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The Development of Higher Education and Social Change

An Ethiopian Experience

Teshome G. Wagaw

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This book is dedicated

To the memory of my parents, Tiroo Kassahun and Wagaw Gebremichael, and to the heroines of the family, Kassaye and Alemnesh Wagaw, who risked career and personal security on behalf of the family at a time of great crisis.

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PREFACE

This book is a study of the development of institutions of higher education and the roles they played in the transformation of traditional Ethiopian society. The study attempts to show that although other modernizing agencies such as a standing regular army, parliament, trade unions, and lower institutions of learning may play significant roles in social and economic change, in Ethiopia the institutions of higher learning, and especially their students, contributed significantly to profound revolution. The study also attempts to show that in the case of Ethiopia these institutions, indispensable as they were to the downfall of the established order, were unable to provide viable political organizations to usher in forms of government that would facilitate progress and the quest for freedom from all forms of oppression, want, and persecution.

In the aftermath of World War II, there emerged a tremendous flood of global awareness of the need for political, technical, and scientific advancement among most of the peoples of the earth who until then had lived under the yoke of European colonialism. As a result, as African nations gained political independence in the 1950s and 1960s, they established new institutions of learning and upgraded, altered, or expanded the few existing ones. For the most part, these institutions drew their models and inspiration from Europe or North America. This borrowing was comprehensive; it included not only the organizational, structural, and substantive aspects, but conventions and traditions as well.

In the African milieu, however, the guest models confronted a multitude of problems that were either not apparent in European and North American institutions or had been resolved a long time ago. These problems included whether, in what ways, and to what extent institutions of higher learning should involve themselves in the application of knowledge to societal concerns such as survival, as opposed to their other central mission which was to discover, modify, expand, and disseminate knowledge. This question did not seem to be an either/or proposition; rather, it sought the appropriate mix of these two broad functional categories. The answer depended on the institutions' relevance and loyalty to the societies in which

they existed and from whose material, spiritual, and cultural support they drew their sustenance and strength.

It is given that universities represent a reservoir of highly qualified human and physical resources, developed over a generation at great expense to the respective states, is a given. Therefore, it is obvious that the wealth represented in the higher learning institutions should be tapped in the interests of the wider human communities through teaching, research, consultancy, and outreach programs. It is also axiomatic that in order for these young institutions to merit and maintain their currency in the international forum of universities, they must declare and pursue the quest for truth, objectivity, democracy, and justice in the gathering and dissemination of knowledge.

On the other hand, many African states are governed by regimes which seized power by other than legal means and, therefore, are preoccupied with problems arising from insecurity and a search for legitimacy. Their struggles to obtain such elusive commodities are illustrated by the comical but brutally serious affixations that some heads of government claim for themselves, including "The Redeemer," "The Guide," "The Miracle," "President for Life," and the like. In most such states, there is only one political party if a party exists at all. Under such circumstances, these totalitarian powers try to manipulate, dominate, and control all instruments of thought and expression. As they attempt to apply policies affecting the institutions of higher learning, the rulers often insist that the colleges and universities respond to the "wishes" of the state, and, of course, the state and the head of its government are one and the same. Usually, conflicts ensue between the politicians and the universities, and the outcome can be disastrous for both.

Consequently, African institutions of higher learning are criticized, sometimes justifiably, for not being relevant or loyal to their societies and for not becoming fully involved in economic and social reconstruction. They are seldom encouraged to become involved or blamed for not being involved in the processes of political development or participation. Indeed, the emphasis is to the contrary. The universities are admonished not to become foci for political opposition against the order established by the "will of the people." In the real world, however, universities and colleges have frequently been drawn into political controversy, perhaps more than any other single sector of organized societal life. When these types of activities occur, the institutions suffer. In the following case study, the political doings of the university

precipitated profound, lasting, revolutionary changes. Given prevailing sociopolitical condition on the continent, more change along these lines is likely.

This study argues that in at least one African state Ethiopia institutions of higher learning were relevant and loyal to the society, perhaps too relevant for their own good. They were strong factors in the demise of the establishment, but were unable to forge new sets of organizations and institutions to guide, control, and ultimately establish a system that would lead the society peacefully away from its oppressively traditional past toward progress and enlightenment.

This book derives from a larger study conceived and undertaken over two decades ago while the author was still on the faculty of the Ethiopian national university. Over the years, as circumstances changed, the scope, orientation, and direction of the study also changed. Data were updated to take account of recent developments.

Now a word or two about the author. After twelve years of work and study abroad first in Australia, then in the United States I returned to Addis Ababa on 11 September 1966. I had held comfortable teaching positions, first at the University of Maryland and later at Howard University in the United States. Although I had no legal requirements to fulfill (I had been almost entirely self-supporting throughout my student days), I felt dutybound to return home and contribute what I could to the development of my country. I arrived from Cairo at 11:00 A.M. and reported to the Ministry of Education in Addis Ababa at 2:00 P.M. the same day. I was ready to start. However, my naïveté gave way to the reality of bureaucratic requirements. It took almost a month to finalize negotiations, and I ended up working for the National University rather than the Ministry of Education and Fine Arts. Still, I was fortunate in that I was able to assume a number of interesting positions that helped me gain a wider perspective of my country and society. I spent the first year as a counselor to university students who were serving a year in rural areas as teachers, technicians, and the like, as part of their graduation requirements. This took me to remote corners of Ethiopia. In retrospect that was the best single year I ever invested in my education.

Between 1967 and 1969 I served as dean of student services to not only the colleges in Addis Ababa but at the Gondar and Alemaya campuses as well. These were turbulent years of student activism throughout the world. Sitting in this position made me feel that given the lack of institutional, political, and attitudinal traditions, ours was the hottest and most volatile position. Full of challenges, at times traumatic, those two years gave me a chance to observe

the political thoughts and actions of young people at close range. From 1969 through 1974, I was associate professor and head of the psychology department. These vantage points gave me unique opportunities to

observe, record, and later analyze the interactions of young institutions of higher learning and the polity of a traditional society. Throughout the pages of this volume, then, my personal observations are wedded with other oral or documented sources. I hope that the reader will find this useful.

Many people provided me with invaluable assistance in many forms as I developed this book. There is no way that I can list them all, but I say thank you, nonetheless. I would like to single out my friends and former colleagues, Drs. Aklilu Habte (then president of the university who was always an enthusiastic supporter of the project), Mulugeta Wodajo, Akalou Wolde Michael, Aklilu Lemma, and Germa Amare, as well as Professors Dartha and Fay Starr who were most gracious in reading the earlier draft. Thank you, friends, for your encouragements and criticisms. I would like to acknowledge the material assistance provided by the Horace Rackham School of Graduate Studies, the School of Education program in Higher and Adult Continuing Education and the Center for African-American and African Studies of The University of Michigan. I thank the Annenberg Research Institute in Philadelphia for granting me a very valuable fellowship during 198990. Special appreciation and gratitude goes to Mary Achatz of the University of Michigan for her meticulous and painstaking editorial work. Her many talents and sharp sense of detail gave full play in the enhancement of the final product of this work. I would like to extend my appreciation to Julie Loehr of the Michigan State University Press for her meticulous care in shepherding the manuscript through the Press. My wife, Tsehi Wolde-Tsadik, was as usual patient and understanding during my long journey and toward completing this work. Thank you, Tsehai. As the final arbiter, any shortcomings in form or substance are the author's responsibilities.

T.G.W.
ANN ARBOR AND PHILADELPHIA
FEBRUARY 1990

INTRODUCTION

In global, as well as African, perspectives, Ethiopia is one of the oldest states while also being one of the newest nation-states. To provide better insight into the theater in which the drama of the old and new were played in the processes of social transformation, a sketch of the political, economic, and demographic characteristics of Ethiopia as it has been and as it is in the process of becoming, follows.

Political-Historical Setting

Ethiopia, or Abyssinia, as it has sometimes been known, ¹ is one of the three or four most ancient states of the world, and certainly the oldest continuous nation-state in Africa, including Egypt.² One of the most unique characteristics of Ethiopia as an ancient nation-state is its diversity, which prompted the Italian historian Carlo Conti-Rossini to coin the term "museum of people."³ The variety of human physical characteristics, languages, ethnicity, religious affiliations or beliefs, societal and family structures, conceptions of self in relation to the national community, modes of earning a livelihood, and general ways of life in this vast and beautiful tract of African land is extremely impressive and fascinating. Some think that this diversity inhibits the rate of modernization or threatens national unity. Others believe that such diversity, if properly guided, could continue to be the unique strength of Ethiopian national identity as it resists the onslaught of European and Asian influences.

Throughout most of its three millennia of history, the country has been ruled by kings and emperors who, since the introduction of Christianity in the fifth century, have usually served as heads of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as well as heads of government. Two major institutions, in addition to the monarchy, which have represented the social, cultural, economic, and political lives of traditional, feudalistic Ethiopia are the church and the nobility.

As the final authority in all religious and secular matters, the emperor has been, over the centuries, the major unifying factor in Ethiopian life. Without the monarchy, Ethiopia's diversity might well have

splintered the nation into irreconcilable factions. Indeed, for the most part the power of the monarch was so absolute that many thought that he would have no problem leading a united country to progress.

Some insight into the claims upon which the Ethiopian rulers based their legitimacy and the attitudes they elicited on the part of the populace is offered by the noted Ethiopian scholar, Blatengetta Mahiteme Selassie. Writing as late as the 1950s, he observed:

The people consider the Emperor as the representative of God on earth and obey his laws and orders happily. I do not think that a monarch is so much loved and so much revered in any other part of the world as in Ethiopia. The monarch's very name is awesome. There is no Ethiopian who will not keep an appointment or promise after he has promised to do so upon oath saying "Let the king die!" Even in a marriage contract, which is considered as an honourable affair, the last binding word of oath is "Let the king die!" In Ethiopia the orders of the Emperor are very much feared. Thus there is a saying in Ethiopia that if you entreat it to stop in the king's name even flowing water will stop, let alone a man. (This saying, in effect, expresses the great reverence and obedience the people have towards the Ethiopian monarch.) 4

For their part, the emperors had to fulfill certain obligations to exact this universal obedience and respect. The *Fetha Negest*, for centuries the legal basis of the contract, states that:

The king you appoint must be one of your brethren. It is not proper for you to appoint over yourself an alien and infidel. . . . And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, some priests shall write for him the Divine Book, so that he may keep it by his side and read it through his life, in order to learn the fear of God his Creator, to observe his commandments and to practice them, lest his heart become proud (and feel contempt for his brothers).5

The obligations of the citizens to the king, on the other hand, were equally clear:

Everyone of you must be submissive to the authority of your ruler, since a ruler is appointed only by God. And God has appointed all these rulers and given them authority; one who opposes the ruler and revels against him, rebels against the ordinance of God, his Creator. Those who rebel against the rulers secure their condemnation. . . . Therefore, we must be submissive to him not only for fear of his (the king's) anger, but

also in our conscience. It is for this same reason that we give tribute since one who is appointed to keep (public) affairs orderly is God's minister and one who does his will. Give every man his due; tribute, if it be tribute, fear, if it be fear, honor, if it be honor, tithes, if it be tithes. 6

The exhortation continues:

For the spiritual and corporal benefits which we derive from the ruler, let us give him tribute and presents in payment for them. This tribute is meant to provide the judges with necessities which they are in need of, since they put aside their own interest and case for the public welfare. Do not say that he has transgressed the law but consider the order obtained by the law. There is no peace if an authority is not constituted: instead, because of the lack of authority, there is great confusion and lack of peace, which leads to the loss of life and existence.⁷

These contractual obligations between monarch and people endured for centuries and were binding even in the Revised Constitution of 1955. Commenting on that constitution, Paul and Clapham point out that "only the Emperor and the people are, under the Constitution, self-sufficient' sources of political power. The establishment of the other elements and institutions of the state is ultimately dependent upon one or other, or both of them.⁸

Thus by sheer legal and traditional force, the power of the monarch remained almost unassailable for centuries. When challenged, it was maintained through personal strength and the frequent application of brutal force. At the same time, the most successful rulers were those who publicly avowed support for such strong institutions as the church and its educational and spiritual activities. For instance, during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, before launching reforms in government and civic affairs, it was necessary for Emperor Menelik II, who was highly respected, loved, and ably supported by his politically astute empress, to go out of his way to convince a significant segment of the Christian populace that he was a staunch, unassailable leader who unflinchingly supported the values of the state religion. It was only after he had accomplished this that he was able to turn his attention to reorganizing the apparatus of government and introducing modern means of communication, administration, and social as well as military services. Even then, he knew the limits of his modernization programs. For instance, during the first decade of this century when he established cabinet posts for the first time in the history of the country, he deliberately left the responsibility for education in the hands of the church,

while at the same time he was initiating the

infrastructure for a far-reaching system of state supported and controlled secular education. In doing so, he was able to lay sound foundations for the modernization of this conservative nation without unnecessarily alienating important segments of the population, i.e., nobility, the church leaders, and the Christian peasantry, whose support and cooperation were essential to the success of his endeavors.

It is with these political and historical settings in mind that the drama of institutional and generational conflicts that culminated in the 1974 Ethiopian revolution should be viewed.

Demographic and Economic Characteristics

Ethiopia covers an area of 1,183,998 square kilometers (457,142 square miles). Although it is only about eight degrees north of the Equator, for the most part Ethiopia enjoys varying climates which stimulate and support a variety of agricultural and livestock developments. This results from the high elevations of mountains and plateaus, and the influence of the surrounding continental land masses and oceans. The rugged terrain and deep valleys have also contributed to the lack of effective communication among the inhabitants and impeded the rapid spread of education.

A 1984 census the first ever indicates a total of 42 million people increasing at a rate of 2.5 percent per annum, which would double the population by the end of the century. An increasing percentage of the population consists of children and young people as a result of the combined effect of rapid population growth and a relative decrease in child mortality.

Since more than 85 percent of the population live in rural communities and depend on agriculture and herding, the Ethiopian economy is essentially a rural one, i.e., agro-pastoral activities are the main contributors to the national gross domestic product. Agricultural production includes such cash crops as cotton, coffee, sugar, fruits, vegetables, oilseeds, and pulses. Other crops (produced primarily for domestic consumption) include *teff* (a type of millet specific to Ethiopia), wheat, maize, sorghum, and millet. The livestock potential of Ethiopia is very promising and is expected to play an even more significant role in the future.

Since 1975, most of the modern sector of the economy (which is relatively young and small) has been brought under state control and management. This

sector includes textile mills, mining, food processing, production of beverages, tobacco, sugar, and footwear. National development programs for the construction of rural roads and housing, forestry, settlement, and hydroelectric schemes are expected to accelerate the growth of the modern economic sector.

In response to perceived popular demand, economic activities in Ethiopia were altered by the 1974-1976 nationalization and redistribution of all rural lands among the heretofore landless populace; by the reformation of urban lands; by the nationalization of big industries, banks, and insurance; and by the changes in labor conditions. But, as will be shown later in this book, there is a new generation of emerging problems which cast serious doubt on whether these measures have in fact improved the lives of the majority of Ethiopians.

Theme and Organization

This book is a social and historical analysis of the development of institutions of learning in Ethiopia, particularly higher education, and a critical analysis of the role these institutions have played in the transformation of Ethiopian society from a feudal monarchy to a socialist economy dominated accidentally, at least up to the present, by the military.

Higher education is largely a post-World War II phenomenon in Ethiopia. The traditional education system supported and operated by religious institutions had some indirect influences on the tradition of higher education when it finally found itself on Ethiopian soil. However, in terms of structure, approaches to teaching, scholarship, and the relationship of teachers and students to the larger national community, the new, imported secular higher education prototypes were as far from the traditional indigenous models as could be imagined.

Ethiopia has probably undergone more convulsive social and political dislocations than any other African nation in this century. In response to the tremendous global changes following World War II, Ethiopia, having been the first to fall victim to fascist aggression and the first to be liberated, found itself in the 1950s face to face with the challenges of reconstruction. Mussolini's fascist Italy invaded the country in 1935, and among the consequences was the systematic and ruthless destruction of the infant secular public education system. In its place, the Italians established for the privileged few a few primary schools with prescribed, strongly pro-Italian curricula. Public education was, therefore, practically nonexistent between 1935 and 1941.

When the national government was restored in 1941, rehabilitation of the educational structure proved difficult. The former teachers were either dead or