

Ethiopian Millennium - Unique Calendar that Endures the Test of Time

By Hailegebriel Biniyam

New Year in Ethiopia begins on September 11. This happy day falls on the 12th every fourth year.

The Ethiopian calendar consists of 13 months. Twelve months of 30 days each plus one of five days. This last month adds a day more to remain six every fourth year. Hence, the leap year, explaining why an Ethiopian New Year day alternate between two days in the Gregorian calendar, this seeming irregularity is but a result of translation.

The name of the Ethiopian first month is Meskerm. That of last appears in transliteration as Pagumen.

Uniquely Ethiopian, this time reckoning system has been handed down across generation in written form. Ethiopian has its own ancient alphabet and numeral.

The Ethiopian calendar much predates Julian, which lent itself to Gregorian through a process of revision. It is said to have based its emergence on Alexandria or Hellenistic Judeo-Christian time reckoning system.

But this unique calendar has been functional to this day and will remain so far generational to come. For over a year now Ethiopians have, therefore, been celebrating their millennium. And as one of the many events an academic conference paid tribute to Ethiopian's calendar, which endures the test of time for millennia.

As part of the grand celebration an international conference which brought elite to deliberate on world wide time reckoning and sacred time in relation of Ethiopian calendar was held in June 2008 here at the United Nations Conference Center in Addis Ababa.

Distinguished Scholars, who did researches on calendars, publish books and articles and lecture in internationally known universities have come together for the first time to talk about time.

Scholars from Britain, USA, Israel and Mexico reviewed the origin, history and systems of time-reckoning including that of ancient Egyptian, Babylonian, Jewish, Armenian, Moslem and Mayan.

The conference was co organized by Addis Ababa University and Institute of Semantic Studies of Princeton, New Jersey and other stakeholders.

Addressing this august academic conference Minister of Culture and Tourism Ambassador Mahammad Dirir said the issue of time is delicate and is a feature of civilized society. He said calendars are instruments that trace the over all interactions of a society. The concept of time has been treated wisely in old times in the framework of calendars.

“Nothing is therefore, more intriguing and more mysterious than to ponder on the issue of time and how the various civilizations of the world including our own have tackled this concept within the frame work of calendars, since these calendars are the vessels of the collective wisdom of nations in setting time for every human activity be it cultural, folkloric agricultural, spiritual ritual and all other activities recorded in human history” he said.

Representing Addis Ababa University, Vice president for International Affairs Dr. Abye Tasse, said the academic deliberation of the conference was a manner and one of the grand celebrations in the new Ethiopian millennium.

Addis Ababa University (AAU) has been celebrating the Ethiopian millennium in an academic manner. The conference, which is the first of its kind to deliberate on time reckoning system, is a part of this initiative

Seyoum Bereded Director General of the Ethiopian Millennium National Council secretariat said the scholarly congregation was is a fitting for the celebrations of the Ethiopian millennium which has been fully embraced as an African millennium.

“The Ethiopian millennium-for all intents and purposes- is indeed a truly “African millennium” this African millennium is expressed through its heritage and one of them is our unique calendar – the Ethiopian calendar” Seyoum said.

First ever academic congregation on time reckoning system

Professor Ephraim Isaac, who is one of the co-organizers of the conference, said the world made tremendous amount of publicity out of the Western millennium (Gregorian calendar) eight years ago but there has never been really a meeting where people got together to answer questions like what a millennium is, why do we have the millennium and what is the Gregorian, Julian and Ethiopian calendar.

He said the conference would give scholarly response to the very cause of why we celebrate the millennium. It was the first ever session of scholars who do research in time -reckoning and study of calendars in the world.

Another scholar Dr. John Steele from the University of Durham, London had this to say.

“I think it is very important to have such meeting where to have been together from the different part of the world scholars working on calendars, different culture ... where they intersect and how we get in to new insight and learn each other” he said.

Ethiopia's contribution

The conference featured Ethiopian and foreign scholars who recognized Ethiopia's contribution to world civilization and celebration of Ethiopian millennium.

Prof. James who is from Princeton Theological Seminary confirmed that pertinent documents were to be found much better form in Ethiopia than elsewhere in the world.

“I know that two most important writing are preserved only in Ethiopic in a full form. Now we have found Armenic fragment, Hebrew fragments of jubilees and what we call Ethiopic Enoch. But one of the sections of *Ethiopic Enoch* is more important than any book written by any Jew and any time for the Christian. That is the parables of Enoch as of the present is preserved only in Ethiopic” he said.

Prof. Jonathan Ben -Dov who is from the University of Haifa, Israel, reinforced Prof James's witness for preservation of Ethiopic documents and the establishment of calanderical concept in those old ages.

“If it wasn't for the Ethiopians scholars for the traditional disciplines this books would have been lost. We now have some ancients copies of Aramaic books, they are not complete, they are very fragmentary. Besides some of the Ethiopian scholars traditions a long ages been able produce very interesting calanderical concept” he noted.

Scholars' impression on Ethiopian calendar and millennium celebration

Dr. Sacha Stern, from University College of London, who studies Jewish calendar, said he was well acquainted with the Ethiopian calendar through literatures and related studies. He was impressed about the Ethiopian calendar.

“What impress me about the Ethiopian calendar is it antiquity which has been preserved ancient tradition without changing it for nearly 2000 years. I think Ethiopia is unique in preserving this ancient's tradition. All other nations modified their calendars in the course of the centuries” he said.

Prof. Stanslaw Josef Iwaniszewski from the University of Mexico said Ethiopia has cultural properties, which he described as wonderful and distinctive.

“Ethiopia is one of the finest examples in preserving ancient culture” he said.

Since the academic conference was hosted in connection of the Ethiopian millennium, the scholars referred the congregation as worthwhile and the theme topical.

According to Prof. James, the essence of celebrating the millennium would help foster understanding between societies.

“Because of the celebration of the millennium here in Ethiopia and because of the book in the secret bible the Ethiopian because what the scholars have been doing here in Ethiopian for over a millennium we are beginning to get together and ask who we are that means understanding time and we are learning a lot from the Ethiopian reflection” he said.

Dr. Stern on his part said the conference was an opportunity to popularize this milestone event and would have paramount importance to promote the values of the nation.

“I think this is a very major event .It is a very important way of celebrating the millennium. I think it would lead to the better understanding of Ethiopia ... I think it is contributing to the present society.”

Prof. Ben -Dov said his visit to Ethiopia has offered him fascinating experience

“I have never been in Ethiopia. But I do study the language and look at Ethiopia source here and there. So it is important to me to come and meet the people and see how they talk and the question they ask. I was fascinated to see that many of the questions asked in the tradition Ethiopic discipline. We keep asking the same questions. I was fascinated by this fact” he said.

He expressed his wishes for Ethiopian millennium to be a time for the fulfillment of hope.

“The coming of the millennium is a time of anxiety and hope. The Ethiopian millennium is just a hope so I wish the hope would be fulfilled and I wish the last of hope in this millennium” he said.

Dr. Stern expressed his happiness to be here in Ethiopia where he witnessed people who are using their ancient calendar.

“I think it is special opportunity to be able to meet people who are still practicing it this calendar to see it in real life rather just in books” he said

Reverend Dr. Vera Nerssian from the British Library, London said Ethiopia’s heritage should be appreciated since it preserves the unique features of its people and the church. He said the millennium is good opportunity to do so.

“If there is any message in this Ethiopian millennium that can sent out beyond ... you have heritage that needs to be considered and appreciated” he said.

Achievements of the conference

Prof. Ephraim said the Ethiopian millennium is a time that the nation has got exposition of its rich cultural heritages that reverse the negative images.

The whole idea of hosting such international academic deliberation was to promote the Ethiopian calendar which he described as a god opportunity to highlight Ethiopian unique culture and tradition.

Prof. Richard Pankhrust from Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University said the organizers would publish the proceedings of the conference.

“AAU and Princeton University are committed to publishing the volume of the proceedings which will be the first work of its kind produced in the world on calendars seen by prestigious scholars” he said

The proceeding of the conference would be published which is believed to significantly help promote the Ethiopian calendar.

Prof. James says the discussion and the proceedings would be a great contribution to the world civilization in terms of time reckoning system.

“This is a marvelous conference. The discussions are very deep and the productions preceding of our discussion and I think it will be the major contribution to our world culture help us better to come together and understand our attempt to explain time and eternity” he said.

Dr. Stern dubbed the conference an igniting one to think about globally.

“There is an absence/lack of some sort of organization is only academic to look at calendars as social cultural phenomenon through the world and there is a lot of benefit in this sort of thing .This conference we held in the last two days is quiet unique in its kind. It might be an opportunity to launch some sort of international academic investigation of the calendars of the world” he said.

The academic conference is a historic and important one to tell the world why Ethiopians have been celebrating their own millennium that counts form their unique and one of the oldest time-reckoning systems.

This has been a calendar made workable since ancient times. Many experts who happened in Ethiopian amidst the millennium celebrations marveled saying it provided them with second opportunity.

But for Ethiopians as a nation the millennium came as a unique opportunity not only for its festivity mood but also to come together and foster national consensus on pressing issues and to redress the country's image long tarnished as a place of war and famine.

The celebration was launched in June 2007 with the famous environmental project "two trees for 2000" and wound up by re-erection the Axum Obelisk after 68 years of exile in Italy.

The events encompass grand concert, national days, religious festivals, sporting events as well as conference and award ceremonies of successful individuals and companies from various sectors.

But as a feel good, there have been a number of entertainment programs which saw big names like Beyonce, Black Eyed Peas and Ethiopian stars at various times since the eve.