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The Return of the Axum Obelisk

Today evidence of ancient Aksumite civilization is clearly seen on the ruins of the ancient capital. There are a number of most impressive pre-Christian monolithic obelisks, which have survived from distraction in and around the ancient town of Aksum. They were created as mortuary at the necropolis of the nobles and are exquisitely carved to represent multistory building complete with door and window, which are constructed in a manner peculiar to ancient Ethiopia architectural style. The biggest of them that measures 33 meters long and weighs some 540 tons and now shattered after its fall above ground is the largest monolithic structure ever erected in the ancient world exceeding the obelisks of Egypt in size. The second biggest, decorated in four sides extraordinarily, known to stand for several hundreds of years was removed from Axum by personal orders of Benito Mussolini in 1935.

Italy promised to return the obelisk in 1947 when it signed the peace accord with the United Nations. In this regard, Article 37 of the Treaty obliged Italy for the restitution of the obelisks within the subsequent 18 months for the realization of the treaty. In order to bring the application of the treaty into action there have been numerous requests from the Parliament and the Governments of Ethiopia. More over the Parliament of Addis Ababa city unanimously approved the resolution that requested for the return of the obelisk in 1968. More importantly, In March 1997, the Governments of Ethiopia and Italy agreed to enhance the bilateral relations on the basis of the Peace Treaty of 1947 and scheduled for the restitution of the Aksum Obelisk to Ethiopia.

The issue was examined at the first meeting of the joint Committee and Memorandum of Understanding between the two Governments. Both the political and technical discussions were held in a friendly manner and emphasizing on the age long relation that exists between the two countries. Along side with this agreement, a need to prepare administrative and technical precondition is indispensable. The objective of the project, therefore, is a preparation of precondition for the full restitution of the stele of Axum to its original place.

Though, the 1947 peace Treaty sets obligations for the return of the obelisk to its origin, the interest demonstrated and measure taken by the Italian Government to return the Obelisk is a corner stone for the mutual cooperation between the Governments and the Peoples of both countries.

The decision of the Italian Government to return the cultural treasures shows a change of attitude and puts Italy in the prime position in practicing the adopted convention by the General conference of UNESCO on November 14, 1970.

The involvement of UNESCO in the re-erection of the returned Obelisk and the idea of elevation of the project as an international project will be infused and gradually spread throughout the issue of restitution of works of art by returning to their original places, creating the opportunity to introduce numerous aspects of the convention.

The return of cultural objects to countries of origin is indispensable. Cultural heritage and the implications of its protection are inseparable from the social and political patterns to which they belong. For many groups of indigenous peoples, the past and its symbols are amongst the most important unifying issues in the struggle for self-determination. The way in which any nation defines and articulates itself is vital to its growth. A nation's historical and cultural heritage is a repository for definitions of its character and identity. The point is not just to recapture its own history, but also to create its own character and identity.

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