraces her sexual desires without any guilt, and not at all condemned by Yismake for her lust. Of all the scenes thematising gender relations in *Dertogada*, the most triumphant is when Meroda, frustrated that Miraje is rejecting her sexual advances, resolves to placate her arousal by pleasuring herself in the bathroom.

In *Dertogada*'s final reversal, the gender switch and the fake monk are brought together. Zipporah infiltrates the monastery of Daga Estifanos with the objective of finding Engineer Shagiz, unaware that her childhood love Miraje is searching for the engineer there. To complete her disguise, Mossad surgically replaces Zipporah's face with that of her father, Abba Finhass (himself, as it happens, a fake monk). When she meets Miraje and has to prove who she is, she removes her clothes to reveal, below her bearded old man's face, her breasts and a cross that Miraje had given her when they were young. Her own face will eventually be restored by Dertogada's surgical technology, but the novel dwells joyously on the incongruity of her appearance in the meantime.

How should we read this switcheroo in the context of *Dertogada*'s general spirit of reversal? Zipporah has already questioned the exclusion of women from the priesthood (45). We have also seen that men who appear to be monks may actually be thieves, doctors, or former soldiers. Equally, women who appear as helpless victims may in fact be dangerous spies. And all these transformations have tantalising connections to the very founding of the Ethiopian nation. The question is, if everything is dissimulated then who actually controls reality, the really real of the hidden world? It seems that to answer 'the monks' is not quite adequate. If the monastics were the guardians of the ancient wisdom, and Dertogada was built under their monasteries and with their guidance, it is nonetheless clear that the future will be for doctors and engineers, and will include women. *Dertogada*, both the novel and the secret organisation, arise from the monastic tradition, but must by necessity develop a synthesis with the technical-professional espionage complex of the developed world.

Killing the Fathers: Youth, Modernity and Ethiopia's 'Great Men'

This is the final piece of the *Dertogada* puzzle. Both *Dertogada* and *Black Panther* centre around the theme of intergenerational succession. All fathers die: T'Chaka dies at the beginning of *Black Panther*, and in *Dertogada* all the father figures die one by one, ending with the death of Abba Jenberu, Miraje's father, in the explosion that destroys the Dertogada facilities towards the end of the novel. The young generations have to take over and chart a new course for a new historical epoch. In the handover, the children discover the sins of their fathers. T'Challa has to deal with the violent and divisive consequences of his father's choice to abandon T'Challa's cousin N'Jadaka/Killmonger. When Zipporah travels to Ethiopia disguised as her father Abba Finhass, she is literally punished for her father's sins. When she arrives to the island, Abba Jenberu immediately imprisons what he believes to be Abba Finhass. Zipporah 'did not know that she was wearing not only his father's face, but also his crimes'; she 'was about to receive the punished destined to her father' (318). Zipporah 'regretted her actions. If she had known of her father's sins, she would not have sacrificed her face to wear his' (319). The new generations have to reluctantly fight the battles their fathers did not have the integrity to fight.

The theme of intergenerational tension is particularly strong in *Dertogada*, and the novel is self-conscious about its positioning in Ethiopian literary history. The older generation had their own literature, and now the new generations need their own. The need for a literary handover between old and young generations is thematised through the historical poet Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin (1936–2006) and the fictional character of Gera, a poet and pilot for Dertogada. The character of Tsegaye appears at the very beginning of the plot, when we are given the fictional backstory to the writing of his famous poem "The Lamentation of Petros". The readers, who have likely read Tsegaye's work, are given the news

that the poem contains the key to identify the secret location of the Dertogada facilities. Gera approaches Miraje in a café and launches in a tirade about the country's lack of validation for young artists. Knowledge production in the country is stifled, and the public is backward-looking, preferring to worship the old writers of the canon rather than opening up to new voices. Gera introduces himself as one of these neglected young voices: 'I used to be a poet. But I could not find anyone who would listen to my poems. I will wait until I am seventy years old. […] Here in Ethiopia, if you want to be heard, you must grow white hair first' (178). It is hard not to hear Yismake's voice behind Gera's, and the rest of the dialogue gives further hints that Gera is for Yismake an autobiographical character: 'they have no desire to see a younger face. They keep honouring one person's name always. They have got only one laureate and poet' (179). The 'laureate', as he is universally known in Ethiopia, is none other than Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin himself. Yismake's criticism of Tsegaye's fame is not a space-clearing gesture. 'That is fine', Gera says, 'let them admire [Tsegaye]. I admire him too. But they have to accept someone else as well; they have to accept me as well. What would the future of Ethiopia look like, if people cannot accept the young as the pioneers of civilization?' (179). Gera knows "The Lamentation of Petros" by heart and it is precisely his knowledge of the poem that enables Miraje and company to finally find the map of the sunken treasure. But tradition has to be innovated, and the past canon cannot speak to the problems of the present.

One of *Dertogada*'s key arguments, then, is that it is time for the young generations to take things into their own hands, and metaphorically kill their fathers and their government in order to work towards a future techno-utopia. Yismake makes a clear pitch for *Dertogada* to be the novel that captures the generational experience of the Ethiopian youth. In the words of Abba Jenberu, 'we have to build something for this generation to have self-worth and be proud of its identity' (279). The mission is clear: to restore the country's unity. But how to do it? And who is the right leader for the task?

We have seen how for Mormordino, ruling is about sheer domination, and power belongs to those 'fit' enough to seize it by force. Yismake contrasts this conception with the politics of monasteries, where power is democratically bestowed on the most capable member of the monastic community: 'the *abbot* is chosen based on his good will and ability to manage and administer. Authority is not granted just because a monk wants it' (225). Through Mormordino and the monks, Yismake opposes two models of political power, the individualist power-grabbing and the collective decision-making. The former divides and rules, the latter aims at creating unity. Ethiopian politicians follow Mormordino's conception of power, and their rule has fragmented the country into ethnic-based regions. Yismake's position against the EPRDF's ethnic federalism is firm. In his pitch for 'real unity', Yismake does not acknowledge any of the grievances of Ethiopia's peripheral groups, and there are substantial sectors of Ethiopian society who dislike the book for its monovocal stance on nationhood.

Yismake proposes the same imperial paradox of unity through Christianity — not state-sponsored Christianity like in Haile Selassie's time, but the lived Christianity of monastical communities. The monastery is for Yismake not only the perfect model of political meritocracy, in which the most capable are elected by consensus, but it is also the living embodiment of what the whole nation should look like. It may well be that 'Dertogada is not an organisation that works towards achieving political, racial, or religious equality only for specific groups', as colonel Fissiha proclaims (341–2), but only a cross can open the box that finally contains the treasure map.

Where *Black Panther* ends with a reconfirmation of the authority of the state, with the legitimate dynasty restored on Wakanda's throne, and a reconfirmation of the authority of supra-state institutions, *Dertogada* ends on a profound disavowal of both the state and international society. This is because Yismake's core argument is that progress and modernity are the product of individual men of talent, and not collective structural transformations. Only a small number of men of genius will drive the country forward, and not the masses. Engineer Shagiz is one of them, and even compared to Jesus by a doting Miraje: 'what it takes to make a change is not necessarily the efforts of the masses, but the efforts of few determined individuals. And you are one of the most determined individuals I have ever known. […] Likewise, only few of its citizens will be enough to rebuild Ethiopia' (114). This conception of historical change leads Yismake to a definition of the nation as a meritocracy of the intellect. If history is made by few single heroes, the task of the nation is to protect and nurture these talented members. This is how England achieved international supremacy (134), and this is how Israel was built (114). Ethiopia, instead, has never supported its geniuses, and this is why it is lagging behind other countries. While intelligence organisations from around the world are competing to avail themselves of Shagiz's talent, the Ethiopian secret services are the only ones who plan to murder the engineer instead of using his skills (121–2 and 145–6).

The view of history as driven by the agency of few exceptional individuals has an old genealogy in Ethiopian political thought. Kebbede Mikael's major work on civilisation, *Ityopyanna Mehrabawi Silittane* ("Ethiopia and Western Civilisation" 1948/49) conceptualises *silittane* ('civilisation') as the product of *tallalaq sewoch* ('great men'), whose talent and hard work creates civilisation. Kebbede's examples are all from European history, from Socrates to Newton. Ethiopia, by contrast, 'has not yet reached that evolutionary stage which produces the men of genius' (1948/49, 103). An enlightened political leader is thus necessary, one who is skilled at recognising and nurturing talent, and Ethiopia did not have for many centuries, until Haile Selassie came to power. If Kebbede considers progress as spearheaded by a small intellectual vanguard combined with an enlightened political leadership, Yismake does away with the need for enlightened political leadership. 'Should we sit and wait for eternity for good leaders to come?' asks Abba Jenberu rhetorically, while explaining to Miraje the philosophy

behind Dertogada, 'at any time in history, whoever our leaders are, we must strive for the development of our country. […] We must make good leaders of ourselves' (279). Yismake has no faith in the Ethiopian government, and to Kebbede's view of a modernisation from the top, he opposes the view of a modernisation from the shadows.

Conclusions

Although Yismake draws a parallelism between Ethiopia's structural position and that position of other African countries (149), his Pan-Africanism is not without contradictions. Much like the Pan-Africanism of the late 1960s, Yismake envisions Ethiopia not as the sibling of other African nations, but as their model and leader. 'The flame lit here [in Ethiopia]', explains the monk Abba Jenberu, 'will shine all over Africa and become an inspiration to every third world nation. Africa will take at last one step forward' (279). Abba Jenberu does not envision any joint struggle or a united political front. Ethiopia will achieve progress and modernisation on her own, and then the other African nations can follow the example. The relationship envisioned by Yismake is not horizontal, but hierarchical. Paradoxically, this formulation reinforces Ethiopian exceptionalism. Yismake's argument is informed by continental considerations, but his literary operation is likely Ethiofuturist before Afrofuturist. Ethiopia's postcolonial renewal has to be morally rooted in the monastic-scholarly tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. But *Dertogada*'s future is not quite a continuation of that tradition either. It is a transformation.

Notes

1. For accessibility to non-Ethiopian specialists, we have transliterated Amharic names following the most common English rendition. There are no family names in Ethiopia, so Ethiopian authors are listed in the bibliography according to their first name followed by their father's name.
2. Page numbers in brackets are from the English translation. Some translations have been readapted based on the Amharic original.

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