

# THE ETHIOPIAN REVOLUTION

1974–1987

*A transformation from an aristocratic to a totalitarian  
autocracy*

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## CHAPTER I

# *The background to the emergence of the structural crisis*

### THE EMERGENCE OF ETHIOPIA AS A SOVEREIGN STATE

The region now called Ethiopia has been the home of diverse linguistic groups since pre-historic times. These were the Semitic languages of the northern and central highlands, notably Amharic and Tigrinya, the Cushitic languages of the lowlands and of the south-western, central and south-eastern highlands, notably Oromo, Afar and Somali; the Sidama languages of the central and southern highlands; and the Nilotic languages of the periphery areas along the Sudanese frontier. It has been the orthodoxy among 'Ethiopianists' to assert that, whereas the other groups have lived in the region since time immemorial, the Semitic languages and people were a result of intermarriages and cultural exchanges between the Cushitic peoples of northern Ethiopia, and settlers from the Arabian Peninsula which took place only in the first millennium BC. However, the idea is not without challenge; Grover Hudson for one has argued that all the Afro-Asiatic languages have in fact originated from the Ethiopian region.<sup>1</sup> If correct, this would render Ethiopia the source of the Semitic, Cushitic and Sidama languages and their counterparts in the present neighbouring countries of Africa and the Middle East as well as many other languages in north, central and West Africa, like the Berber and Chadic languages. Clearly the origin of the Ethiopian linguistic groups is still a matter of conjecture.

The Ethiopian region was also an early home for the great monotheistic religions of the Middle East. Though Judaism was perhaps the first to be introduced into the region (probably before Christ), it was Christianity (fourth century) and Islam (seventh century) which were superimposed on the linguistically diverse, Judaic and animist populations of the region and

became the major contending ideologies from that time to the present.

In addition, the Ethiopian region has been the home of diverse political institutions for at least the last 2,000 years. During that period, the major protagonist has been the Christian kingdom which had to change its seat several times in the northern and central Highlands. The first of these was the classical Kingdom of Axum (first millennium) which had as its heart-land the present regions of the Tigrain and Eritrean plateau and the adjoining coastal area of the Red Sea. The kingdom was notable for its architecture, having a written culture and maintaining a flourishing trade not only with the interior but also the Middle East and Far East. At the height of its glory in the middle of the millennium, it was in control of a large area extending into the Arabian Peninsula across the Red Sea, the present-day Sudan, and it also dominated most of the trading posts on the southern coast of the Red Sea as far as present-day Somalia. Axum's rise to a land and sea power earned it the designation 'empire'. However, the rise and expansion of Islam in the seventh century, and the waves of migrations of the Bejas from the north, cut the empire's relations with the other centres of the classical civilizations and, by the end of the millennium, put an end to Axum altogether.<sup>2</sup>

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the medieval kingdoms of Ethiopia emerged in the Agaw (Cushitic) and Amhara regions of the central highlands with the religious ideology and script of Axum.<sup>3</sup> In addition to making an impressive array of conquests in all directions including the present Eritrean region in the north, they built monasteries and produced literature, music and art. The political career of the more important of the kingdoms which was ruled by the so-called Solomonic dynasty and which had emerged among the Amhara in the thirteenth century, was marked by having to change its seat constantly in order to tame independently minded regional governors and to ward off increasingly important Islamic encroachments from the strings of emirates that had come to exist in the eastern highland and lowland areas during the twelfth century.<sup>4</sup>

The decline of this kingdom came in the sixteenth century as a result of invasions by one of these emirates (Harar) and by waves of Oromo migrations from the south. Harar, led by Gragn who was probably a Somali, overran the length and breadth of the central

and northern highlands from 1529 to 1543. If, in this enterprise, Harar was backed by the Ottoman Empire, which was by then beginning to make its influence in the region felt, the Christian kingdom was rescued from total annihilation by Portuguese musketeers made available courtesy of their government. Despite the failure of the conquest, it appears to have resulted in the further penetration of Islam among the highland populations. Harar's defeat was followed by fifty years of waves of migrations by the animist Oromo into the eastern, western, central and northern highlands. Subsequently, the Oromo settled in the territories which they conquered and adopted either Christianity or Islam depending on the religion of the people among whom they settled.<sup>5</sup>

The greatly weakened Christian kingdom established its capital in the north-western part of the highlands (Gondar) in the second half of the sixteenth century; nevertheless, quite apart from the fact that it had not recovered from the previous invasions, it was further debilitated by religious disputes provoked by the intervention of Jesuit missionaries, by the centrifugal tendencies among the regional nobles and by the restiveness of the royal garrisons. With the religious disputes out of the way, with an understanding struck between the nobility and the monarchy, and with the influence of the Ottoman Empire having declined in the region because of revolts against it in the Arabian Peninsula, the Christian kingdom was able to flourish once again at Gondar between the 1640s and the 1770s. From then to the 1850s, however, it disintegrated into feudal anarchy often referred to as 'the era of the princes'.<sup>6</sup>

These political actors can be described as an empire (Axum), a city-state (Harar), a kingdom (Janjero among the Sidamas), and as a clan (the Somalis). In other words, none of them were sovereign states with a claim to independence, equality and territorial integrity, nor were they committed to non-interference in each other's internal affairs and the settlement of disputes peacefully. Rather, they felt free to trample on and pillage each other's rights and properties, subdue one another and exact tribute. Similarly, the whole of the region that we now call 'Ethiopia', composed as it was of all these political actors, did not enjoy the attributes of a sovereign state in its dealings with powers like the Greek or Ottoman Empires. Its relations with such powers were governed



by the same rules that prevailed among the actors within the Ethiopian region.

The process of Ethiopia's emergence as a sovereign state can be said to have been initiated and completed by its well-known kings: Tewodros of Gondar (1855–1868), Yohannis of Tigrai (1869–1889) and Menelik of the central province of Shoa (1889–1913). Calling himself king of 'Ethiopia' like his predecessors and imbued with Ethiopian nationalism, Tewodros conducted a series of campaigns and managed to bring most of the northern highlands under his control, thus putting an end to the era of princes. Yohannis not only consolidated Tewodros's fragile reunification of the north but also extended his rule to the Red Sea coast by bringing under his control the Naibs of the port towns of Massawa and Arkiko who, since the sixteenth century, had been switching their allegiances between the Ethiopian kings and the rulers of the Ottoman and Egyptian Empires.<sup>7</sup> Thus, Egypt, which in the nineteenth century had replaced the Ottoman Empire as the regional power, was expelled from the area as recognized by the tripartite agreement of 1884 concluded between Yohannis, Egypt and Britain. While acknowledging the suzerainty of Yohannis, Menelik was in the meantime expanding to the south-west, south and south-east and in so doing bringing under his control territories like the Ogaden which had never been under the jurisdiction of the kingdoms of the north. When Yohannis died fighting the Dervishes on the present Ethio-Sudanese frontier in 1889, Menelik inherited his throne and became the uncontested ruler of the whole of present-day Ethiopia.

As the internal consolidation was underway, the regional Islamic expansionists were replaced by the European imperial powers. In fact, Menelik's southward thrust was in part instigated by his competing in the carving up of the Horn of Africa with European powers; he is reputed to have stated that he was not going to be an independent spectator to the division of the region among the Europeans. However, it soon transpired that European designs were not limited to competing with him over territories which were outside his jurisdiction but extended to the annexation of the whole of Ethiopia as built by Tewodros, Yohannis and himself. Thus, Italy which had a coaling post at Asab and which had been fighting with the forces of Yohannis in order to expand into the interior, took advantage of the confusion that ensued

upon Yohannis's death and in 1890 carved out the whole of the coastal area and the tip of the northern highlands, christened it 'Eritrea', and brought it under its control. Then, in 1896, Italy declared an all-out war on Ethiopia but was heavily defeated at the hands of Menelik at Adwa (Tigray), not far from what became the Ethio-Eritrean boundary. Why Menelik did not then pursue the Italians, drive them out of Eritrea and claim what was his by right (by the fact that he was a successor of Yohannis) has since been a matter of intense speculation among Ethiopians.

Menelik's diplomatic genius (his ability to play one state against another) is often cited as a major reason for his strong stature in the eyes of the European powers. More important in this regard was, perhaps, his Adwa victory; that event seems to have enhanced the standing of Menelik and his country in the international arena, frustrated the ambition of the European powers to colonize Ethiopia, and forced them to conclude boundary treaties with him. Thus, Ethiopia and France concluded a treaty concerning the Ethio-Djibouti boundary in 1897; Ethiopia and Britain concerning the Ethio-Sudanese boundary in 1902, the Ethio-Kenyan boundary in 1907, and Ethio-British Somaliland in 1908; and Ethiopia and Italy concerning the Ethio-Eritrean boundary in 1908. Though a similar treaty was concluded between Ethiopia and Italy concerning the Ethio-Italian Somaliland boundary in 1908, the instruments by which it was executed (oral agreements and exchanges of correspondence) has since proved illusory.

The recognition of her boundaries by the European states coupled with the fact that she had a government and a people effectively made Ethiopia a sovereign state. This was further enhanced by the recognition of her sovereignty over all her territories except Eritrea by a tripartite treaty of 1906 concluded between Britain, France and Italy and by her membership of the League of Nations in 1922. The emergence of Ethiopia as a sovereign state at the turn of the century was remarkably early; at the time, only the Latin American states, Japan and China had joined the European state system; a few other countries like Saudi Arabia and Yemen which were allowed to keep their independence, were, not unlike Ethiopia, targets of colonial ambitions of European powers.

Like the present Third World countries and, perhaps, like non-nuclear states, the sovereignty of Ethiopia was true only in the

juridical sense of the term. In other words, Ethiopia lacked the resources with which it could assert such formal attributes of a state as equality, independence and territorial integrity against the European powers which continued to pose a threat against its until 1944. Thus, though there were earlier attempts at dividing her into British, French and Italian spheres of influence, the real threat to her independence came in 1936. Resentful of her humiliation at Adwa, fascist Italy launched its offensive against Ethiopia from its African possessions of Eritrea and Italian Somaliland; this time, Italy had the advantage of modern weapons like planes and poison gas with the help of which she tore into the Ethiopian forces and occupied the country. Land-locked and starved of European weapons by a French blockade of Djibouti, Ethiopia's patriots resorted to guerrilla resistance while Haile Selassie went to Europe in self-imposed exile and, from that vantage point, launched a diplomatic offensive against Italy.

With the outbreak of World War Two in the European theatre and with Mussolini's joining the Axis, Italy was confronted by the Allied Powers both at home and in her colonial possessions. In 1941 Britain, at the head of the Allied Forces, liberated Ethiopia and reinstated Haile Selassie. Britain followed this by imposing a number of restrictions on the Ethiopian government which amounted to reducing the country to the status of a British *de facto* protectorate. This gave rise to the fear in Addis Ababa that Britain intended to treat Ethiopia as an enemy-occupied territory, which would not have been altogether inconsistent with her recognition of Italy's occupation of Ethiopia by an Anglo-Italian treaty of 1938. As it happened, Britain did not pursue the restrictions she imposed on Ethiopia with much vigour; after some diplomatic wrangling and a degree of US pressure, the restrictions began to be relaxed as of 1942.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, Britain was insistent that the Somali-inhabited regions of the Ogaden and Haud which she had brought under her control should be treated as enemy-occupied territories, a fact Ethiopia was made to recognize by treaty in 1942. After a lot of protests on the part of Ethiopia, another Anglo-Ethiopian treaty was concluded in 1944. That treaty recognized Ethiopia's sovereignty over the Ogaden and Haud subject to their continued British administration, since Britain insisted that they were necessary for the prosecution of World War Two. Despite this

understanding, in 1945 Britain submitted the Ogaden and Haud for disposal by the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Great Powers. As the proposal was not greeted with favour, the British government went public and declared that the idea had been submitted to the council only because of its sympathy for the Somali people and that the proposal would be dropped as of then. However, the Ogaden was not returned to Ethiopia until 1948 and the Haud area until 1955, three years and ten years after the end of the war respectively.<sup>9</sup>

In 1941, Eritrea too came under British administration as enemy-occupied territory. Britain sought (or it was accused of having sought) to expand its adjoining colony of the Sudan by hanging on to Eritrea. For her part, Italy, which had made its peace with the Allied Powers in 1943, sought the return of its ex-colony of Eritrea. Ethiopia sought 'reunification' because of her need for access to the sea, her claim that the territory used to belong to her and because the peoples of Ethiopia shared the same historical, linguistic and religious heritage with the peoples of the territory. Some Eritreans supported the British, some the Italians and some the Ethiopian position, while others were in favour of outright independence. The question of the disposal of Eritrea was then entertained by the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Great Powers between 1945 and 1948. However, they could not agree on the question, not least because of the onset of the cold war which was beginning both to frustrate their attempts at a post-war settlement of European issues, and to spill over to extra-European questions like that of Eritrea. Finally, they agreed to submit the question to the General Assembly of the UN, which, after several years of deliberation, decided to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia as of 1952.<sup>10</sup>

#### THE MODERNIZING AUTOCRACY

Medieval Ethiopia was very much an agrarian society composed of a mass of cultivating peasants and a surplus-appropriating upper class. The northern socio-economic order was introduced into the southern highlands during Menelik's conquests of the region in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and superimposed on the pre-existing agrarian system about which very little is known. Though important as animal-rearing communities, the nomadic peoples who inhabited the vast expanses of the arid and semi-arid

lowlands along the Red Sea coast and Somali frontier have not been absorbed into the northern socio-economic order.

Though there were important pockets of tenancy in the north, the bulk of the peasants had a title to their holdings called *rist* which entitled the holders to use their lands and pass them on to their heirs. Contrary to popular misconception, there is growing evidence to show that the *rist*-holders also had the right to sell their land though in reality they rarely exercised that right because they depended on their holdings for their livelihood and because if they sold their plots, they would lose the right to claim a share of the family *rist* land. Since the land was owned by the cultivator, therefore, the major form of surplus appropriation in the north was tribute, known as *gult* (fief). By contrast, the major form of surplus appropriation in the south was rent collected by landlords from the peasants. This arose from the fact that the conquerors of the south and their descendants, who were probably given tribute rights initially, managed to register the land and claim it in the form of ownership and reduce the cultivators to tenancy in the course of the twentieth century. In addition to tribute and rent, the peasants of both northern and southern Ethiopia were subjected to *corvée* and to presenting gifts on special occasions.<sup>11</sup>

Further, the *rist*-holders paid a tenth of their produce by way of tax. In 1944 this was replaced by the payment of rates based on the size and quality of the land and in 1967 by a progressive income tax. Though the same obligations existed for the landlords of the south, there was apparently a wide practice of shifting their tax duties onto the tenants. Finally, the peasants of the north and south and, when possible, the nomads of the lowlands paid tax on livestock, salt and trade.

The upper class which lived off the surplus appropriations was composed of what could be called the gentry and the nobility. More often than not, the gentry were state functionaries who were responsible for local administration, justice and tax collection. In return for their services, the gentry were entitled to a share of the tax they collected and sometimes to a tribute; often, they would have their own land in which case they could also be beneficiaries of *corvée* and rent.<sup>12</sup>

Superimposed on the gentry were the nobility who were primarily a class of warriors. The monarch gave rights of tribute over certain lands to members of the nobility in exchange for a

commitment to make available, in time of war, their 'private' armies as well as soldiers spontaneously raised from among the gentry and peasants. In addition to the land tenure and tax systems, these 'feudal institutions' of the north were introduced to the south by Menelik's conquest of the region towards the end of the nineteenth century, giving rise to a new class of gentry and nobility often referred to as the *neftegna*.

A constant feature of the weakness of the medieval Ethiopian state was the fact that these regional nobles who were in charge of military and administrative functions tended to assert independence against the monarch. The monarch counterbalanced the influence of the nobility with whatever political skills and manoeuvrings he could master and with the many royal garrisons (*chewa*) which were commanded by his loyal *rases* and *asmaches*.<sup>13</sup> Except for the period between the 1770s and the 1850s when the centrifugal forces prevailed, central rule continued to be the order ever since. Despite this inherent weakness in the state, strong monarchs of medieval Ethiopia were able to use these institutions to conquer vast territories and it was the same institutions that the monarch, from Tewodros in the middle of the nineteenth century to Haile Selassie in the twentieth century, used to create present-day Ethiopia to defeat Italy at Adwa in 1896 and to fight and resist it during its occupation of the country from 1936 to 1941.

In the twentieth century, the nobility was to find its position undermined on account of the demands of modernization set in motion by European expansionism. The major reason for this was the state's creation of a modern civilian and military bureaucracy and the increasing dependence on it rather than the traditional elite. No doubt, modern education plays a pivotal role in the building up of such a bureaucracy. The first modern school was established by Menelik in Addis Ababa (Menelik II School), a school that Haile Selassie himself attended as a boy. Graduates of the Menelik and Mission schools, as well as individuals hand-picked by the government, were sent abroad for further education and returned in the early part of the century to constitute a class of radical advocates of reform in the social, economic and political fields.<sup>14</sup> Called 'Japanizers' or 'the young of Ethiopia', these precursors of the radical civilian elite of the 1960s and 1970s held government positions that required modern education and

backed Haile Selassie in his drive to adopt progressive policies which were opposed by the traditional nobility. It appears very few of the militants survived the Italian occupation of the country and those that did seem to have fallen out with the monarch on matters of policy as well as the question of his sojourn in Britain during the occupation. After the war, however, the monarch devoted a great deal of attention to the building of schools and institutions of higher education; for a time, he appointed himself minister of education, visited every school at least once a year, gave one of his palaces to the university etc. The kind of education pursued was very elitist; partly as a result of this and partly because of the belated introduction and slow growth of educational institutions, by no means all children of school age were provided with access to schools. In 1970, the number of enrolled secondary school students was 70,000 while the equivalent figure for university students in 1974 was 6,000 with a further 2,000 attending universities in other countries. The civil service, which was the most important employer of the school and university graduates, was gradually yielding to modernization under their influence. By 1974, therefore, 20,000 school and 6,000 university graduates were working in the civil service. The bulk of the remaining civil servants, totalling about 100,000 in 1974,<sup>15</sup> had primary school education and/or church education, the latter of which only enabled them to read and write the official language (Amharic).

More important to the decline of the state's dependence on the nobility was the creation of a modern army which had been begun in the 1920s when Haile Selassie was the most powerful man in the government as regent and heir to the throne (1916 to 1930) and pursued vigorously when he became king (1930 to 1974). The first to be established was the royal bodyguard in the 1920s, with the help of a Belgian military mission engaged for the purpose and with the training of officers in France. This was followed in 1934 by the establishment of the Genet Military Academy of Holeta. After the Italian occupation, the British helped in organizing and financing the army (1941 to 1951) followed by the Americans and others thereafter. The royal bodyguard was reconstituted with pre-occupation graduates of the Holeta Academy, the Police Abadina was established in the 1940s, the Harar Academy in 1957, and the air force and navy were greatly expanded thereafter. The assistance of different countries was employed in the running of

these establishments: Indians for the Harar Academy and the bodyguard, Swedes for the air force, Norwegians for the navy and the Israelis for the police commandos and for other security units.<sup>16</sup>

The Holeta Academy recruited its intake from among non-commissioned officers who could read and write the national official language (Amharic) and who could do their basic arithmetic; however, in its two years of training it offered no academic subjects whatsoever. Whereas the Police Abadina College was no different from the Holeta Academy in this regard, the others, including the Harar Academy, the air force and the navy, recruited some of the best school graduates of the country and provided them with an academic background equivalent to three years of university education in addition to the usual military training in strategy, law, and the like. By 1974, the army consisted of 45,000 men including four divisions of infantry, one tank battalion, one airborne infantry battalion, four armoured car squadrons, four artillery battalions, two engineer battalions, fifty medium tanks, twenty light tanks, forty armed personnel carriers, eighty-six armed cars, six helicopters, a 6,800 mobile emergency force, 1,200 frontier guards, a 3,200 commando force as well as 9,200 paramilitary territorials in active force.<sup>17</sup>

The civilian and military bureaucracy was extremely expensive to maintain in several respects. In the first place, quite apart from the costs involved in running modern institutions like colleges, academic institutions, hospitals and the like, the amount paid to members of the new elite by way of salary was much more than the income of the direct producers of wealth (the peasants and workers). For example, whereas the pay of a university graduate was a minimum of 500 dollars per month and that of a school graduate half of that, the per capita income of the country was a mere 150 dollars a year. Secondly, there was the expectation of the members of the modern elite not only to be paid above the level of inflation but also to receive an ever-increasing income in order to promote their prestige and standard of living. Thirdly, the need to import weapons created dependence of the state on other powers and on exportable goods; whatever could not be paid for by the export of coffee, hides, oil seeds and other less important commodities, had to be made good by the generosity of external powers. In addition, economic development became, in its own



right, the tenet and ideology of the new elite. In other words, the economy had to be made to generate more wealth to meet these demands and others which, politically, were arguably less important in the short run but in terms of the plight of the people in the long term were even more pressing.

The state was in a dilemma with regard to its agrarian strategy, if it can be said to have had one. There was very little it could do concerning the extensive lowlands which the nomads used for watering and grazing their herds, short of developing certain parts of it through the granting of concession agreements to foreign investors since they required capital-intensive projects beyond the means of the government. Foreign investors would probably not have been easily attracted for this purpose. The *rist* lands of the north, which were arguably equivalent to a system of freehold, were fairly divided up by the peasants but extremely subdivided and fragmented. The only possible land reform in these areas was either nationalization or collectivization; while the wisdom of such a policy is questionable, the *ancien régime* was in any case not predisposed to these policies. The state, therefore, was reduced to providing fertilizers and insecticides made available by courtesy of the UN organizations during the 1960s. By contrast, the state could have acted on the land which was being cultivated through tenancy agreements between the farmers and landlords but, instead, it prevaricated on the question.

There were at least three trends discernible in the late 1960s, which were not necessarily consistent. In the Ministry of Land Reform and Administration there was a proposal to place a ceiling on the amount of land an individual could own without paying excessive tax on it; this was obviously intended to result in a certain amount of redistribution of land in areas where there were concentrations of land holdings in individual hands. Conversely, in practice the opposite applied: the vigorous commercialization of agriculture pursued in several areas of the country in the late 1960s, made possible by international public capital, led to the eviction of thousands of tenants and poor farmers. However, there is no question that this policy actually led to unprecedented levels of productivity. Yet again, there was another draft legislation which was finally submitted to parliament intended to regulate tenant-landlord relations; if adopted, this might have put an end to eviction of tenants. However, it would also have acted against

the *laissez-faire* commercialization policy of the state. Coffee which mostly grew in the south-west and which constituted by far the most important foreign exchange earner did not show a marked rise in productivity in the 1960s and 1970s. It was not a good match to the Middle East's oil. In effect, agriculture was, on the whole, neither in a position to provide the raw materials required by industry nor generate sufficient taxable surplus to meet the increasing requirements of the modernizing state.<sup>18</sup>

Arguably, the achievements in the industrial sector over the same period were more impressive than the agricultural sector. Though the government launched three successive five-year plans starting in 1957, the policy pursued in relation to the growth of industry was also basically *laissez-faire* and the plans were mere indicators of targets that it was hoped would be met by the private as well as public sectors. In fact, most of the big industries which were actually developed by multinationals (for instance the St George Beer Brewery, the Ethiopian Airlines, the Wenji Sugar Factory and the Melloti Beer Brewery) predate the five-year plans. More important than these, at least in terms of creating employment, were the intermediate industries that were established mostly by resident Italians, Greeks and Armenians in the 1960s. The explanation for the sudden increase in the number of these industries which included garages, food-processing plants, restaurants, pulp industries, as well as import-export businesses was most probably the adoption in 1964 of a liberal investment guarantee proclamation with generous provisions on the expatriation of capital. By and large, nationals were limited to the retail business. In the 1960s, manufacturing production expanded at an average annual rate of 11.1 per cent with higher rates registered in the later part of the decade; the labour force grew from 28,340 in 1961 to 51,312 in 1971.<sup>19</sup> However, all this was an extremely modest step towards a capitalist transformation of the national economy; 51,312 manufacturers in a population of about 32 million is not only insignificant but had also come very late. The inadequacy of the rate of growth is perhaps best reflected by the fact that there was still a great deal of unemployment. By the end of the 1960s, school graduates were also beginning to be unemployed and the fear of unemployment for university graduates was on the horizon from the early 1960s.

Thus, the national economy did not live up to the expectations