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## Ethiopia, Europe and Modernity: A Preliminary Sketch\*

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This paper was inspired by, and a preliminary version given at, a symposium at Hamburg University in October, 1998, directed to the question of “Ethiopia and Europe.” My interest in that topic arises from two well-established strands of Ethiopianist thinking, — diplomatic history and a documentation of the changing interactions between Ethiopia and the Europe,<sup>1</sup> — but tries to go beyond them to explore some of the deeper issues of cultural epistemology which they raise. I argue that the relations between Ethiopia and Europe cannot be naïvely understood for a central component of the relationship, from the Ethiopian side, was the appropriation of modernity. Thus, Europe, for Ethiopia’s leaders, embodied certain notions of power and authority, although these notions were to be found elsewhere, — initially in the United States, and, before long, also in Japan. The central epistemological problem is that the relationship has given rise to the modes of thinking by which it is typically understood, which means that tautology is a constant risk when one moves beyond description to explanation.

The paper starts with a brief look at the beginnings of Ethio-European relations in the nineteenth century and argues that the conventional framework within which they are understood, — a framework of increasing secularization and interest in technology, — is misleading and that, narrowly speaking, the relations have to be placed within a much longer narrative time line and the very notion of “Europe” itself needs to be problematized in order for us to start to appreciate it from an Ethiopian standpoint. It then moves on to explore some of the parameters of the hegemony of “imperialism” within which Ethiopia’s wider

\* A paper originally presented to the Symposium “Ethiopia and Europe”, Hamburg University, October 23, 1998.

<sup>1</sup> SVEN RUBENSON’s *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence* (London/Stockholm/Addis Ababa: Heinemann/Esselte Studium/Addis Ababa University Press, 1976) integrates these strands nicely.

relations have emerged. One dimension of hegemony is the pervasiveness of certain “master narratives” which it supports, these narratives being accounts of the world, of how things have come to be as they are, and of how best to participate in that world. To illuminate by analogy the master narrative of “progress” and “development,” which marked the middle decades of the twentieth century, I briefly discuss the master narrative of “environmentalism,” which marks its passing. The paper closes with reflections on how best we can go about critically locating and understanding Ethiopian tradition within the world created by European modernity.

*Origins of Modernity?* In April, 1810, *Ras Wäldä Sellasé*, then ruler of Tegray province, used the offices of the English emissary, Henry Salt, to write to King George III of England. Wäldä Sellasé explained to the English King, that, because of the disordered condition of his country, Salt was unable to visit a proper Ethiopian king. He complained that he was surrounded by infidels, and sought closer relations, which the English might support by stationing a warship in the Red Sea. At several different points in the letter, he complained that his political opponents were using different interpretations of Ethiopian Orthodox doctrine to isolate and browbeat him. He closed with an appeal that King George should secure for him, and his country, a bishop.<sup>2</sup>

Seventeen years later, on February 22, 1827, his successor as ruler of Tegray, *Däjjazmach* Subagadis Wäldu, wrote to the same Henry Salt, now English Consul General in Egypt. Subagadis noted that, “since you used to send to the *ras* what the church needs, send to me now because I have renovated four churches. Therefore send me what the churches need, so that you and I will be doing the correct thing.”<sup>3</sup>

Eleven years after the Subagadis letter, Sahlä Dengel, nominal ruler of the country, together with his leading (and controlling) lords, *Ras* Ali, *Däjjazmach* Webé, and *Däjjazmach* Kenfu, wrote to the King of France, Louis Philippe, seeking his assistance against an incursion of the army of Muhammad Ali of Egypt into Ethiopia’s western borderlands. “We have heard about your power,” Sahlä Dengel flattered the French ruler, “So act according to your power and turn back the Turks for us by writing (lit. sending) to Muhammad ‘Ali.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> SVEN RUBENSON, GETATCHEW HAILE and JOHN HUNWICK (eds.), *Acta Æthiopica. Volume I: Correspondence and Treaties 1800–1854* (Chicago/Addis Ababa: Northwestern University Press, Addis Ababa University Press, 1987), pp. 4–5.

<sup>3</sup> *idem.*, pp. 24–5.

<sup>4</sup> *idem.*, pp. 34–5.

Finally, in April, 1855, the newly-crowned King of Kings Téwodros wrote to Samuel Gobat, Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem, and former missionary in Ethiopia. He told Gobat of his pleasure at learning that Gobat would send craftsmen, and asked him to do so. In conclusion, he asked that one of the workers, be “one who ploughs with an engine (lit. fire wheel),” and enjoined the bishop, that the workman bring “his engine with him to me.”<sup>5</sup>

The quotations document four founding incidents in the story of modern formal contacts between the rulers of Ethiopia and Europe. The progression seems fairly clear, from a myopic fixation on internal politics, ecclesiastic and dynastic, through a decidedly more sophisticated grasp of international diplomacy and power relations, to an interest in the technological basis of European strength. Religion is a dimension common to each of the gambits, but, again, there seems to be a progression away from narrow fixations to an almost secular framework. In his letter to Bishop Gobat, Téwodros noted that he had united his country, previously divided by the sectarian struggles which had plagued *Ras Wäldä Sellasé*: “so now let not priests who disrupt the faith come to me...” From this germ was to flow the emperor’s secular agenda for the transformation of Ethiopia: importation of technology, modernization of army and bureaucracy, and supremacy of *raison d’état* over the institutional interests of the church.

*The Time Frame.* The progressive linearity is an illusion. Ethiopia’s relations with “Europe” have far deeper roots and make up a much longer story. The story should start no later than the reign of Emperor Dawit, in 1402. Tadesse Tamrat has told the first chapter, one which centers around the reigns of the Ethiopian rulers Yeshaq (1413–30) and Zär’a Ya’eqob (1434–68). It then takes on epic proportions in the sixteenth and earlier seventeenth centuries, moving from the gentleness of Francisco Alvares to the martyrdoms and massacres of the 1610s and 1620s.<sup>6</sup> Further chapters carry us from 1632 through the later seventeenth

<sup>5</sup> SVEN RUBENSON, AMSALU AKLILU, MERID WOLDE AREGAY and SAMUEL RUBENSON (eds.), *Acta Aethiopica. Volume II: Tewodros and his Contemporaries 1855–1868* (Addis Ababa/Lund: Addis Ababa University Press/Lund University Press, 1994), pp. 10–11.

<sup>6</sup> The long sixteenth century, from 1529 to 1632, really deserves much more scrutiny than it has received. The most interesting work remains the very scarce GIRMA BESHAH and MERID WOLDE AREGAY, *The Question of the Union of the Churches in Luso-Ethiopian Relations (1500–1632)* (Lisbon, 1964). See also PHILIP CARAMAN, *The Lost Empire. The Story of the Jesuits in Ethiopia 1555–1634* (Notre Dame, Indiana; University of Notre Dame Press, 1985). MERID WOLDE AREGAY’s unpublished University of London Ph.D. dissertation also has much to contribute: *Southern Ethiopia and the Christian Kingdom, 1508–1708, with Special Reference to the Galla Migrations and their Consequences*, 1971.

and the eighteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Thus, when Wäldä Sellasé made his overture to the English, he did so against a background of four centuries of contacts between Ethiopian rulers and western Europeans.

*Increasing Secularization?* Moreover, not only did the story start long before 1810, religion was not progressively moved to the sidelines as one of its dimensions. Secularization is a projection of moderns, Ethiopians and Europeans. In fact, Téwodros was a religious man and his conception of himself, of his rule, and of the Ethiopian kingdom, which he hoped to re-build, were all embedded in religion.<sup>8</sup> Too many observers have misinterpreted the famous clashes between Téwodros and his bishop, *Abunä Sälama*, as reflective of an anti-religious posture on the part of the king. Nothing could be further from the truth.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Téwodros's successors, Yohännes and Menilek, were also deeply embedded in the milieu of Ethiopian Orthodoxy. For Yohännes no case remains to be made, since this dimension to the man and his rule have long been recognized.<sup>10</sup> For Menilek, a phlegmatic personality and a pragmatic politics have misled some commentators into questioning the king's basic commitment to Ethiopian Orthodoxy. Consider, by contrast, Menilek's extensive church-building activities, or his respect for and deference towards *Abunä Mattéwos*.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, of course, there is the enigmatic Haile Sellassie. Judgments of the emperor, overall, have probably become more favorable in the last fifteen years

<sup>7</sup> EMERY J. VAN DONZEL, *Foreign Relations of Ethiopia, 1642–1700: documents relating to the journeys of Khodja Murad* (Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut, 1979); REMEDIUS PRUTKY, *Prutky's Travels in Ethiopia and other Countries*. Translated and edited by J. H. ARROWSMITH-BROWN and annotated by RICHARD PANKHURST (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1991); and D. E. CRUMMEY, *Priests and Politicians. Protestant and Catholic Missions in Orthodox Ethiopia, 1830–1868* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), pp. 9–10, for Fr. Tobias Gäbrä Egzi'abehér in Ethiopia, 1790–1797.

<sup>8</sup> DONALD CRUMMEY, Imperial Legitimacy and the Creation of a Neo-Solomonic Ideology in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Ethiopia, *Cahiers d'Etudes africaines*, 109, XXVIII, 1 (1988), pp. 13–43.

<sup>9</sup> DONALD CRUMMEY, Orthodoxy and Imperial Reconstruction in Ethiopia, 1854–1878, *Journal of Theological Studies*, XXIX, 2 (1978), pp. 427–42.

<sup>10</sup> See, most notably, BAIRU TAFLA (ed.), *A Chronicle of Emperor Yohannes IV (1872–89)* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1977); and ZEWEDE GABRE-SELLASSIE, *Yohannes IV of Ethiopia. A Political Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

<sup>11</sup> For Menilek's church-building activities see Chapter 10 of DONALD CRUMMEY, *Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia, from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century* (forthcoming, University of Illinois Press in association with James Currey Publisher, Oxford, and Addis Ababa University Press); for his relationship with Mattéwos, see ADUGNA AMANU, *op.cit.*, and GÄBRÄ SELLASÉ, *Tarikä Zämän ZäDagmawi Menilek Negusä-Nägäst ZäItyopyya* (Addis Ababa: Berhanenna Sälam Printing Press, 1959 Eth. Cal.).

as Ethiopia's revolutionaries demonstrated their own moral and intellectual bankruptcy and as the country's rulers in the 1990s turned their backs on the national project, which their predecessors had pursued for over sixty years. Yet what we can grasp of his personality seems cold, grasping, and manipulative.<sup>12</sup> Did spiritual fires burn within? A hard core amongst the Orthodox never accepted the emperor's fidelity. Yet, rather than irreligion, this accusation arose originally from his education at the hands of Catholic missionaries, and was reinforced by the autocratic drive, which brooked no autonomous authority apart from his own. I see no reason, through all this, to doubt the authenticity of Haile Sellassie's personal piety. Orthodoxy was, after all, integral to his vision of Ethiopia; he viewed Protestants and Catholics as authentic agents of the westernization, which he pursued; and his drive to ensure the autonomy of the Ethiopian Church vis à vis Alexandria was marked by scruples about canon law and apostolic propriety.<sup>13</sup>

"Europe" problematized. The story of progressive movement toward secularization as a representation of the modern relations between Ethiopia and Europe is clearly problematic, at least from the Ethiopian side. So, too, in the larger story hinted at above, is the very notion of "Europe" itself. For a start, the objects of diplomatic interest to the fifteenth century rulers Yeshaq and Zär'a Ya'eqob were *färänj*, — Franks, — not Täwahedo, not Greek, not Muslim. They were members of the Roman Catholic Church, spiritual subjects of the Bishop of Rome, and they were potential allies in the struggle to maintain an Ethiopian presence in the Holy Places of Jerusalem and Palestine. Two hundred years later, in the world of *Abba* Gorgoréwos and Job Ludolf, some of them were also Protestants. As many of us know only too well, we remain *färänj* in

<sup>12</sup> On the avaricious side of Haile Sellassie, see JOHN H. SPENCER, *Ethiopia at Bay: A Personal Account of the Haile Sellassie Years* (Algonac, MI: Reference Publications, 1987). SPENCER's testimony gains force from the author's continuing loyalty to a ruler whom he served for thirty years. Rather more favorable views of Haile Sellassie are offered by EMMANUEL ABRAHAM, *Reminiscences of my Life* (Oslo: Lunde forlag, 1995) and HANS WILHELM LOCKOT, *The Mission. The Life, Reign and Character of Haile Sellassie I* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 1989). There is, of course, no *logical* opposition between avarice and religiosity. The autobiography is notoriously unrevealing, but does not, in my view, support the view that Haile Sellassie lacked a religious orientation: *The Autobiography of Emperor Haile Sellassie I: 'My Life and Ethiopia's Progress' 1892–1937*. Translated and Annotated by EDWARD ULLENDORFF (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

<sup>13</sup> ADUGNA AMANU, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church becomes Autocephalous*, unpublished BA thesis, Department of History, Addis Ababa University, 1969.

Ethiopia today, although, to be sure, in its transition to the contemporary vernacular much of the term's original meaning has dissipated.

The problematic nature of the "Europe", which became an object of interest and concern to the rulers, and, subsequently, to the educated citizens, of Ethiopia, is my central contention, for Ethiopia's interest in Europe, in the largest sense, was always tied up with Ethiopia's interest in "westernization" and "modernization".<sup>14</sup> To be sure, Ethiopia had another kind of interest in Europe, one forced upon it by the imperialist activities of the European countries Britain, France, and Italy. But this interest was rather narrower than the one to which this paper is addressed. By subjugating the territories surrounding Ethiopia, including some territories which Ethiopia's rulers had themselves ruled in times past, and thereby controlling Ethiopia's access to the wider world, in all senses, at least until the advent of radio and telecommunications, those countries forced themselves upon Ethiopia's rulers. Dealing with them was, perhaps, the central object of Ethiopian diplomacy down to the outbreak of the Ethio-Italian War in 1935. Territorial imperialism was, indeed, a challenge to the integrity of the Ethiopian state, one which it met with qualified success.

However, the territorial imperialism of Britain, France, and Italy, was but one expression of a much deeper phenomenon, which some commentators have also labeled as "imperialism," — those forces which established not only the political hegemony of the European powers on the continent of Africa at the end of the nineteenth century, but also the economic dominance of finance capital throughout the globe, and the cultural hegemony of Westernization or modernization amongst the indigenous peoples and states of Africa, Asia, and the Americas at much the same time. So the notion of Europe is problematic in two senses: firstly it is embedded in an epistemological field which also contains the broader categories of "Western" and "modern;" secondly, that field was constituted by the powers and processes which it seeks to describe, and, so, is to a certain extent, hegemonic and self-defining. To put the issue differently: to understand Ethiopia's relations with Europe within the broadest possible framework, we have to understand that the relationship has been asymmetrical and part of larger, global processes. Part of the asymmetry is that the machinery with which Ethiopians themselves try to understand the relationship and participate in it is European and Western-derived.

<sup>14</sup> DONALD CRUMMEY, *The Politics of Modernization: Protestant and Catholic Missionaries in Modern Ethiopia*, pp. 85–99 in SAMUEL RUBENSON, GETACHEW HAILE and AASULV LANDE (eds.), *The Missionary Factor in Ethiopia* (Peter Lang Publishers, 1998).

In the global field of “Western” and “modern” there is little that distinguishes the American position from the European position, and this is probably how Ethiopia’s leaders viewed the situation, as well, once the American option became available to them. To be sure, there have been manifest differences of politics: in the 1940s, the Roosevelt administration’s supporting Ethiopia’s aspirations to thwart British control; and in the 1980s, the European Economic Community maintaining closer relations with Ethiopia than did Ronald Reagan’s United States. The problem lies at a deeper level.

*Hegemony and Master Narratives.* Given Western hegemony, in the creation of which Europe played such a central role, how are we to identify an Ethiopian perspective? Given Western hegemony, how can we find “neutral” language with which to describe Ethio-European relations? Where is the Archimedean point from which we can command the situation?

We should not take lightly the difficulties here, nor the pervasiveness of Western hegemony, which has expressed itself in a number of master narratives.<sup>15</sup> In the years from the 1890s to the 1920s, — the formative years of Haile Sellassie, — that narrative was one of “civilization” and “progress,” the belief that industrial productivity and the institutions of liberal democracy constituted a morally superior stage of human history. In the 1960s the narrative was “development,” a combination of ideas, aspirations, inducements, and techniques, which profoundly shaped the actions of governments and international agencies in Africa, Latin America and Asia. Development was a narrative with divergent sub-plots, one capitalist, one socialist. Ethiopia embraced the socialist one far more thoroughly than it ever did the capitalist one. Yet the rivalry of the two ought not to obscure for us the preconceptions which they shared, preconceptions which were cultural as well as economic, and profoundly “Western” and “modernist” in origin.

So, too, the 1990s have produced a master narrative of environmentalism. While ideas of economic and social “development” still hold considerable sway, the uncontested language is the language of the environment, language, which I

<sup>15</sup> WILLIAM CRONON has written persuasively of the multiple meanings, in light of post-modern theory, of narrative for the historian: WILLIAM J. CRONON, A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative, *The Journal of American History*, 78, 4 (March 1992), pp. 1347–76. ALLAN HOBEN has demonstrated how thinking about the environment has come to constitute a master narrative for the ‘90s: The Cultural Construction of Environmental Policy: Paradigms and Politics in Ethiopia, pp. 186–208 in M. LEACH and R. MEARNNS (eds.), *The Lie of the Land. Challenging Received Wisdom on the African Environment* (London/Oxford/Portsmouth, NH: International African Institute/James Currey/Heinemann, 1996).



believe, is constitutive of “globality.” The rise of Green parties in Europe is but one expression of this narrative. Environmentalism is deeply influenced by ecology and carries heavy Malthusian baggage. So another expression of the master narrative is a set of country-specific sub-narratives, and the Ethiopian sub-narrative runs as follows. Population is rising faster than agricultural productivity, which means that mouths are outpacing food. Population growth means that farmers are forced to farm increasingly marginal lands. Some of these lands are steep slopes, which earlier generations of Ethiopian farmers had thought unmanageable. Some of these lands are found in lowland areas, which, again, earlier generations of highland farmers had shunned, because of climate and the presence of vectored diseases such as malaria.<sup>16</sup> The ever-increasing demand for farm land necessitates the clearing of bush and the cutting down of trees, a process abetted and exacerbated by the equally increasing demand for firewood. The farming of imprudent slopes and the denudation of hillsides produces soil erosion, and, eventually, through a process known to climatologists as the albedo effect, decreases rainfall and produces drought.<sup>17</sup> These processes render farmers vulnerable to the kinds of famines which struck the Ethiopian highlands in 1973 and again in 1984 and 1985.

The narrative dictates action. Experts who understand the larger forces involved, — forces either invisible to the immediate participants, or against which they are powerless to act, — must intervene to stop the downward spiral. And intervene the Ethiopian government did, forcibly resettling hundreds of thousands of people; taking thousands of hectares of land into its own hands, excluding from it local people and their livestock; planting millions of seedlings (mostly eucalyptus) on hillsides and watersheds; and imposing erosion devices

<sup>16</sup> For a critique of much of the Ethiopian environmental narrative, see JAMES MCCANN, *The Plow and the Forest: Narratives of Deforestation in Ethiopia, 1840–1992*, *Environmental History*, II, 2 (1997), 138–59; and *idem.*, *People of the Plow. An Agricultural History of Ethiopia, 1800–1990* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995). For MCCANN’s own sub-narrative, see Ethiopia, pp. 103–115 in M. GLANTZ (ed.), *Drought Follows the Plow: Cultivating Marginal Areas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). I have taken my own stab at these issues in: *Deforestation in Wällo: Process or Illusion?* *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, XXXVI, 1 (1998); and *Rereading the Wällo Landscape, 1937–1997*, unpublished paper presented to the Twenty-Fifth Annual Spring Symposium of the Center for African Studies, University of Illinois, April, 1998.

<sup>17</sup> Statements of this narrative are rife in all the Ethiopian media and are further propagated by the principal NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) active in the country. See for example, the editorials in the *Ethiopian Herald* observing the tenth anniversary of the Great Famine of 1984–85: January 11, 1995, and February 2, 1995.

such as bunds.<sup>18</sup> In the importation of this narrative into Ethiopia and the propagation of its sway there, it is impossible to draw the line between external and internal agency. To be sure, the more extreme, heavy-handed interventions were designed by the Ethiopian government and the more authoritative “scientific” analyses were produced by Europeans, but many Europeans were in favor of vigorous intervention, and a number of Ethiopians produced some pretty subtle analyses. Nor was there significant difference, and this at the height of the sway of the Workers’ Party of Ethiopia, between experts of a socialist or capitalist orientation.<sup>19</sup>

Yet it is my contention, on the basis of a considerable body of convergent evidence, that this narrative is counter-factual, i.e. just plain wrong. While it is true that population is growing rapidly in Ethiopia and in the Ethiopian countryside, and while it is true that Ethiopian farmers, especially in Wällo province and contiguous parts of Shäwa and Tegray provinces, did suffer grievously from famine, research in Wällo does not support the idea that there has been a major expansion in the land being cultivated. Photographs from the 1930s indicate a landscape bereft of woody vegetation, whereas photographs of the exact same landscapes in the 1990s indicate many more trees. In the planting of those trees, primarily but not exclusively eucalyptus, the initiatives of private farmers played a very important role, and farmers have been planting trees, especially eucalyptus, since the 1930s and 1940s. Farmers have coped with rising population through *intensification* of cultivation, and, secondarily, through out-migration and the more thorough cultivation of areas, such as the *qwolla* of the Millé River valley, which, in the 1930s, were primarily used for grazing. Farmers, — men and women, — articulate their histories clearly and vigorously. Nor is the currency of the narrative confined to elite circles. Friends report that it fuels conversation on Ethiopia’s inter-city buses; and I have found local farmers deploying elements of it, too.

Whence, then, the national narrative of deforestation, accelerating soil erosion, and human-induced drought? It has been *inferred* from a global master narrative, which, replete with scientific rationale and supporting institutions primed for intervention, explains what has happened and what should be done

<sup>18</sup> A process DESSALEGN RAHMATO has aptly described as littering the landscape: *Littering the Landscape: Environment and Environmental Policy in Wollo (Northeast Ethiopia)*, unpublished paper presented to the Twenty-Fifth Annual Spring Symposium of the Center for African Studies, University of Illinois, April, 1998.

<sup>19</sup> Uninformed, ideological interventions, like the editorials of the *Wall Street Journal* always excepted.

about it without the unseemly necessity of actually asking the victims of the tragedy or ascertaining the most elementary facts.<sup>20</sup> No one should doubt the power of global narratives; nor their capacity to capture the minds of national citizens. Ethiopians are the most numerous and enthusiastic relaters of the global narrative about their own environment.

*Ethiopia and Modernity Revisited.* How, starting from Ras Wäldä Sellasé and his pre-occupations with the politics of Ethiopian Orthodox sectarianism, have we reached the Wällo famine of 1984 and the editorial columns of the *Ethiopian Herald*? The link is an epistemological one. Wäldä Sellasé may be taken to have opened a dialogue, which continues to the present, a dialogue, which constitutes the substance of relations between “Ethiopia” and “Europe.”<sup>21</sup> The argument here is that the processes, which shaped that dialogue, also dictated the terms by which it was to be interpreted, and that one of its dictations was a story of “progress” and “secularization.” More deeply, the process implanted the hegemony of the notion of “modernity” and its identification with “Westernization,” and these, in turn, have brought in their train successive narratives, of economic development, and of environmental fragility and ruin. And these narratives have embedded themselves profoundly in the consciousness of Ethiopians.

So what is the object of our study? What may be gained from a contemplation of the relations between “Ethiopia and Europe”? Ultimately, the only way to recover a deeper sense of “Ethiopia” is through a critical reevaluation of its relations with modernity and the West, of which Europe is the progenitor, although no longer a sole controller. Certainly, nothing is to be gained from a naïve approach, since modernity is so deeply embedded and broadly pervasive.

First, let us consider the reality of “Ethiopia.” Although this is something which few of the readers of this journal are accustomed to questioning, the refusal to do so is no longer an optional procedure, since what many of us took for a fixed point of departure has experienced two challenges, one intellectual, one political. The distinction, of course, is arbitrary. BONNIE HOLCOMB and SISAI IBSSA have published the most widely circulated attack on previously accepted

<sup>20</sup> Over a decade ago, DAVID ANDERSON and RICHARD GROVE anticipated many of these arguments in their edited collection, *Conservation in Africa: people, policies and practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). See also LEACH and MEARNES, *The Lie of the Land* (s. note 15).

<sup>21</sup> BAIRU TAFLA has building blocks for an understanding of this dialogue: BAIRU TAFLA, *Ethiopia and Germany. Cultural, Political and Economic Relations, 1871–1936* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1981); and *idem.*, *Ethiopia and Austria. A History of their Relations* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1994).

ideas of the meaning of Ethiopia.<sup>22</sup> The polemical character of their book has led many to dismiss it. Rather more serious, however, is JOHN SORENSON's *Imagining Ethiopia. Struggles for History and Identity in the Horn of Africa* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993). The "Imagining Ethiopia" school argues that, in all significant respects, the country is the creation of the past 100 years, a construct of global (or is it European?) imperialism working in consort with indigenous elites. Those elites used, with an indeterminate degree of consciousness, notions of historic Ethiopia, to disguise that what they were about was the creation of a country which had never existed. SORENSON does a pretty good job of dissecting the historical preconceptions of many of the scholars who have written about Ethiopia. What neither he, nor HOLCOMB and IBSSA, does is pay much attention to the substance of what the historians of Ethiopia have had to say. Nor do they pay any attention to what the elites, whose actions they claim to analyze, had to say about their actions, nor to such indications as we may have as to the deeper consciousness which may have shaped their behavior.<sup>23</sup> BAHRU ZEWEDE is the only historian to respond as yet.<sup>24</sup> These views need not have detained us long, had they not been espoused by Ethiopia's rulers, and had they not had a significant role in shaping the country's 1995 constitution. Whatever paroxysms of patriotism into which their relations with Eritrea in 1998 may have thrown them, Meles Zenawi and his circle have shown little appreciation for Ethiopia's deeper past or more enduring traditions. So the Ethiopia with which we are concerned *has* been called into question.

To be sure, the country has undergone profound changes in the last hundred years, changes in large part attributable to its engagement with the world created by global capital. Yet, in so doing, both its leaders and citizens have drawn on much older traditions of language, culture, and public behavior, traditions which we may discern in a host of fields, land tenure and agricultural practice not least among them.<sup>25</sup> I, for one, believe that there is a real historical entity, "Ethiopia," that it manifests itself in the behavior of millions of people in the Horn of Africa today, and that its unfolding may be observed in processes extending over periods of centuries. To turn the "invention" argument back on its proponents, "Ethiopia" has as much reality as does "Germany" or "France."

<sup>22</sup> HOLCOMB, BONNIE K., and SISAI IBSSA, *The Invention of Ethiopia. The Making of a Colonial Dependent State in Northeast Africa* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1990).

<sup>23</sup> Such was the attempt of CRUMMEY, Imperial Legitimacy (s. note 8).

<sup>24</sup> BAHRU ZEWEDE, YäSost Shi Wāys YäMāto Amāt Tarik? *Dialogue. Journal of Addis Ababa University Teachers Association*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Series, I, 1 (March, 1992), pp. 1–16.

<sup>25</sup> The former the subject of the forthcoming *Land and Society* (s. note 11).

No Archimedean position exists from which we can disentangle the substance of Ethiopia and its engagement with modernity, the West and Europe. Is the situation then hopeless? I would plead, not so. Firstly, we must adopt an *a priori* commitment to approach the issue with as much critical reason as we can muster. Self-criticism and self-consciousness are the beginnings of wisdom in this sphere. We must be particularly attentive to *alternative* perspectives or orientations. Thus did the Emperor Fasil, having expelled the Jesuits and severed his connection to Western Europe, turn to alternative sources of power and authority, Ottoman Turkey and Mughal India.<sup>26</sup> Thus did Ethiopia's young modernists of the 1920s turn to Japan. Thus did Ethiopia's aspirant revolutionaries of the 1960s and early 1970s turn to the Soviet Union.

Secondly, in order firmly to establish the Ethiopian side of the relationship, we must seek sources which will give us privileged access to authentic Ethiopian modes of thought. SVEN RUBENSON's *Acta Aethiopica*, citations from which opened this paper, has been dedicated to bringing to light the most authentically Ethiopian expressions of the diplomatic engagement. But the *Acta* exist, so far, in two volumes, reaching only to 1868. As more volumes appear, we can hope to learn more.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, I would suggest three additional sources or arenas as being of particular relevance or value. Firstly, there is the project which Professor BAHRU ZEWDE has been pursuing for some years now, an intellectual history of Ethiopia from the late nineteenth century onwards.<sup>28</sup> Much closer attention to, and a subtler appreciation of, the first modern Ethiopians will give us a richer understanding of Ethiopian modernity. IRMA TADDIA has contributed to this enterprise.<sup>29</sup> So, too, has REIDULF MOLVAER, although his efforts have

<sup>26</sup> VAN DONZEL, *Foreign Relations of Ethiopia, 1642–1700* (s. note 7); and *idem.*, *A Yemenite Embassy to Ethiopia 1647–1649. Al-Haymi's Sirat al-Habasha Newly Introduced, Translated and Annotated* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1986), Äthiopistische Forschungen, Band 21.

<sup>27</sup> As we will, surely, also benefit from close reading of the documents published in BAIRU TAFLA's accounts of the relations between Ethiopia, on the one hand, and Germany and Austria, on the other. Citations above in note 21.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, BAHRU ZEWDE, The Concept of Japanization in the Intellectual History of Modern Ethiopia, *Proceedings of the Fifth Seminar of the Department of History (Debre Zeit, 30 June – 3 July 1989)* (Addis Ababa University, 1990), pp. 1–17.

<sup>29</sup> IRMA TADDIA, Ethiopian Source Material and Colonial Rule in the Nineteenth Century: the Letter to Menilek (1899) by Blatta Gäbrä Egziabher, *Journal of African History*, XXXV (1994), pp. 493–516.

met with some resistance in Addis Ababa.<sup>30</sup> Put another way, Ethiopia's encounter with modernity has its own history, one of active appropriation. The views of Ethiopians today build on the views of those who went before them, at the beginning of the twentieth century. Different individuals with their peculiar preoccupations brought modernity to Ethiopia, — however much modernity was then further appropriated and shaped by institutions, — and recovering individual contributions will be an important step in disentangling this particular Gordian knot.

Secondly, we badly need an epistemology drawn from the corpus of Ge'ez and pre-twentieth century Amharic texts. I am not satisfied that we have one yet,<sup>31</sup> but the late ROGER COWLEY may have sown some of the seeds from which one could grow.<sup>32</sup> COWLEY is the only modern scholar, Ethiopian or Western, known to me to have immersed himself in traditions of Ethiopian thinking, which have been maintained within institutions which continue to function today much as they have functioned for a very long time. This judgment may, no doubt, reflect as much upon my ignorance as it does upon ROGER COWLEY's distinctiveness.

COWLEY identified an Ethiopian tradition of thinking. He immersed himself in its texts; and, then, he went to school under the Ethiopian authorities, thereby placing himself, so far as possible, within the tradition itself. Ethiopian studies, in its modern, European, origins, dedicated itself to the assembly and publication

<sup>30</sup> REIDULF K. MOLVAER, *Black Lions. The Creative Lives of Modern Ethiopia's Literary Giants and Pioneers* (Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 1997). My comment reflects conversations in Addis Ababa.

<sup>31</sup> CLAUDE SUMNER has worked in this direction. See, for example, Ethiopian Conceptual Logic and Figurative Logic, *Proceedings of the Eleventh International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa, April 1–6, 1991*. Edited by BAHRU ZEWEDE, RICHARD PANKHURST, TADDESE BEYENE (Addis Ababa: 2 vols., 1994), I, pp. 725–37. But one pillar of his historic Ethiopian philosophy is the philosopher Zär'a Ya'eqob, whose authenticity remains in doubt. In an important article, CARLO CONTI ROSSINI pointed out that the text attributed to “Zär'a Ya'eqob” has no resonance elsewhere in Ge'ez literature; that the ideas historically belong to the rationalist “Enlightenment” tradition of Western Europe; that the only copy of the manuscript attributed to “Zär'a Ya'eqob” came from the hand of Giusto da Urbino; and that da Urbino was a nineteenth century Lazarist, who abandoned his mission and forsook his priestly vows: CARLO CONTI ROSSINI, *Lo Hatata Zar'a Ya'eqob e il Padre Giusto da Urbino*, *Rendiconti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei*, Series 5, XXIX (1920), pp. 213–23.

<sup>32</sup> ROGER W. COWLEY, *The Traditional Interpretation of the Apocalypse of St. John in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church* (Cambridge: CUP, 1983); and *idem. Ethiopian Biblical Interpretation: A Study in Exegetical Tradition and Hermeneutics* (Cambridge: CUP, 1988).

of Ethiopian texts, but it spurned the still-living tradition which had generated those texts, and which continues to generate them. There are institutions, — schools supported by monasteries and churches, — which maintain modes of reasoning rooted far back in the Ethiopian past. To be sure, they, too, are affected by modernity. The lucky churches have access to electricity; many of the clergy are participating in the government school system. Nevertheless, as COWLEY convincingly demonstrated, those institutions are still very much at work.

COWLEY looked only at traditions of Biblical interpretation. As we all know, the Orthodox Church recognized four great branches of learning, of which New Testament commentary was but one. An imaginative philosopher could have a field day, immersing himself or herself in the rich body of texts, which the fathers of Ethiopian studies have made available to us. But it would take a huge, conceptual leap from academic philosophy as the Western, “modern,” “European,” academy now presents it, a leap which suggests the real distance between the “Ethiopia” with which I am concerned, and the world of modernity within which we live.

I would suggest a third source of insight, perspective and knowledge, which would also contribute significantly to constructing the Ethiopian side of the “Ethiopia and Europe” relationship: the men and women of the Ethiopian countryside. I do not have a naïve populism in mind here. Ethiopian farmers and herders have limited horizons and are prone to the irrational modes of thinking that we have deemed “superstition.” Yet it is also the case, that, much more than the Ethiopian intelligentsia or their rulers in Addis Ababa, Ethiopian countryfolk are the living heirs of deep traditions, which are, as yet, only partially affected by modernity. I spent much of my time, from April through August, 1997, interviewing Ethiopian farming men and women as part of a project dedicated to an understanding of the environment and social change over the previous sixty years.<sup>33</sup> Intellectually, I was prepared for my informants to speak with integrity and vigor and to have something to say. Personally, I was quite unprepared for the substance of what they had to say, or the extent to which they had successfully evaded incorporation by the modern Ethiopian state. To be sure, they have been mightily engaged with the successive avatars of that state, and its successive agents have left their mark on how people think and feel. Yet they continue to make their livelihoods without significant contribution from the state. They engage in market activities, but the state has done a poor job in perceiving what

<sup>33</sup> I must express my appreciation of funding provided by the Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board, which made possible my time in the field.

this really amounts to. They marry, give birth to and raise their children, and train them into livelihood with no assistance from the state.

I spent most of my time with the farmers of Wällo and a couple of weeks in each of Dämbeya and Armac’äho, respectively south and north of Gondär town. I suspect that spending time with pastoral peoples would yield parallel insight. What I came away with was a sense of a vast chasm between the state and its agents, on the one hand, and farming people on the other. On the one side was “science” and “modernity;” on the other was knowledge, — real knowledge, — and experience, — lived experience. National and regional policy is simply not informed by any sense of what ordinary people really think, feel, or believe. Moreover, it is formulated in complete ignorance of the real processes at work in the countryside, processes shaped by centuries of experience and by farmer initiative, imagination, and adaptation. I gained this conviction through a study of environmental policy and environmental change in Wällo, — and through conversations with two remarkable, junior Ethiopian anthropologists, Tesfaye Wolde Medhin and Teferi Abate, — both of whom did fieldwork in Wällo,<sup>34</sup> but I am fully convinced that a study of a different domain in another part of the country would yield similar results. To put it another way, the people of Ethiopia are having their history taken away from them, and are having another history, one inferred from global notions of modernity, imposed upon them. The result is epic tragedy.

What has this to do with “Ethiopia and Europe”? Everything; the substance of Ethiopia’s relations with Europe has been the engagement with modernity, and that engagement has been tragic for the people of the Ethiopian countryside. Properly to evaluate that relationship, and to gain a nuanced, well-grounded account of the Ethiopian side of it, one with any pretensions to completeness, it is imperative that the views of Ethiopian country people be given proper heed. I am not suggesting that we reject modernity, for that would be impossible. For Ethiopia’s leaders and intelligentsia there can be no going back, only forward. Yet the ultimate goal should be to pass beyond modernity, — not into the world of the post-modernists, — but into a world where Ethiopia’s modernity may be critically understood and placed in creative tension with its tradition.

I would like to conclude by returning to one of my earlier themes, religion. One of the prejudices of modernity is the marginal significance of religion, and, above all, of religious authorities and institutions. Yet, throughout this paper we have seen that religion has played a role very far from marginal. At a number of

<sup>34</sup> Tesfaye is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; Teferi is a Ph.D. candidate at Boston University.



points it has been central, so, in our revaluation of the Ethiopian side of the “Europe and Ethiopia” relationship, it behooves us to take religion seriously.

Religion was a central preoccupation of, and shaping influence on, the leaders who mediated Ethiopia’s response to modernity, starting with *Ras Wäldä Sellasé* and running all the way through to Haile Sellassie I. Notoriously, religion was *not* an influence shaping the modernizing aspirations of the Derg, but is this not, then, but one more measure of the extent of their alienation from the country which they sought to lead?

Secondly, religion, to a degree I cannot fully establish, shaped the first generation of conscious Ethiopian modernizers. Many of them had been educated in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, many of them also had European missionary connections. I have written elsewhere of Berru P<sup>2</sup>ét<sup>2</sup>ros, correspondent of Antoine d’Abbadie and student, in the 1850s at a school run by the English Church Missionary Society on Malta.<sup>35</sup> Berru, to me, was the first identifiable modern Ethiopian, and without institutions created and sustained by religious enterprise, his aspirations would have remained unfulfilled.

Thirdly, as exemplified by the work of ROGER COWLEY, the Orthodox Church embodies modes of thought which are crucial to recovering a sense of the dynamic and living character of Ethiopian tradition. So, too, do the *ulema*, the learned men of Ethiopian Islam. We cannot truly evaluate Ethiopia’s modernity, and its relations with the sources of that modernity, without invoking an indigenous epistemology.

Finally, religion is part of the fabric of life in the Ethiopian countryside. That religion is not the same thing as what the learned colleagues of ROGER COWLEY teach. Rather, it is the practical and popular appropriation of those ideas. Moreover, religion in the countryside is far from being limited to Orthodox Christianity in a strict sense. Most of my Wällo informants were Muslims, and we do Ethiopia a great disservice if we take the Christian self-description of its historic ruling elite at face value.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, popular religion contains a good deal of belief and practice the roots of which lie quite outside the domain of priests and monks, although some of it may be brought back within the institutions of Orthodoxy in the “shadier” practices of the *däbtära*.

What are the issues in the relations between Ethiopia and Europe? The issues revolve around the complex meaning of “modernity” and “Westernization;” the

<sup>35</sup> CRUMMEY, *The Politics of Modernization*, pp. 92–94 (s. note 14).

<sup>36</sup> See here, the recent work of HUSSEIN AHMED, *The Historiography of Islam in Ethiopia*, *Journal of Islamic Studies*, III, 1 (1992), pp. 15–46; and *idem.*, *Aksum in Muslim Historical Traditions*, *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, XXIX, 2 (1997), pp. 47–66.

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asymmetrical nature of the relations, whereby these ideas became implanted in Ethiopia; and the extent to which they permeate our attempts to evaluate the Ethiopian side of the relationship. We may gain a stronger handle on the Ethiopian side to the extent that we cast a cold eye on modernity itself; seek a deeper understanding of those Ethiopians, who, at the beginning of this century, struggled to appropriate Western ideas and influences; and turn back to recover elements of an authentic Ethiopian epistemology in the works of the country's religious scholars and in the perspectives of ordinary Ethiopian men and women. The task is not an easy one, but, if we are to benefit from the wisdom which Ethiopia has to share with us, we have no other choice.

#### Summary

This paper explores some of the issues of cultural epistemology which underlie the relations between Ethiopia and Europe. It briefly explores the origins of modern diplomatic contacts, arguing that the appropriation of modernity increasingly became a central concern of Ethiopia's rulers in their relations with Europe. It then raises the question, if Europeanized modernity has increasingly marked Ethiopia in the twentieth century, how are we to discern Ethiopia's contribution to this process? To what extent, in its modernization, has Ethiopia's educated elite lost contact with an indigenous point of view? The paper argues that a critical appreciation of modernity in Ethiopia must be made against a background which historicizes the process whereby it came about, which takes fully into account the modes of reasoning embodied in Gə'əz texts, and which privileges the views of those rural Ethiopians so lightly touched by modernity.