Chapter IV

Eurocentric versus Ethio-centric Approaches to Ethiopia's Modernization Lag: The Concept of Derailment

After studying the link between survival and modernization, the next logical step is to provide concrete answers to the question of why Ethiopia's impressive record of survival failed to initiate a successful process of modernization. In fact, the greater the resolution to survive, the more determined should have been the drive toward modernization. Yet, not only is Ethiopia still ranked among the poorest countries, but it is also entangled in numerous internal conflicts, the primary consequence of which is an unending political instability threatening its very existence. However, before delving into the reasons for the Ethiopian failure to modernize, we must make sure that the analysis is sufficiently free from the drawbacks of the Eurocentric account, that is, from an account solely based on the self-assumed normative standing of the West. Indeed, in speaking of failure, the study commits to providing a native explanation, the very one that derives the failure from the choices made by Ethiopian elite groups.

The Eurocentric Paradigm

To highlight the difference between the Eurocentric explanation and a native-based approach, let us recall the main tenets of Eurocentrism, as laid down in Chapter I. Its basic assumptions stem from the Western construct of world history and its portrayal of non-Western cultures as congenitally deficient and backward. The construct stipulates that emancipation from barbarism and ignorance can only come through indigenous cultures being towed by the Western engine. The colonial project and its execution rested, precisely, on this idea that non-Western peoples are incapable of pulling themselves out of what Westerners label "barbarism" and "ignorance." Hence the characterization of colonialism as a civilizing mission, which is none other than the assignment that the West took up to, first, wipe out all obstructing beliefs and customs, and then inject into the minds of indigenous peoples the rudiments of civilized life. The Western theoretical scheme turns Western values and institutions into universal norms, thereby creating the framework for portraying cultures not exhibiting such characteristics as retarded. Clearly, the Western perspective provides no provision for apprehending the non-technicalness and communalism of non-Western cultures—as opposed to Western technicalness and individualism—as orientations imparted by different existential choices rather than by the congenital inferiority of the peoples who adhere to the cultures.

The detrimental consequences of the Western construct of world history are thus obvious. It transforms other cultures into representations of Western culture, whose consequence is that their intrinsic natures are perverted. The purpose is to objectify the cultures, that is, to insert them into a theoretical framework that both distorts and degrades them. The critical outcome of this

operation is that non-Western elites internalize, both through formal education and acculturation, the Western description of their cultures. In so doing, they endorse the idea that they are deficient, inferior, and unable to pull their countries out of the state that they themselves see as "backwardness." The uprooting impact of this internalized discourse is hard to resist: not only does it alienate indigenous elites from their cultures, but it also instills a hidden resentment toward their own history and traditions. The resentment has a profound decentering effect: the West becomes the normative model, the absolute reference, and the center around which all other countries revolve as peripheries. Even for the revolutionary Karl Marx, the normative status of the West was an undisputable fact since, for him too, "the bourgeoisie . . . draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilization."[1]

Given that whatever belongs to indigenous peoples is classified as irremediably flawed, modernization requires, first, that their leaders throw away their traditional beliefs and values and, second, that they buckle down to the serious work of copying and implementing Western values and institutions. What else is this requirement signifying but the literal application of the basic principle of modernization theory as expressed in the maxim "tradition versus modernity"? Yet, there is nothing else in the principle but the project of empowering the West by decentering and marginalizing non-Western countries. The proof of this is found in the narratives about the modernization of Western countries. As specified in Chapter I, the modernization of Western countries is described in terms of renaissance, renovation of tradition, less so as liquidation of tradition. The paradigm that turns the imitation of the West into a sine qua non for the modernization of non-Western societies openly asserts that there is only one path to modernity, and that is the Western path. The theory is therefore totally adamant about the idea of multiple modernities, that is, the idea that each culture being unique, owing to the impacts of a specific history, environment, and dissimilar foundational choices, should strike out its own road to modernization.

The recognition of the need to particularize modernization exchanges the notion of one type of modernity for the more promising avenue of multiple modernities. As a matter of fact, with the spread of globalization, some scholars have even started to think that the notion of conflicting modernities is better expressive of the ongoing reality than just multiple modernities. According to them, the trend of history indicates that the different forms of modernity are not simply coexisting; they also compete for the build-up of more power and the acquisition of greater influence in the world. Thus, on the one hand, many Western globalists expect "the increasing homogenization of all human societies, regardless of their historical origins or cultural inheritances" through the global triumph of liberal democracy. [2] On the other hand, however, scholars like Samuel Huntington assert that "the clash of civilizations will dominate global politics."[3] Indeed, there is no denying that rival alternatives to the Western model, like the Chinese version of modernity, nascent modern Islamism, and many other authoritarian brands, vie with the principles of liberal democracy. That the West, far from being the model to imitate, is an adversary, posits the issue of modernization in terms very distant from the precept "tradition versus modernity." Moreover, the idea of conflicting modernities does no more than confirm that survival is, indeed, the underlying motive of modernization. Obviously, cultures that are different from the West cannot hope to survive unless they develop social systems that can match the Western material power.

Obstacles to Change

As could be expected, in agreement with the Western explanation of why non-Western countries fail to modernize, most scholars attribute the failure of Ethiopian modernization to the radical incompatibility of Ethiopian traditional values and social system with modernity. From what is said in the previous paragraph, we can draw the inference that there is more than a mere oversight in the analysis of those scholars who find the Ethiopian society inimical to modern values and methods. They are all victims of the Eurocentric paradigm of modernization theory. A pertinent example of this victimhood is Gebrehiwot Baykadagn. Fully endorsing the Western evolutionary scheme, he writes: "If we follow the research of European scholars, humanity attained its present level of understanding and wealth not at once but in stages proceeding from one to the other."[4] The assertion ratifies all the tenets of Eurocentrism, namely, the leading role of Europe, the barbarism and backwardness of non-Western peoples, and the idea that modernization is to catch up by copying the West. Let us not deceive ourselves by thinking that the students and intellectuals who inspired and spearheaded the revolutionary upheavals of the early 70s had a different explanation than Gebrehiwot and other early intellectuals. The ideology that propelled them, namely, Marxism-Leninism, was just a radicalized version of Eurocentrism. For them, too, defective characteristics have interrupted the process of the progressive march of history in Ethiopia. The only difference is that the socialist revolutions in East Europe and Asia, and not the West, are leading history's progressive course.

In Chapter I, we alluded to attempts in Africa and elsewhere to break out of the Eurocentric entrapment by the defense both of diversity and the notion of diverse roads to modernization. This is not the path that most scholars took to understand the Ethiopian predicament. Instead, relying on what they considered to be the facts of Ethiopian history, they endeavored to modify slightly the Eurocentric paradigm to make its application fit the case of Ethiopia. Unable to deny Ethiopia's past advancements in many areas, they looked for blockages that hindered the continuation of its progressive course. For most scholars, the negative changes that halted the Ethiopian advances occurred either long before Emperor Menelik or as a result of the southern expansion. Whatever the differences, for all these scholars, understanding the reason why Ethiopia lagged behind Europe is identifying obstacles.

For Addis Hiwet, for instance, the main factors responsible for Ethiopian backwardness are "(1) the long, protracted absence of social peace; (2) the character or the mode of life of the dominant, warrior class; and (3) the slave trade."[5] With a slightly different emphasis, Gebru Tareke assigns the serious internal conflicts tearing the country apart to the fact that "Ethiopian leaders have been far less successful in nation-building than in state creation and consolidation."[6] Generally speaking, the hegemonic position of the Amhara elite and the subsequent inability of Ethiopian leaders to accommodate ethnic and religious diversity on an equal footing are said to be the principal causes of the lack of social peace. A society so sharply divided along ethnic and religious lines will exhaust its strength and energy in internal quarrels and violent clashes rather than embark on constructive efforts to promote modernization.

To be consistent with the acclimatized version of Eurocentrism, many scholars consider the negative functioning of the traditional political system as the core obstacle. Because it encouraged an incessant power game, it stood, they say, in the way of political stability. By instituting a permanent power conflict, the political system nurtured a culture prone to constant intrigue, mutual suspicion, and clientelism. Even during times of relative stability, competition

among claimants often led to civil wars, and this weakened the empire and deepened its backwardness. Gebrehiwot is an important proponent of the theory ascribing Ethiopia's socioeconomic retardation to the frequent propensity of the political system to wreck social peace. According to him, the brilliant civilization of Aksum and its Abyssinian extension soon lost their dynamism and deteriorated into a stagnant system immersed in increasing poverty and an arrested state of knowledge and techniques of production. He writes, "The obelisks testify that at the time they were erected, the Ethiopian people had attained prosperity and power. If they were not hampered by obstacles, in between, the period and extent of prosperity would have been longer and greater."[7] How did such deterioration come about? Gebrehiwot's answer is straightforward and categorical: the lack of social peace, and that alone, explains why the great potential of the Aksumite civilization was interrupted. In a short review of Ethiopian history, he shows how continuous wars and pillages due to internal religious conflicts, foreign invasions, and regional rivalries for the control of the imperial power halted the promising march toward progress. "Looting and pillaging, which were learnt in that period, are prevalent even today," he says.[8] In other words, in addition to weakening the imperial institution, the rise of warlordism set up entrenched rival regional powers and induced a mindset that valued war and looting at the expense of peace, production, and knowledge. Emphasizing and summarizing his finding, Gebrehiwot writes, in Ethiopia, "*the main obstacle to knowledge and wealth is war*."[9]

For Afework Gebre Yesus, too, the major impediment to the progressive development of the Aksumite civilization has been the predominance of the warrior class and its warlike values. Its major consequences were the absence of social peace and stability, the mistreatment of the working people, and the disdain for intellectual works. He writes, "The authorities of this country eat, drink, sleep and fatten themselves up like Easter sheep, and that at the expense of the property of the poor people, who are continuously and mercilessly robbed by them."[10] Because of the pernicious behaviors of kings and governors, a rich and beautiful country is destitute and unable to progress. Afework touches on what is, according to him, the main reason for the lack of social peace and progress, namely, the absence of a hereditary monarchy in Ethiopia. The abandonment of the principle of hereditary transmission of power deprived Ethiopia of political stability by preventing an orderly transition each time a king passed away. In Ethiopia, Afework notes, "the replacement of a monarch entails a ferocious fight until one comes out winner."[11] Worse yet, it led to the enthronement of usurpers who used terror and plunder to stay in power, the only way by which they could silence their opponents and reward their followers and soldiers at the expense of ordinary people.

The detrimental fallouts of the political system extend to the economic organization. The *gebar* system, scholars say, was an economic system opposed to innovation and improvement. An economic system in which, in addition to being unprotected by private ownership, land was burdened with heavy taxes, offered no incentive to improve productivity. The system did not benefit the producer, as raising outputs meant more taxes. In Europe, the practice of granting fiefs, that is, of giving landholdings allowing lords and vassals the direct use of granted lands and the appropriation of the incomes accruing from the use, progressively evolved into hereditary holdings. This evolution gave the feudal class the incentive to raise productivity. In Ethiopia, grafted on a communal system of landholding, the tax system, far from providing incentives for improvement, created a state of mind exclusively concerned with collecting taxes. Uninvolved in production, lords were only interested in amassing as much wealth as they could without any concern for prospective investment. This reluctance to invest was further motivated by the "insecurity of *gult* tenures" subsequent to the revocability of appointments.[12] Additionally, in

depriving the system of any invigorating appeal for enrichment through hard work and productive investment, the non-institutionalization of private property blocked the emergence of a "propertied peasant stratum."[13]

Among the prominent obstacles, scholars also include the all-dimensional and extreme conservatism of the Ethiopian Church and its teachings. Beyond the controversies surrounding the church (refer to the previous chapter), one thing cannot be disputed, namely, its powerful influence on ordinary people as well as on elites in traditional Ethiopia. The fact that no Ethiopian monarch was able to seize or retain power without the support of the church was a clear demonstration of its authority. A major source of its influence came from the complete monopoly of the church on the traditional system of education. In light of the absence of any noticeable and lasting reformist movement, the monopoly meant the freezing of knowledge in general and social ideas in particular to a medieval level. Because of this monopoly, Afework does not hesitate to say that "stupidity and ignorance rule Ethiopia."[14] When so a powerful institution openly and categorically opposes progress, the likelihood of change becomes close to impossible.

Take the case of Emperor Tewodros. He was the first to understand the extent to which the extreme conservatism of the church combined with the ignorance of its clergy acted as a formidable drag on the attempt to modernize Ethiopia. The reforms that he had in mind included a reduction of its wealth through taxation and even confiscation of the vast lands it possessed. Tewodros paid dearly for his reformist attempts, since one of the reasons for his defeat against the British was, admittedly, the loss of the church's support. For theoreticians, the fate of Tewodros makes it quite clear that modernization is unthinkable so long as the church's powerful influence is not neutralized. This neutralization is all the more crucial because the church is one of the pillars for the perpetuation of the power of monarchy and nobility. *Struggle*, the journal of the radicalized Ethiopian students of the 60s fully echoed this analysis: the power of the aristocracy was, it says, "further enhanced through the invaluable services rendered by religious organizations. Thus, the masses are chained and downtrodden by fear of naked force on the one hand and ignorance bred chiefly by religion on the other."[15]

Modernizing Potentials of Traditional Ethiopia

The obstacles to modernization that scholars enumerate remain a one-sided approach so long as they are not accompanied by a more balanced view. After all, the long survival of Ethiopia does not square with the idea of a completely defective society. Let us begin with the lack of social peace, since it is believed to have been the most important obstacle to modernization. It is correct to underline the impact of regional and ethnic feuds, but without forgetting that the country would not have survived for so long if Ethiopians did not at the same time share a common national commitment. While many scholars admit that the sense of unity had prevailed in northern Ethiopia, they say that the annexation of the south created a completely different situation: peoples with different cultural backgrounds, dissimilar histories, and ethnic origins were forcefully incorporated into the empire. The incorporation naturally led to widespread and ceaseless ethnic conflicts that retarded modernization.

Without entering the debate generated by the various ideological constructions designed to shore up the assimilation of the southern expansion to colonial conquest, let us reiterate the naked truth, which is that the incorporation actually thwarted colonial designs against Ethiopia. It is hardly believable that the southern peoples would support the independence of Ethiopia without feeling part of it, even if the system was wanting in terms of equal treatment. In Chapter II, we

indicate that Ethiopia's survival owes a great deal to the southern expansion. Both in terms of expanding the resources available to the state and providing an additional fighting force, the southern expansion considerably strengthened the defensive capacity of Ethiopia against colonial threats. The following statements taken from Raymond Jonas's study give a taste of the contribution of just one Oromo contingent to the victory of Adwa. Jonas speaks of "Ethiopian infantry" being "covered by Oromo cavalry."[16] A little further, he adds, "the appearance of Oromo cavrymen . . . had a notably dispiriting effect" on the Italian army.[17]

The explanation for this sense of belonging despite the initial differences is that the Ethiopian identity is not a lineage-based identity, given that allegiance to the transcendent authority of the emperor and the universalist religion of Christianity (at least until the revolution of 1974) defined it. The Christian message transcends ethnicity, race, and geography and, as we saw, Ethiopian emperorship was not lineage-based. So that, both allegiances excluded no one in the sense that sharing the same ethnic identity was not a condition of membership in the Ethiopian community. In fact, with the integration of southern peoples, the Ethiopian identity was increasingly becoming a melting pot for various cultures. This ability to integrate different cultures shows at the same time its potential to evolve in the direction of modern changes. The fact that people were Ethiopian, not because of their ethnic affiliation, but because they were members of a supra-tribal community, is proof of the modernizing ability of Ethiopianism. This plasticity of Ethiopian identity provides a pertinent answer to all those many scholars, especially those of Oromo extraction, who wonder why, considering the coercive nature of Menelik's expansion, the southern peoples came to the defense of Ethiopia. Indeed, both the plasticity of the identity and the possibility of social mobility attracted ambitious and talented community leaders, who mobilized native followers and joined Menelik's army. The many southerners who moved into the various echelons of power testify to the emergence of new southern elites that incorporated into the Ethiopian power system with all the benefits accruing from the integration.

As to the charge against the incessant competition for power inherent in the traditional form of social mobility, it does not alter the fact that it had a modernizing potential. All modernization theorists agree that the prevalence of social mobility over rigid social stratifications demarcates modernity. It is only when people occupy places in accordance with their individual merits rather than seniority, birth, lineage, or confession that modernity takes root. As we saw, even though the criteria controlling the mobility were not modern, positions in Ethiopia were appointments, not hereditary rights, and as such depended on services to the state. This mobility enabled the integration of non-Amhara individuals into the ruling elite, just as it instituted a form of competition that modernization would have taken up and developed further if the ruling class had shown a serious modernizing commitment.

In connection with the absence of social peace, war and the cultivation of warlike values have been accused of hindering the modernization effort. Doubtless, war is destructive by definition; it is also contemptuous of the values of hard productive works, inventiveness, and democracy, that is, of all the characteristics vital for modernization. Facts, however, do not support this one-sided judgment on war and warlike values. World history associates great periods of invention and change with the need to wage war. This is so true that it has been said, "War on the continent of Europe provided the principal motive force for change between the end of the seventeenth century and the Revolution."[18] In effect, the beginning of modern science is closely tied up with the needs of warfare and conquest, such as those related to navigation and firearms, not to mention the fact that Europe, which invented modernity and accomplished most of the inventions, was the theatre of continuous and devastating wars more than any other continent.

Countries that possessed new means of warfare became powerful, while latecomers scurried to acquire the mastery of those weapons. This is not surprising if one keeps in mind the link between modernization and survival. A warlike society is, therefore, in no way at a disadvantage. Not only does the need to possess powerful means of war provide a vigorous incentive for modernization, but it also convinces the warrior class to read into economic achievements a refurbished expression of its own traditional commitment and values. A good example of this is the rapid modernization of Japan owing to the enthusiastic conversion of the Samurai warriors into entrepreneurs.

Another feature associated with the political system that is blamed for the retardation of Ethiopian society is authoritarianism. True enough, for many theoreticians, the opposition between tradition and modernity stems from the negative role of authoritarianism. What could be more repressive of the features of modernity, like innovation and change, than authoritarianism? Once again, however, world history does not confirm this analysis. The countries that modernized were authoritarian societies, in fact, the most puritan of them taking the lead, as evidenced by the connection between Protestantism and capitalism. Considering this undeniable fact, we can even say: the more authoritarian a society, the greater is its potential for modernization. As Emmanuel Todd puts it, one necessary component of countries' ability to modernize is "a certain authoritarianism . . . [that] rules out their close adherence to liberal values."[19] The Protestant world, the Jewish system that European countries inherited through the adoption of Christianity, the presence of Germanic culture and, outside Europe, the non-liberal cultures of Japan, South Korea, and China provide concrete cases of authoritarian societies that modernized successfully. Authority was decisive in all these cases because transition to modernity cannot occur without a cultural disposition for discipline, dedication, delayed gratification, and leadership respect. The conclusion is obvious: if authoritarianism did not hamper modernization in other parts of the world, neither could it be blamed for preventing the modernization of Ethiopia.

It follows that the negative role ascribed to the authority that the Ethiopian Church had on people and elites suffers from one-sidedness. To be sure, the ecclesiastic authority had a stifling impact on the progress of knowledge and social ideals. However, the haste to conclude that it was devoid of any valuable potential overlooks the connection, noted above, between authoritarianism and modernization. To begin with, as is widely acknowledged, churches and religious practices in Europe have been accused of far more misdeeds than the Ethiopian Church. Yet, these wrongs did not prevent religion from being fully a participant in the modernization of Europe to the point that many scholars have even interpreted modernity as a progressive implementation of Christian beliefs and ethics. True, it can be argued that, unlike the Ethiopian Church, religious beliefs in Europe went through periods of self-evaluation and reformation that made them more responsive to modernization. Still, some such argument must take into consideration the different conditions of Christianity in Ethiopia and Europe: the threat of Islamic encirclement and isolation did not allow the Ethiopian Church the luxury of self-examination and internal splits. The objective was more about surviving, standing fast, as implied in the injunctions of the *Kibre Negast*, than about responding to mundane solicitations. The duty-mindedness flowing from the assignment to stand fast and the attendant authoritarianism and obedient disposition could have been formidable assets if Ethiopian leaders and elites had steered modernization in the right direction.

The same can be said about the other often criticized feature of traditional Ethiopia, namely, the central belief in *idil*. The wrong approach is to associate *idil* with fatalism and passivity. We rejected as spurious the interpretation of the belief in terms of fatalism, given its role in promoting social mobility. *Idil,* we argued, functioned like a calling urging individuals to be more daring and ambitious. Though not fully identifiable with what is called the deviant mentality because of

deficiency in creativity, yet the *idil* mystique possessed some of the aspects of deviancy, notably it harbored discontent and encouraged quest. In fact, a more open and differentiated society, such as modernity is, would have been quite suitable for *idil* hunters. With its capacity to open more opportunities for self-realization, modernity could have diverted the exclusive path of war deeds toward other more productive pursuits, like economic, artistic, scholarly, etc., objectives, thus replacing the quest for power over people with the quest for power over things. This could have happened if, instead of being confined to the spiritual, the religious component of *idil* was summoned to seek validation through material conquests.

Derailment versus Obstacles

Based on the above discussions, this much can be said: while it is true to state that some of the attributes of Ethiopian traditional life were inimical to modernity, there were many more that could have been quite supportive of it. The inability of Ethiopia to achieve modernization remains, therefore, an enigma. Solving this enigma is nothing other than explaining why the strong Ethiopian will to survive did not see modernization as the best and only medium to guarantee survival, especially to counter colonial and neocolonial threats. In view of the proven inspirational role of survival in the modernization process, the logical approach, as already intimated in the analysis of the southern expansion, is to ascribe the Ethiopian failure to a derailment of the survival will. Imputing the failure to the inherent defects of the society, in addition to being no more than a borrowed Eurocentric reading, goes nowhere, since the so-called defects can also be viewed as assets. Hence the need to effect a paradigm shift, which says that the obstacles originated not so much from tradition per se as from a skewed encounter of tradition with modern elements.

The straying is easily explained: the integration of tradition with modernity did not take the course of positive sociocultural changes through mutual adaptation, the consequence being that tradition failed to assimilate properly with modern ideas and practices. Instead of facilitating befitting changes, the encounter with modernity translated into beliefs and practices flowing from the battening of traditional features on modern elements. Since in this kind of relationship, the traditional uses modern elements for its own aggrandizement, the outcome is that traditional features lose the system of restraints under which they operated in the past. Without the cultural and institutional protections and ethical restraints, which used to safeguard their worthiness for the traditional system, the path allowing traditional features to subsume modern elements cannot avoid the formation of a severe imbalance, even anomaly. In going down the road of subsumption rather than adjustment with modernity, the features give up moderation, and this turns their traditional worthiness into modern vices. This skewed encounter can take various forms, like traditionalism, Westernization, or articulation (the meanings of these concepts are discussed in Chapter I). All these forms of change create social imbalances that produce harmful results. In the case of Ethiopia, the most appropriate concept that defines its path to modernization, both during Haile Selassie's regime and, with some variations, during the two post-imperial regimes, is articulation. Let us analyze how, in these three regimes, traditional features used modern elements to break away from moderation, thereby creating the anomaly of a modern setting functioning without the attendant political and cultural components.

First of all, the theory imputing the failure to modernize to the conflict, the incompatibility between Ethiopia's traditional features and modernity leaves us with some unanswered questions. Thus, considering that Haile Selassie ruled for more than four decades, the argument according to which a fundamental incompatibility was all along incapacitating the regime looks frail, to say the

least. For, it is one thing to underline the incompatibility, quite another to explain how the two parts came together to form a particular social formation despite their antagonism. The latter did not prevent the system from working, even if the results were disappointing for those who expected better outcomes. Moreover, the attribution of the failure to modernize to the inadequacy of tradition does no more than take up, as we insisted, the negative and disparaging views of the West on whatever is not Western. The explanation makes sense only if one endorses the Eurocentric paradigm and absolutely discards the existence of different civilizations that pursued diverse goals in the course of human history. Thus, as shown in previous chapters, the injunction to stand fast in the guardianship of Orthodox Christianity, as opposed to the Western resolution to become, in the words of Descartes, "masters and owners of nature," was Ethiopia's specific mission.[20] Lastly, the incompatibility theory has yet to explain why the expected modernization did not materialize once a radical revolution removed the alleged backward and reluctant traditional features. The two successive regimes that came after Haile Selassie did not do better in terms of modernization, despite their forcefully claimed determination to remove the obstacles standing in the way of Ethiopia's modernization.

A better approach is the one that starts by admitting the sui generis nature of the imperial and post-imperial regimes. The admission endows the regimes with their own proper features and modes of functioning. Instead of blaming tradition, the approach says that modernity was not so much blocked as used to buttress traditional longings. So understood, the reason why the modernization that the three successive regimes promised did not come to fruition stands out better. For instance, let us take the evolution of Haile Selassie's imperial power toward autocracy. While it is true to say that all Ethiopian emperors have aspired to wield absolute power, none had succeeded in amassing as much power as Haile Selassie. Previous emperors could not remove or prevail for an extended time over the traditional limitations to their power, like the autonomy of regionalism and the authority of the church. Haile Selassie was able to prevail because he borrowed "from abroad modern instruments, methods and institutions and introduced its capital and its technology" to achieve absolute power.[21]

In the economic sector, as already said, the traditional *gebar* system evolved, under Haile Selassie, into the oppressive system of tenancy in the south. Since the system, in addition to extracting more taxes from peasants, carried out extensive expropriation of land, its promise to improve productivity and raise the standard of living of people was hardly realizable. Both its design and goal only worked for the exclusive interests of voracious absentee landlords. Certainly, the system did not expand into the northern part of the country. Still, owing to the centralized imperial state and the possession of modern means of repression and control, heavier taxes were levied on northern peasants, who could no longer resist as in the past. Even more seriously, the communal foundation of the *rist* system seemed increasingly threatened under the cover of reforming the landholding system. Peasants reacted here and there, the most important being the peasant rebellion in Gojjam in 1968. All in all, thanks to the introduction of modern means, the traditional ruling class consolidated its power and wealth at the expense of the peasantry to a degree never reached in the past.

Contrary to expectations, the end of monarchy and "feudalism" did not deliver a more productive agricultural sector. The Derg eradicated the traditional systems of *rist*, *rist-gult*, and tenancy through a radical policy of nationalization of rural and urban lands. It applied the same policy to the industrial sector: it nationalized all industries and other sectors with some economic importance. Despite some liberalizing measures in urban sectors, the regimes that followed the Derg left intact the nationalizations of rural and urban lands. So that, rather than injecting into the

socioeconomic system an incentive for improved productivity, the two post-Haile Selassie regimes went in the direction of strengthening the state's control over social production. Both tenancy and the *rist* system were removed, but in favor of direct state ownership, with the state becoming the only collector of taxes levied imperiously on producers and implemented through its various agents thanks to its sprawling bureaucratic apparatus. Even though the traditional monarchical system had longed for absoluteness, it never materialized because of numerous traditional safeguards. Not so with post-imperial Ethiopia: the nationalizations and the accompanying tighter centralization ensured that ruling elites' control of power reached a level of absoluteness never attained before.

What is most disconcerting about Ethiopia is that its transition from monarchy to republic, unlike the experience of many other countries, did not usher in any liberalization. On the contrary, the two regimes that came after Haile Selassie exceeded by far imperial absolutism, even though both claimed to end absolute power in Ethiopia once and for all. The question is: how, in a republic where power is supposed to emanate from the people, those who control the state manage to wield more power than the deposed monarch? The answer lies in the subordination of the state to a party harboring a revolutionary and partisan agenda. In the name of the interests of a social group, be it a particular social class, ethnic group, or religious constituency, the state is turned into an instrument of a sectarian ideology and policy. Since such a state champions a partisan cause, it has no autonomy vis-à-vis the ruling party and, consequently, is exclusive by definition. Under a normal democratic context, the victorious party uses the state to advance its agenda, but it also operates under norms and institutions that defend democratic rules, like majority rule, protection of human rights, freedom of speech and organization. But when the state operates under the partisan agenda of a party, that is, when there is no longer any distinction between the state and the ruling party, the norms of partisanship override democratic rules and frame the goals and methods of the state.

Up until and including Haile Selassie, the legitimizing instance for the exercise of state power in Ethiopia was divine election. The divinely sanctioned absolutism, however extensive, expected emperors to rule their subjects in accordance with Christian principles. For a revolutionary and partisan agenda, the priority is not so much the rights of people as the removal of rights from one group to benefit another group. This change alters the functions of the state. For instance, as implied in the expression "class justice" that Marxist revolutionaries often used, the notion of equitable justice for all mutates into a notion of justice benefiting one class or a group to the detriment of another class or group. The alteration allows an unrestricted, limitless use of state power for the implementation of an exclusive political and economic agenda. Under both the Derg and the TPLF, the metamorphoses of the Ethiopian state into a party-state in which other parties are either outlawed or forcefully marginalized and controlled explains, therefore, the reason why Ethiopia found itself under a state commanding more power than under the previous monarchical government.

True, the Derg first seized state power in the name of a comprehensive and inclusive political program known as *Ethiopia Tikdem* (Ethiopia First). But very soon it realized that it needed a revolutionary and partisan program to define and consolidate its power. This is exactly what Mengistu Haile Mariam did once he emerged victorious from the violent power struggles within and outside the Derg. In creating the Workers' Party of Ethiopia and espousing Marxism-Leninism as the official ideology of his party and the country, he brought the state under the full control of a party completely devoted to him and to his partisan agenda favoring workers and peasants at the expense of the traditional nobility, the emerging wealthy class, the upper echelons of the military and bureaucratic apparatuses, and educated elites. Instead of a class agenda, the

TPLF adopted the version of Marxist-Leninist ideology that supports ethnic groups, henceforth baptized "nations" and "nationalities," against the Amhara hegemony. In order to realize this political program, it pushed for the creation of ethnic parties that grouped into a tight organization known as the EPRDF. The Leninist rule of "democratic centralism" held together the ethnic parties under the inflexible hegemony of the TPLF. In completely identifying the state and party, the TPLF made sure that the partisan goal of both weakening the Amhara standing and shaping the state as a weapon promoting the interests of the Tigrean elite is fully functional.

Together with the mushrooming growth of the state due to the removal of moderating restraints, the absoluteness of authority infused every aspect of social life in Ethiopia. The exposure to modernity did not temper the traditional centrality of authority in favor of some liberalization; on the contrary, it heightened it through a sprawling authoritarianism allowed by the unprecedented centralization of state power thanks to the use of modern means of control and repression. So absolute an authority is totally impervious to accountability as well as to impersonal and rational norms. As a result, extreme deference to a degree never seen before pervaded the relations between superiors and subordinates. Since the only assignment of subordinates is to fulfill the whims of their superiors, innovation and initiative, let alone criticism, amounted to insubordination. "Any political position," Clapham notes, "is essentially a personal position rather than an impersonal office."[22] Consequently, in place of achievements, nepotism, the cultivation of kinship ties, obsequiousness, etc., became the royal road to social promotion. A no less negative derivation of the authoritarianism of the system is the prevalence of vertical relations over communal solidarity. The undue importance of vertical relationships, insofar as it weakens communal interests, holds back the development of class consciousness and solidarity, with the consequence that mass movements able to pressure the ruling elites for change become hard to organize. In the Ethiopian context, modern organizations, such as political parties and trade unions, which would be based on common ideological or economic interests, are overtaken by client relationships or by individual opportunist calculations. This weakness of communal solidarity explains why Ethiopians are ill-equipped to organize strikes and other forms of peaceful protests, with the view of defending or obtaining collective rights.

Even the Ethiopian social mobility, contrary to expectations, went in the direction of reinforcing its harmful side, less so its potentials to support modernization. The belief that comes naturally to mind is to assume that the encounter with modernity would incline the culture of mobility to cherish the climbing of the social ladder through hard work, investment, and innovation. In the past, the principal path to social mobility was war exploits, which were rewarded with tax rights. In today's Ethiopia, though business has gained some momentum, it is still dominated, as we saw with the policy of nationalization, by the primacy of the politico-military criterion. I say "politico-military" because in "modern" Ethiopia, as was the case in traditional Ethiopia, entitlement to power is dependent on the control of a military force, but in a way that far exceeds the past practice, owing to the removal of the traditional restraints, like the balancing authorities of the church and regionalism as well as of communal solidarity. Accordingly, those who are in charge of state power use various modern means to perpetuate the complete subordination of social activities to the political system. In particular, business activities are subjected to constant intimidation and extortion for the purpose of enriching the political elite class. In other words, just as in the past, Ethiopian social mobility values more power over people than power over things. The only difference with today's Ethiopia is that it uses powerful modern means to exert control. In opening new opportunities, Ethiopia's encounter with modernity, far from lessening the authoritarian structure, reinforced it, and this is evidenced by the repeated

inability of the political system to adopt and implement democratic norms and working procedures, despite the reiterated promise of those who happen to seize power.

At the cultural level proper, we find the same derailment as in the sociopolitical system. The excessive dominance of authority pervades all cultural activities. Take the case of education. Though the traditional system valued education, the concept of "education for the sake of inquiry as such or for personal development was never permitted in its program."[23] Learning was essentially a rehearsal, an unaltered transmission of what has been accepted once and for all. Personal inquiry and the development of critical aptitude were promptly discouraged in favor of an educational system deliberately designed to perpetuate tradition. The general outcome of this conservatism was the utter stifling of creativity. Far from altering this state of things, the intersection with modernity elevated the stifling to a new level. Thus, during Haile Selassie's time, despite the promise of modernization, nothing was done to correct this chronic deficiency in creativity. Protesting against the suppression of academic freedom, one university professor wrote in 1968 an article in *Dialogue*, the Journal of the Ethiopian University Teachers' Association, in which he implored the ruling class to be open to dialogue and free exchange of ideas, for "a university is a place where people can learn to think fearlessly and objectively."[24] The successive post-imperial governments, not only followed the same authoritarian path of imposing their own ideological and political views, but they also did it on a scale never known before. Together with modern schools and universities, government-controlled media and modern means of surveillance and repression laid out a totalitarian grip on the country. The fallout was that the culture was deprived of any potential for hatching modernity, given that a break with authoritarian culture conditions the appearance of innovativeness. A word of caution: the problem is less authority than a barren form of authority. After all, as said earlier, Japan, East Asian countries, and other nations have demonstrated the modernizing potential of authoritarianism when a genuine determination to develop modern forces drives it. The simple reinforcement of unmodern pursuits by exploiting modern means, as was and still is the case in Ethiopia, moves on the wrong side of modernity.

The same straying from the path of modernity occurred with the notion of *idil*. Ill-adopted to modern requirements and understood as an exclusive allotment, *idil* cannot accommodate a cumulative conception of individual and social advancements. In the extremely limited opportunities of the traditional system, the exclusion of a drive toward a general betterment was in the order of things. The limitation entailed the rule that one had to occupy one's proper place at the expense of another individual, since the rise of one individual required the fall of another. Besides encouraging zero-sum social interactions, belief in *idil* was adamant to rationalization. Nothing could be planned, as everything depended on divine will over which humans have no control. It was also little inclined to value self-realization through hard work. Instead, it extolled warlike values, since military prowess was construed as the divine mode of allotment of one's place in society. As said earlier, a society founded on the martial spirit cherishes authoritarianism and power concentration to the detriment of democratic rules, so essential to modernity.

The upshot is that an unreformed belief in *idil* in a transitional situation is prone to grasp modern political and economic competitions as zero-sum games, which also means games free of ethical norms. In consequence, the goal of absolute power through the sheer elimination or imprisonment of opponents becomes the rule of political competition. In business practices, unethical enrichment turns into the fundamental rule of the game, with the outcome that it opens a wide door for vices, such as the proliferation of greedy methods, corruption, embezzlement, etc. Neither the imperial regime nor the post-imperial ruling elites did anything to adjust the fervor of *idil* to modern opportunities and working conditions. In the past, as it was tied to God's choice, it

operated within an ethical and religious parameter. In post-traditional Ethiopia, because politics and economics were not integrated into the religious culture, the religious restraint has been eroded and confined to matters of the soul. As a result, raw politics and enrichment by all means pervade the secular life.

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