

Unlocking the Ethiopian Paradox

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Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia

by Gérard Prunier and Eloi Fiquet, eds.

Hurst & Company, 2015, 521 pages, £19.99, ISBN: 9781849042611

Many have been the moments in history when Ethiopia attracted more than its fair share of global attention. In 1896, it astounded the world by coming out victorious over the Italian invading forces, thereby reversing in emphatic fashion the tide of colonial rule. In 1935, it evoked worldwide solidarity as the first victim of the Fascist aggression that was to evolve four years later into the conflagration of the Second World War. In 1984, a devastating famine moved the world into a massive show of solidarity through mobilization for relief and an iconic song involving almost all the known pop stars. Nowadays, the country is lauded as one of the fastest growing African economies, even if its human rights record is not without blemishes.

Just as it has evoked popular interest over the decades, Ethiopia has been the subject of scholarly attention since at least the nineteenth century. It is one of the few countries that have been the object of triennial international conferences. Appropriately enough in view of the pre-eminent position of Italian scholars, the first of the series was held in Rome in 1959; the 19th took place in Warsaw in 2015. As the editors note at the beginning of the volume, it also has the rare distinction of being the subject of a five-volume encyclopaedia (*Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*) dedicated to almost everything that pertains to it.

Yet, all the above notwithstanding, Ethiopia remains a paradox, a land of contradictions. Controversy has been the hallmark of its history. The founder of modern Ethiopia, Emperor Menelik II (r. 1889-1913), was as much admired by Pan-Africanists and venerated by Pan-Ethiopians as he has been detested by the spokespersons of submerged nationalities. Emperor Haile Sellassie (r.1930-1974) had been the object of global adulation since his historic and prophetic speech at the League of Nations in 1936. Yet, he became the target of virulent student protests that eventually cost him his throne in 1974. His eventual successor, Mengistu Haile Mariam, much as his followers admired his ruthless leadership, has come down in history as the architect of a terror that wiped out a generation. Finally, Meles Zenawi, the person who has left his indelible imprint on contemporary Ethiopia, has had his equal share of admirers and detractors.

Given this historical backdrop, it is not easy to come out with a balanced account of the history, politics and economics of the country. Marshalling the expertise of a number of scholars, the editors have succeeded in doing that to a considerable degree. The country's demographics, religious distribution, the forging of the modern empire-state, the defining nature of the 1974 revolution, the growth of regional and ethno-nationalist insurgency in the north, the controversial experiment in ethnic federalism since 1991, the vexed question of elections, the country's emergence as a regional hegemon, its much-vaunted economic performance, the evolution of the capital Addis Ababa, and the personality and legacy of Meles Zenawi are all treated in sixteen wellresearched chapters. A generous supply of good quality maps helps to illustrate

the narrative considerably. As the editors themselves acknowledge, what is missing is a treatment of the cultural scene.

A collection of this nature is bound to be not so easy to review as the chapters have varying levels of expertise and erudition, not to speak of objectivity and conscientiousness. But, with the exception of one or two chapters, the overall result is the production of a work that could serve as a handy companion to all those who wish to understand contemporary Ethiopia.

Appropriately enough, the work begins with the demographic shape of the country. The population is treated under six categories: the Habesha or Abyssinian core, the Oromo, the pastoralists of eastern Ethiopia, the ethnic 'mosaic' of the Southern Region, peoples of the south-western borders, and peoples of the western borders. A final section treats what the authors have called 'Ethiopians on the move', i.e. the ever-growing Ethiopian diaspora. While the content under each category is rich and informative, the categories themselves are problematic. Sections of the Oromo as well as the Gurage could easily be regarded as being part of the Abyssinian core, probably more than the Harari, who are treated as an urban enclave within that core. In light of this, one wonders whether it would not have been more scientific to stick to the time-honoured linguistic classification of the peoples of Ethiopia- the Semitic, the Cushitic, the Omotic and the Nilo-Saharan.

Religion has been a defining element of Ethiopian life. Christianity was introduced in the early fourth century, much earlier than in some parts of Western Europe. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, member of the Eastern Orthodox brand that has held sway in Russia, Eastern Europe and the Middle East, has been the prevalent form of religious affiliation for centuries. It inspired some of the enduring architectural legacies of the country. It was also the repository of advanced forms of ecclesiastical art and illuminated manuscripts of artistic and historical value. Buttressed by the state, it served at the same time as its propaganda arm. It was also the state that finally resolved in 1878 the doctrinal controversies that had threatened to tear it apart. Administratively, the Church remained subservient to the Coptic Church based in Alexandria (Egypt), which had invested itself with the authority to appoint the head of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the *abun*. This state of affairs persisted until 1959, when the Ethiopian Church became autocephalous with the consecration of Abuna Baselyos as the first Ethiopian Patriarch. In the wake of the 1974 Revolution, the Church was disestablished, forfeiting its privileged status and the huge revenue it used to get from its landed property. But, as the relevant chapter in the book under review clearly shows, the state continued and still continues to monitor closely its activities, notably the appointment of the patriarch.

Islam, to which some 34 per cent of Ethiopians currently adhere, first came to Ethiopia even faster after its birth than Christianity did. The persecuted followers of the Prophet Mohammed sought and were granted asylum in Ethiopia. Widespread conversion, facilitated through trade rather than imposed by the sword, had to wait until the beginning of the second millennium, however. The royal patronage that the Church enjoyed throughout the centuries meant that Islam and Muslims remained largely marginalized. As in all other spheres of life, the 1974 Revolution changed this situation, Islam being granted an equal status and the three major Muslim holidays being declared national holidays. In more recent times, official recognition has graduated into revivalism and accommodation has given way to confrontation. Rather crude government efforts to contain Islamic radicalism have ushered in a period of uncertainty and instability.

Orthodoxy has not been the only brand of Christianity in Ethiopia. Both Catholicism and Protestantism have deep roots. The former goes back to the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, when a reigning monarch's ill-considered attempt to convert to it unleashed a ferocious civil war, culminating in the monarch's abdication and a ban on Catholic missionaries that lasted some three centuries. In the nineteenth century, in tandem with developments elsewhere in Africa, there was an influx

of both Catholic and Protestant missionaries and the conversion of a large number of Ethiopians to both denominations. Catholicism had its stronghold in parts of northern and eastern Ethiopia while Protestantism came to prevail in the western and southern parts. The pertinent chapter in the book, concentrating as it does on the Pentecostal brand of Protestantism, hardly does justice to this longer and much more nuanced history. Even more disturbingly, Pentecostalism tends to be equated with Evangelism. Neither Qes Gudina Tumsa nor Radio Voice of the Gospel had anything to do with Pente. The Pente may have been the loudest and most sensational brand; but they have certainly not been the most significant in the long durée.

As so often, it is the political realm that would attract the reader's greatest attention. And the volume under review does not disappoint in this regard. Modern Ethiopian history, which historians agree starts with the coronation of Emperor Tewodros II in 1855 and attains its dénouement with the eruption of the 1974 Revolution, is dominated by four personalities: Tewodros, Yohannes, Menilek and Haile Sellassie. Two carefully and competently crafted chapters bring out the highlights of their reigns. Tewodros was a child of the *Zamana Masafent* (conventionally translated as the 'Era of the Princes') but ultimately proved its antithesis. The unification under a powerful monarch of the fragmented provinces and the modernization of the country became his overriding ambition. In the end, in practical terms, he failed in both. His heavy-handed approach bred widespread rebellion, leaving him isolated when British troops invaded his realm in 1868. That invasion itself was precipitated by his detention of all the available foreigners in his country, including the British consul, in a fit of indignation at the lack of response to his letter to Queen Victoria.

The struggle for succession that ensued was not finally resolved until 1878 when Menilek, who had harboured his own imperial ambitions, finally acknowledged the suzerainty of Yohannes, who had ascended the throne in 1872. Contributing in no mean measure to Yohannes's ascendancy was the resounding victories that he scored against the invading Egyptian forces in 1875 and 1876. The Egyptian military incursion, frustrated though it was, was the harbinger of even more serious external threats. These had principally two components: confrontation with the Mahdist state in the Sudan and the more enduring threat of Italian colonial ambitions. The landmark year for both was 1885, when Ethiopian forces clashed with the Mahdists for the first time and the Italians acquired the port of Massawa, a major foothold from which they propelled themselves onto the Ethiopian highlands. The clash with the Mahdists attained its climax in the Battle of Matamma (9 March 1889), which claimed the life of Emperor Yohannes and thereby paved the way to the Italian occupation of the highlands. Barely a year later, the Italians proclaimed their colony of Eritrea, opening a contentious chapter in the history of the region that has not yet been closed.

In the end, Menilek proved to be the most successful of the nineteenth century monarchs. His submission in 1878 was in effect a blessing in disguise. For he could concentrate on the expansion of his realm to the less contested southern half of the country. In a series of dazzling military campaigns that combined force with diplomacy, he was able not only to extend the frontiers of his kingdom but also to accumulate the resources that made his eventual succession to the throne a foregone conclusion. Ethiopia as we know it today is largely an outcome of those campaigns. But, he also had to grapple with the legacy of Italian colonial intrusion. In his struggle for imperial power, he had befriended the Italians. That was the genesis of the Treaty of Wichale that he signed with them in May 1889. By that treaty, he had recognized a great deal of their territorial acquisitions in Eritrea. But the Italians wanted more. On the basis of their interpretation of the Italian version of the treaty, they claimed a protectorate over Ethiopia. That naturally was unpalatable to Menilek. The outcome was the historic Battle of Adwa (1 March, 1896), when Ethiopian forces scored a victory over the Italians that reverberated around the world. That victory guaranteed Ethiopian independence and branded Ethiopia as a symbol of freedom and dignity for the black race as a whole.

Haile Sellassie is probably the one name that has been so readily identified with Ethiopia in the public imagination. He presided over Ethiopian politics for over half a century: as heir to the throne and regent from 1916 to 1930 and as emperor from 1930 to 1974 (with the brief interregnum of Italian occupation, 1936-1941). He burst onto the global stage in 1924 when he made an unprecedented tour of Europe. But the image that has remained engraved in the public mind is his dignified and prophetic speech at the League of Nations in June 1936, some two months after he had been forced into exile following the

Fascist Italian invasion. The modernizing measures that he took from early on, including the granting of the country's first constitution in 1931, were primarily aimed at creating the unitary state that had first been kindled in the mind of Tewodros. The centralization of administration and the personal concentration of power that this process entailed ultimately proved the emperor's -and his dynasty's- undoing. The first signal of trouble came in December 1960, when the commander of his own Bodyguard led an abortive coup d'état. Sustained and militant student protests and Eritrean insurgency triggered by the abrogation of the 1950 UN resolution that had federated the former Italian colony with Ethiopia culminated in the 1974 Revolution.

The revolution started as a popular upsurge in February 1974. Ultimately, however, power fell into the hands of a group of junior and non-commissioned officers known as the Derg, Amharic for Committee. It was this group that deposed the emperor in September 1974 and introduced a series of radical measures, including the nationalization of land in March 1975. Its seizure of power, though inevitable under the circumstances, was depicted as usurpation by sections of the civilian Left, notably the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP). A period of tense confrontation snowballed into a period of blood-letting with few parallels in Ethiopian political history. In characteristic Leninist parlance, these acts of mutual extermination were christened 'White Terror' and 'Red Terror'. Ultimately, the Derg came out victorious and, taking the garb of the Left that it had liquidated, it formalized its consolidation of power with the proclamation of the Workers Party of Ethiopia (WPE) in September 1984 and the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (PDRE) in September 1987.

The Derg's consolidation of power proved short-lived, however. Barely four years after it attained the pinnacle, it was dislodged by the combined onslaught of insurgent forces in northern Ethiopia. The Eritrean insurgency started in 1961, a year before the abrogation of the Un-sponsored federation. It was initially led by the predominantly Muslim Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF). But that organization was eventually superseded by the predominantly Christian Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which was the organization that finally entered Asmara, the Eritrean capital, in May 1991 following a series of spectacular victories over the Ethiopian military. Simultaneously, another insurgent force, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), seized power in the Ethiopian capital. This was a coalition spearheaded by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which had arisen on the fringes of the Ethiopian student movement and started armed struggle in 1975 on an initial agenda of independence for the northern Ethiopian province of Tigray. Contributing to its success was the fact that the Derg, which focused its attention on what it considered to be the principal danger (i.e. the EPLF), had underestimated its potential threat. Initially, TPLF had a rather ambivalent relationship with the EPLF. But, after 1985, the two organizations put aside their differences, at least temporarily, and acted in concert to remove the Derg regime. Those differences flared up once again in 1998 when the two countries were plunged into a devastating (and senseless) war that cost so many lives and enormous resources.

EPRDF has been at the helm since 1991 and its tenure has had a mixed reception. As so often in Ethiopian history, foreign observers have tended to be more charitable in their assessment than Ethiopian citizens. Five chapters in the volume examine various facets of the EPRDF regime: its controversial experiment in ethnic federalism (arguably one of the best chapters in the book), its dubious record on parliamentary elections, Ethiopia's emergence as a regional hegemon, the contradiction between its much-vaunted double-digit economic growth and the persistence of abject poverty, and the highly contentious personality of its leader, Meles Zenawi. The last item is undoubtedly the most difficult and the author has no pretension of delivering a final verdict, preferring to present the piece as 'a historical essay', 'a philosophical musing'. The picture that he draws for us is one of a 'supreme tactician' who was faced with the stark choice 'between an authoritarian order and the danger of state dissolution'.

As already indicated above, the volume constitutes a useful handbook for those who wish to understand contemporary Ethiopia, as its title promises. If there are to be any future editions of the book, however, some chapters have to be revisited. This review has underscored the seminal importance of the 1974 Revolution to understand contemporary Ethiopia. Yet, the chapter that is devoted to it is marred by many factual and chronological errors-too many to enumerate in a review of this nature. Likewise, if to a lesser degree, the chapter on the 'Eritrean Question' also needs a close second look. Addis Ababa, which

has evolved into an African metropolis, also deserves a much more thorough and comprehensive treatment. The overlooked cultural section in this volume has to be filled in. After all, Ethiopia is known not only for its leaders-from Menilek to Meles-but also for its athletes-from Abebe Bikila to Haile Gebre Sellassie, from Terunesh Dibaba to Genzebe Dibaba. If such rectifications are made, the volume has the potential of being an even more useful handbook than it currently is.

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Africa Review of Books / Revue Africaine des Livres

Volume 13, N°01- Mars 2017