

Radicalism and Cultural Dislocation in Ethiopia, 1960–1974

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As we approach the 20th anniversary of the seizure of power by the current Ethiopian government – the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) – a government which has shown itself ever more determined to monopolise power indefinitely, it is increasingly apposite to examine the roots of political modernity in Ethiopia. To a very real degree, those roots can be discerned in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when a radicalised generation emerged to challenge the imperial regime of Haile Selassie; many members of the current government became politicised in that critical period, that brief era of revolutionary potential before the revolution itself, which overthrew Haile Selassie in September 1974, was hijacked by the military establishment known as the *Dergue*.⁽¹⁾ Understanding the events of that period, and the processes by which students and soldiers alike embraced new ideologies in their attempt to remake Ethiopia, has therefore never been more important, while it may be that sufficient time has now passed for a more sober assessment of that generation’s successes and failures. This is precisely what Messay Kebede has attempted in this original and thought-provoking study. There are now a number of fine studies of the origins and nature of the *Dergue*, as well as its aftermath ⁽²⁾; this was the brutal regime which governed Ethiopia from 1974 until its own overthrow in 1991, defined by its militant Marxism in the face of socio-economic crisis (including the 1984–5 famine), vicious intolerance of political opposition, and the wars in Eritrea and Tigray which eventually brought it to its knees. Yet Messay Kebede’s book approaches the subject from a somewhat different angle, namely the radicalisation of Ethiopian students in the 1960s and early 1970s, and the political and cultural implications of that radicalisation.

The key focus is the appeal of Marxism-Leninism to a generation of students and intellectuals (although the overwhelming concern is for the former), and the role of Haile Selassie’s supposedly ‘modern’ but ultimately elitist education policy in producing an educated elite willing to embrace such radical ideas. This was a new elite which became simultaneously radicalised and dislocated from their own culture. Messay finds, perhaps unsurprisingly, that a number of factors drove forward radicalisation in general, and rendered Marxism-Leninism especially attractive; but he concludes that, in the end, this generation failed to effect political reform, or indeed to do anything more than mimic foreign ideologues. This book may be considered something of a follow-up to Bahru Zewde’s assessment of Ethiopia’s early 20-century intellectuals ⁽³⁾, an older generation which certainly grappled with the omnipresent issue of ‘modernisation’, which served to influence later generations, but whose shortcomings between the 1930s and the 1950s arguably facilitated the violent radicalisation of the 1960s and 1970s. At the very least, the jury is out on what has been achieved

by the latter.

Following an introductory overview of the rise of student radicalism in Ethiopia – in which Messay contends that the spread of Marxism-Leninism was sudden and rapid, disconnected with anything that had gone before, and rejects other scholars who argue for an ‘evolutionary’ understanding of radical politics – there is an assessment of education policy under Haile Selassie. Ultimately, student radicalism was the symptom of disconnection which was itself the product of failed education policy. It was a process which led to the emergence of an elite which tended to mimic foreign models and import foreign ideas rather than develop organic solutions to Ethiopia’s apparent problems; the revolutionary element – what Messay describes as a ‘cultural disposition to utopia’ (p.103) – was facilitated by Ethiopia’s messianic Christian culture. It was a short step from revelation to revolution. Violent revolution was deemed necessary as the Church was rejected and atheism embraced. While ‘traditional’ culture and old-fashioned nationalism was rejected, Marxism-Leninism filled the vacuum, as it allowed for an ‘upgraded’, novel and radical nationalism; paradoxically, perhaps, it also helped foster anti-Western sentiment, as Marx and Lenin could be appropriated accordingly. A range of other causes of radicalism are assessed, finally: from the somewhat mundane but critical issue of living conditions, to the anti-Americanism demonstrable elsewhere in the globe at this time, to a heightened sense of ethno-nationalist consciousness. Students were also ‘repressed’, which drove radicalisation – although they were not repressed not too much, for in fact there was a space within which they could operate. The imperial regime, it seems, did not take them *too* seriously, which in itself allowed student radicalism to flourish; more on that later.

The author’s central contention is the failure of the ‘modernisation’ project, the failure of impassioned students to ‘indigenise’ (p. 89) or go beyond mere mimicry; there were no genuinely homespun intellectuals who might ‘upgrade’ traditional culture (p. 100), only students who imported wholesale foreign ideas and failed to render these applicable to Ethiopia’s particular problems. The outcome, too, was the emergence of an elitism (p. 90), which developed with the opening up of a yawning gulf between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’. These self-appointed modernising elites were in some respects similar to European colonial elites elsewhere in Africa, he suggests (p. 99), although scholars of the colonial experience may raise their eyebrows at this claim. Nonetheless the argument will resonate with those who have examined the attitudes and programmes of guerrilla movements – many of which, in northeast Africa, grew out of student movements – who frequently appointed themselves to ‘change the people’ and rejected rafts of ‘traditional culture’ in the cause of grassroots revolution.

Ironically, perhaps, there were aspects of that same ‘traditional culture’ which facilitated such revolutionary fervour, notably the messianism in Ethiopian culture, specifically the peculiar Christianity of the highlands and the God-given role for Ethiopia described in *Kebra Negast* – the country’s ancient national epic. Messay makes the compelling argument that this dramatic, messianic component in Ethiopia’s self-image facilitated the acceptance among young educated elites of Marxism-Leninism, and radical revolution (pp.103–19). At the same time, however, students increasingly questioned – and many rejected – the role of the Church and ‘traditional religion’, arguing for the total demolition of the past in order to achieve progress. There was a fair amount of mutual misunderstanding between educated youth and the state in this regard, witness the role played by the revivalist *Haimanote-Abew* (‘faith of our fathers’) Ethiopian Students Association, which was used by the imperial regime to defend ‘traditional values’ whereas its members believed it was in fact a means to reform (pp.135ff). The latter were soon disappointed.

Some readers, especially historians, may find the numerous wanderings into philosophy and theory distracting, and even a little irritating; on occasion the Ethiopian story at the heart of the analysis is lost temporarily, and patches of the discussion have a somewhat ahistorical feel. Certainly, those seeking a narrative of events between 1960 and 1974 will be disappointed at times, and would do better to check Andargachew Tiruneh’s account, or even (for the early 1960s) Greenfield’s discussion of early student radicalism.⁽⁴⁾ There is frequent reference to ‘traditional’ culture, but this needed to be problematised and discussed somewhat more rigorously; it suggests – as the use of the term often does – something rather more stagnant and static than was surely the case. Aside from this, there are some sins of omission, at least from

your reviewer's standpoint. Arguably, there is rather too much treatment of the student body as a monolithic bloc; there are only occasional glimpses of difference and division within it. The focus on youthful politicisation and student politics might have been set alongside a clearer picture of their teachers – comparisons with Paris in 1968 might be instructive – and indeed the intellectual community at large. This reviewer was interested to know what impact much of this had on the writing and researching of Ethiopian history in the immediate aftermath of 1974; many scholars who were the product of the era under discussion – including Tadesse Tamrat – moved abroad, but what influence did these events have on their view of Ethiopia's past? Who were the intellectuals involved in these events, moreover? Something of the detail of Bahru Zewde's book – with which Messay might have engaged a little more thoroughly – would have been welcome. That said, it is clear that Messay believes the students of the 1960s were far removed, in terms of action and ideas, from the intellectual reformers of the earlier 20th century; it is just possible that he overstates this level of disconnection, for whatever the degree of radicalism of the 1960s and early 1970s, and however removed they *felt* themselves to be, the students of this era surely must be considered part of a longer-term reformist tradition. At the very least they were the product, again, of their predecessors' failings. Some might take issue with the assertion on p. 139 that other 'colonised' peoples in Africa engaged in a 'defence of tradition' in rejecting colonial rule, and achieving decolonisation; this is an odd and ill-advised remark. While the violent radicalism of Ethiopia in 1974 may have been avoided elsewhere, there were other forms of modernity being applied by new Western-educated elites across the continent. It was not unique to Ethiopia.

It might be suggested that at times the book perhaps overcomplicates a reasonably common phenomenon. Marxism-Leninism – or variations of it – was, after all, the political activist's ideology of choice in the 1960s; so why not Ethiopia? It offered neat answers to the problem of nationalities in the post-colony; it facilitated, at least in the rhetoric, the kind of mass mobilisation necessary to achieve the desired revolution; it also facilitated the kind of political control which leaders craved. Furthermore, little mention is made here of the trans-national nature of many such movements: the Sudanese Communist Party, for example, had a major influence on the early Eritrean nationalist movement. Were Ethiopian students influenced by leftist organisations in neighbouring territories? In the end, of course, one might wonder what the students had actually achieved: the *Dergue* swiftly steamrolled student protest out of the way, and indeed marshalled the students themselves for its own ends. As the author himself suggests, the students assisted in the overthrow of an autocracy only for it to be replaced by an even more severe one. Yet perhaps they are not to be blamed for failing to foresee how Marxism-Leninism would prove inappropriate in addressing Ethiopia's problems. The fact is that there were a number of very good reasons for embracing it; many Africans did so in the same period. Nor were Ethiopian students to blame for failing to predict how the *Dergue* would respond to the massive internal and external crises of the second half of the 1970s.

In a sense, of course, the author has produced what sometimes reads an indictment of, and perhaps a kind of *mea culpa* on behalf of, his own generation: to some extent it may also be read as a somewhat depressed assessment of what he and his colleagues were able to do – or not do, encumbered as they were by borrowed ideology. It would have been fascinating to read a concluding chapter linking the period under examination with the current situation in both Ethiopia and Eritrea: the governments of the two countries are descended from the radical politics of the student movement, including both Meles Zenawi and Isaias Afewerki, yet – or, perhaps, subsequently – both have demonstrated, in their different ways, marked degrees of intolerance toward student protest, or indeed any kind of protest.

Chapter 8 considers the adaptability of 'traditional' culture versus the detachment of students from it. Marxism-Leninism becomes adapted into Ethiopian politics, at least in part as an expression of defiance against and rejection of the West; and yet we are told that Eurocentrism had effectively removed young Ethiopians from 'traditional' culture. We need to be very clear what the various adaptations and rejections actually amount to, and what they represent. At any rate Messay suggests that an 'unrenovated nationalism' (p. 163) meant that they could not uphold 'old Ethiopia', and this was in itself alienating. China is held by up the author as a useful comparison. Like their Chinese counterparts, young Ethiopians were simultaneously rejecting the older values and older representations of what Ethiopia meant, and turning to symbols of

resistance which were external in origin but which could still be used ‘against’ the West. There is, however, a certain strain in the argument that student radicals also emerged because of the ‘highly repressive imperial state’ (p. 24), and yet we are told that the state’s attitude toward the students was actually rather more lenient than all that, and that they were regarded as errant children, chastised and then forgiven (p. 185). Perhaps this matters little, and it is more about the perception on the part of students that the state was repressive which was important. Certainly, when confronted with a *truly* repressive state – the *Dergue* itself – student protest was largely silenced, or at least driven to the bush. The difference between the eras of Haile Selassie and Mengistu Haile Mariam was in the level of physical danger involved – and there is a comparison to be made here with the oppression of students in modern Eritrea, for example. However, what these eras do share is the denial of freedom of expression, for, as Messay puts it, ‘when a theory is banned ... it takes the character of being true without any examination of its actual merits. If it is banned, so students say, it must be true’ (p.32).

Overall, this is a thoughtful, provocative and insightful book, essential reading for anyone interested in Ethiopia during the revolutionary years of the 1960s and 1970s, and the era of political radicalisation in Africa and Asia more broadly. This is a book which grapples with such fundamental themes as elitism, modernity, education and development, intertwining them and offering new perspectives on how revolution, broadly defined, goes awry, despite best intentions. It is a sad tale, in many respects, particularly in terms of how a young, educated, radical elite can fail so spectacularly, and become so detached from their ‘own culture’ in the process of becoming radicalised that it renders any possibility for change impossible. Ethiopia between 1960 and 1974 is an extreme scenario, to be sure; but it remains a problem for many African societies. It is, perhaps, the ultimate development paradox. Messay raises interesting questions throughout: why *do* young people adhere to particular ideologies and dogmas at any given point? And, conversely, why do they reject others? He also highlights the fundamental paradox of modernising authoritarianism – whether the imperial regime of Haile Selassie, or European colonial rule – in that by its very nature it contains the roots of its own destruction. Haile Selassie doomed himself through his own education policy; but the educated, it seems, were doomed to fail, too, for reasons eloquently and thoughtfully explored in this book.

Notes

1. The word is Amharic for ‘committee’, and was the common term for the Provisional Military Administrative Council, as the post-imperial government was formally known.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See for example Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution, 1974–1987: a Transformation from an Aristocratic to a Totalitarian Autocracy* (Cambridge, 1993); *Remapping Ethiopia: Socialism and After*, ed. W.James *et al.* (Oxford, 2002).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Bahru Zewde, *Pioneers of Change in Ethiopia: the Reformist Intellectuals of the Early Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 2002).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, *passim*; R.Greenfield, *Ethiopia: a New Political History* (London, 1965).[Back to \(4\)](#)

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