

## **A Cultural Tour of Africa-Ethiopia**

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I had an opportunity to visit Ethiopia, Tanzania and Zimbabwe in November 2011. As I traveled from north to south on the African continent, I was able to take a close look at African culture. The trip convinced me that Africa, especially Ethiopia, is not a “cultural desert” as some have claimed, but an oasis steeped in culture.

### **We should pinpoint where we first came from before knowing where to go**

In essence, art comes down to a cultural expression of man’s views, emotions and inner feelings. Without emotions and spirit, presentations and techniques have no artistic value. Culture transcends borders--the more national characteristics it exhibits, the greater global recognition it enjoys.

Prejudice results from ignorance. If I had not set foot in Ethiopia, I would never have imagined the country has a long history and a splendid civilization. That’s because today’s highly developed mass media have made Ethiopia synonymous to hunger, poverty, war and disaster. TV images and news photos invariably portray Ethiopia as a country of malnourished people with vast expanses of waste land.

Museums provide the easiest access to a country’s culture and history. A two-story building with cement walls and a fenced courtyard in front, the National Museum of Ethiopia is incredibly shabby. Before told what it is, you could mistake it for a hotel by the road. The inconspicuous museum, however, houses a huge number of relics that beguile the world. Someone joked that earnings from auctioning a single exhibit are enough to build a magnificent museum.

The most precious item in the museum’s collection is the fossilized remains of an early hominid named Lucy by Westerners. U.S. paleoanthropologists discovered the remains in Ethiopia’s Afar Region in 1974. Representing 40 percent of the skeleton of a woman who lived 3.2 million years ago, they are the earliest human fossils unearthed to date. Lucy shows that despite its barren land, Ethiopia is the origin of mankind, the cradle of human civilizations and the native place of human beings. Archeologists at the museum said since she died at around 20, Ethiopians affectionately call her Miss Lucy. As a matter of fact, we should call her Granny Lucy instead, because she is our oldest known ancestor and deserves respect as the grandmother of mankind.

In the museum, there is an exclusive exhibition room for Lucy. Also on display in the room are human fossils dating back to more than 2 million, 1 million, 400,000 and 200,000 years ago. Ethiopian experts gave us a vivid account of the story behind each fossil. They dwelled upon the evolution of human beings with solid evidence from anthropologists’ point of view, while recalling the triumphs and tribulations they have experienced since remote antiquity from historians’ perspective.

Visitors with a sense of history are bound to take a break in this small exhibition room,

lost in thought and filled with reverence. In my opinion, this room, only several dozen square meters in size, serves as a shrine for all humanity that documents our long history and an ancestral temple of the big human family, which has 7 billion members today.

While in Ethiopia, we were impressed with the Ethiopians' heartfelt pride. Every member of modern society, no matter which part of the world he or she is from and no matter which ethnic group he or she belongs to, should pay tribute to the birthplace of mankind and those who have lived there to this day.

Worshipping ancestors is a deep-rooted Chinese tradition, which I believe is a virtue of our nation. The continuity of the Chinese civilization over the past several thousand years is partly attributed to the special importance the Chinese attach to remembering the past. In recent years, extravagant worshipping ceremonies have sparked much criticism in China. But we should refrain from being overly critical as long as the ceremonies do not aim to reap profits or have a hidden agenda, because rituals are indispensable to preserving cultural traditions.

Moreover, I think as a nation with splendid culture, the Chinese can be more farsighted and have a broader vision when exploring their roots. Apart from paying homage under the giant pagoda tree in Hongdong County, Shanxi Province, in the memorials of legendary emperors Yandi and Huangdi and in Zhoukoudian caves on the outskirts of Beijing, they should go to Africa and Ethiopia, which are home to the ancestor of our ancestors and where all human beings find their origins. People in modern society are supposed to recognize their shared cultural identity. As we move forward, reflections on the past can make us wiser, more at ease with ourselves and more confident and determined to go further.

A family should respect its ancestors, and a nation should prize its history. Likewise, mankind should venerate its place of origin. Everybody should remember and cherish the place where he or she first came from. Without knowing our origins, how can we possibly know our destinations? Ignorance and disrespect of history will lead to an uncertain future.

### **While patriotism does not require reasons, cultural confidence does.**

The Ethiopians take great delight in their 3,000-year-long civilization. When discussing culture with them, I often saw their eyes sparkle with pride--an expression that I will not forget. Patriotism is an instinct for those who have a motherland, just as it is in our nature to love our parents. But there are reasons for the cultural confidence of a person or a nation. The Ethiopians' confidence about their culture stems from their long history as well as their ancestors' remarkable cultural achievements and contributions to human civilizations.

The civilization of Aksum, the capital of the ancient Empire of Ethiopia, peaked in the first century B.C. Its flourishing economy, trade, architecture and art attracted numerous bureaucrats and merchants from the Mediterranean and the Arabian Peninsula. Aksum bears some resemblance to Xi'an, an ancient capital city of China.

Unlike Xi'an, which remains a thriving metropolis, Aksum's prosperity has long been consigned to history. Rubble and withered grass seen everywhere in the city can hardly remind visitors of its glorious past. Towering obelisks in the bleak ruins of ancient Aksum are the only signs of its historical civilization.

Obelisks, made of local granites, were the grave markers of Aksum residents. Varying in height from several meters to dozens of meters, they were all carved with single pieces of stone. The size of an obelisk and the sophistication of its carvings are indicative of the social status of the buried. Aksum archeologists showed us around one of the best preserved graveyards, which was said to be the royal cemetery built in the prime of the empire. Dozens of obelisks, high and low, formed a stunning stele forest.

The largest obelisk, which was 33 meters high and weighed more than 500 tons, is now fallen, with broken rocks lying on wild grass. Two other major obelisks remain standing, at 24 meters and 21 meters respectively. Legions of visitors from across the world rallied around the imposing structures. As they looked up at the masterpieces of Aksum people more than 2,000 years ago that still dot the city's skyline, they were all taken aback with astonishment. At the same time, they appeared puzzled, meditative and, most notably, struck with awe by Ethiopia's time-honored history and brilliant culture.

Gazing at the obelisks, I naturally thought of Egypt's pyramids and the Great Wall of China, all being symbols of the nations and their civilizations as well as tangible testaments to history. History and culture are two sides of the same coin. A nation passes down its history in the form of culture and preserves history in cultural symbols and heritage. Culture creates the most glittering ripples in the river of history. But it takes shape only with the passage of time and the accumulation of historical achievements. Therefore, when talking about history, we tend to use the phrase "history and culture." History and culture are like lovers deeply attached to each other.

Archeologists said the Italians plundered the 24-meter-high obelisk in 1937. After persistent demands by the Ethiopian Government and people for its return, it was handed back in 2005 and restored to its original place. The Ethiopians' just struggle protected the dignity of obelisks as well as their nation. We have reason to feel glad for them because they washed off a national stigma they had suffered with the return of the obelisk, which marked a cultural triumph in modern society.

In the past, some countries, which labeled themselves the world's cultural centers, looted countless treasures from other parts of the world thanks to their military superiority. They openly used the spoils to equip museums or decorate palaces without feeling guilty. They even went so far as priding themselves on the robbed treasures and capitalizing on them to boost their arrogance.

In recent years, there have been frequent media reports about Greece, Egypt and China urging Western countries to return looted artifacts. However, very few attempts have succeeded like Ethiopia's. A nation should pursue cultural development based on its own efforts, instead of through brutal seizure and plundering. While it is possible to get rich overnight materially, it is impossible to do so culturally. There can be no

cultural upstarts. Robbers can take illegal possession of others' wealth, but not others' ideas and thoughts. A country can plunder the world's treasures, but not another country's history and culture.

Today, Ethiopia remains poor economically with many Ethiopians being tortured by hunger. At the same time, however, it is a wealthy nation endowed with invaluable assets such as a profound culture and spiritual richness. As we listened to Ethiopian archeologists talk in a confident tone, we felt the millenniums-old Aksum civilization and the venerable Ethiopian history and culture remain a strong driving force. Like rain and sunshine, they keep the ancient nation energetic and vigorous. They continue to provide impetus and spiritual support for Ethiopia's development and revitalization.

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