

## Chapter II

### Survey of Ethiopia's Survival: Definition and Controversies

The last chapter has unraveled the close link between modernization and the emergence of a survival ethos among ruling elites of traditional societies in transition. To approach the case of Ethiopia's modernization from the same angle of explanation, it is necessary first to make sure that some groups among Ethiopian ruling elites had shown a propensity that could be defined as a salvational will. Sure enough, any ruling elite wants to protect the social order that benefits it. However, the salvational will, as defined in the previous chapter, is less the desire to perpetuate the status quo than the will to reform because of the belief that only reforms that include the forsaking of some traditional prerogatives can ensure survival.

#### Ethiopia and the Concept of Survival

Whatever is said about Ethiopia, one thing is sure: survival best defines it. Admittedly, the country is one of the oldest in the world, since its history can be traced back to antiquity, specifically to the ancient Kingdom of Aksum. Also, until the Revolution of 1974, the dynasty called Solomonic is supposed to have ruled—with some short interruptions—Ethiopia since the Aksumite kingdom. Christianity, introduced as early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, still survives in its pristine forms mixed with some pagan and Judaic elements. In terms of socioeconomic structure, the imposition of tax rights on a communal system of landholding (the *gabar* system) has determined, until the revolution, the class structure of the society for centuries. Moreover, the country has never been conquered and occupied by foreign invaders, the five years of the Italian occupation being the only exception. Besides thwarting colonization, no serious social upheaval or revolution has interrupted its history prior to the revolution of 1974. The overall image is, therefore, one of a protracted continuity, even though hostile and expanding forces surrounded the country.

Granted that Ethiopia has a remarkable record of survival, the question that relates to modernization is whether the ruling class or groups within it have been willing to reform to counter threats. At first look, the answer is no. Seeing the country's inability to defeat the Italian invasion in 1936 and the paucity of serious modernizing reforms both before the invasion and after the recovery of independence in 1941, one can conclude that the survival will of the ruling class did not go in the direction of serious modernizing reforms. Yet, such a definitive conclusion would be a bit hasty. Notably, it would overlook the appearance of a movement of intellectuals close to ruling circles that took Japan's modernization as a model that Ethiopia should emulate. Moreover, even if they were not part of an organized group, leaders and highly influential persons have shown an earnest interest in the modernization of Ethiopia. Emperor Tewodros is among such leaders: his modernizing ethos can be said to come close to the people who led the modernization of Japan. As Seven Rubenson puts it:

Tewodros perceived as did none of his predecessors among the *mesafint* that the political anarchy, moral laxity, and technological backwardness of his people threatened national survival. The reforms he announced, the policies he tried to implement, the very single-mindedness and perseverance with which he tackled the problems, indicate that he aimed at nothing less than a national revival combined with the transformation of his country into a modern state.<sup>1</sup>

Tewodros spoke in terms of restoration of the traditional polity, but such that it would be capable of countering the colonial threat. In no way was modernization equated with Westernization; rather, it was a survival option designed to endow the traditional polity with new material means. His unsuccessful attempts to form a standing army, introduce a separation between church and state, reduce the landholding of the church, institute Amharic as a national language, build roads and bridges, and centralize the administration are inseparable from his fanatical attachment to traditional Ethiopia, to its religious values, nobility, and imperial system. The reforms were perceived as necessary to salvage what was most precious and essential. In particular, Tewodros's determination to steal Western technology, as evinced by his effort to produce firearms in Ethiopia, the apex of which was the manufacture of his famous cannon, revealed an inspiration that was quite Japanese.

A similar spirit has animated Emperor Menelik's approach to modernization. He too wanted to strengthen the state through some centralizing measures and the construction of roads and networks of communication. He understood the importance of modern education and opened to that end the first school where the highest dignitaries were urged to send their sons. He was also "supremely interested in weapons and generally intrigued with machinery and technology," with the view of possessing for "himself and his people the power which resides in the white man's knowledge of things."<sup>2</sup> To measure the full importance of these planned changes, one must keep in mind that they came from a sovereign black leader of an African country, as opposed to being introduced under the tutelage of colonialism. Moreover, the changes had one purpose: the restoration of the grandeur of Christian Ethiopia. A nationalist motive and not, as is now the case, the desire for Westernization, itself understood as the attainment of civilized life, motivated Menelik's modernizing attempts. Modernization was thus a nationalist mission, an interpretation in line with the Japanese inspiration.

As regards the mentioned intellectual movement that proposed Japan as a model for Ethiopia, this much can be said. Nicknamed "Japanizers," intellectuals like Guebre Hiwot Baykedagn, Gebru Desta, Worqeneh Martin, and Heruy Wolde Sellase, to name but the most important ones, injected into the ongoing discussion on the choices facing Ethiopia the idea of taking inspiration from Japan. The proposal is in itself quite revealing of the heightened awareness about the dangers threatening the country. The characterization of these intellectuals as "Japanizers" has been variously criticized. Thus, Shifferaw Bekele argues that their knowledge about "Japan's westernization was at best elementary" and their proposals did not go beyond "superficial changes."<sup>3</sup> Bahru Zewde adds that the proposal to take Japan as a model "remained a subjective urge unsupported by the objective reality," given the unbridgeable social and technological gap between the two countries.<sup>4</sup> That Shifferaw speaks of "Japan's westernization" already indicates a misconception about the originality of the Japanese path to modernization. As stated in the last chapter, liberalization in the Western sense was never sought, as shown by the fact that in Japan "ethics and social philosophy remained thoroughly Confucian and thus feudal."<sup>5</sup> The essential motive of Japan's modernization was the countering of colonial threats, and not the

desire to convert to Westernism. Because critics fail to pay enough attention to the sui generis nature of Japanese modernization, they tend to challenge the application of the concept of “Japanizer” to Ethiopian intellectuals, arguing either that their proposals significantly fell short of the model or that they were inadequate to the existing conditions in Ethiopia. In so doing, they miss the most important issue, which is that many Ethiopian Japanizers did not long for Westernization, but for a form of modernization fitting Ethiopian realities and values. It is this indigenization of modernity that precisely enticed them to take Japan as a model.

### **Ethiopia's Southern Expansion**

Regardless of whether the Japanizers had an adequate understanding of Japanese modernization or not, regardless of whether the respective conditions of Japan and Ethiopia were comparable or not, the theme of survival authorizes a fruitful parallel between the two countries. All the more reason to appeal to the theme is that, for both countries, survival is not a recent commitment, one that is solely confined to the colonial threat. On the contrary, the commitment has a long history and constitutes an embedded cultural feature. Because of this shared commitment, just as Japan wanted to appropriate Western technology to safeguard its independence, values, and social system, so too have Japanizers and the two mentioned Ethiopian emperors nursed the same goal. In particular, the goal implied the project of modernizing without social revolution, in the sense that it should come from above so as to avoid wrecking tradition, its ultimate objective being the strengthening of the defensive capacities of Ethiopia.

If the two countries shared the same goal, then the question that needs an answer is why Ethiopia backed down from implementing changes comparable to those of Japan. As Harold Marcus remarks, though Menelik had heard of Japan and was stimulated by its example, “he opposed the thoroughgoing economic and social transformation that would be inspired by industrial revolution.”<sup>6</sup> In my view, the most plausible explanation for the softening of the reformist determination of Ethiopian leaders is the southern conquest. The conquest and inclusion of vast territories constituting the southern part of today's Ethiopia gave confidence to the ruling elite, which confidence was further enhanced by the victory of Adwa over Italian colonial forces. As a result, there was a false sense of self-sufficiency that ill-prepared the ruling class for the greater danger of the second Italo-Ethiopian war. To quote Marcus:

The ease with which Menelik had obtained weapons led Ethiopians to conclude that the nation would always be able to purchase war supplies from eager salesmen. The leadership did not consider it necessary to build up an arm industry, with all the modernization and reorganization of society that such an effort would involve, but was content to foster the development of government and the traditional economy through the introduction of communications such as the railway, telephone, and telegraph.<sup>7</sup>

Even if Haile Selassie had other reasons for deferring the appropriate reforms, in the main he followed the same reasoning.

The explanation that imputes the Ethiopian deferment of far-reaching changes to the southern expansion does acknowledge the different perceptions prevailing in Japan and Ethiopia. However, unlike Bahru's notion of a gap between the two countries, it ascribes the differences to diverging opportunities. The survival ethos of the Japanese ruling class could rely on no other option to achieve its goal than to initiate reforms that, however untraditional and inconvenient to

the ruling elite, were necessary to save what could and deserved to be saved. Not so in Ethiopia: the problem of obtaining more surplus to purchase firearms being solved, beyond hope, by the immense prospects of the southern expansion, there was no need for deep reforms. Rapid Ethiopianization and Christianization of the southern populations accompanied by the creation of a southern elite embedded in the political apparatus were all that was needed to make additional peoples and resources available to the Ethiopian state and ruling elite.

The key point here is that dissimilar conditions offered Ethiopian leaders different choices. Naturally, they opted for the easiest choice, the one with the least change and sacrifice. The condition for survival being the upgrading of military capability, the availability of additional resources made the hard way of manufacturing modern weapons and introducing the attendant far-reaching social changes unnecessary. Instead, it made available the much less exacting course of purchasing weapons. The case of Tewodros gives more strength to this explanation: because he could see no other way out of the danger than the solution of manufacturing firearms, he was driven toward the Japanese state of mind. Still alien to the idea of expanding the empire in order to muster additional peoples and resources, he was, so to speak, cornered within the limits of traditional Ethiopia from which he could hardly squeeze more surplus to buy weapons. Anyway, he did not have the necessary time to nurture and launch his modernizing projects. The easy choice of expansion rather than industrialization in the face of colonial threat has, therefore, put Ethiopia and Japan on different tracks.

### **Controversies Surrounding Ethiopian Survival**

To give the approach tying the concept of survival to modernization a solid foundation, we need to investigate further the application of the concept to Ethiopia. The fact that we just said that Ethiopia's survival ethos inspired the southern expansion makes the investigation all the more necessary. To make it clearer, defining survival is not simply to indicate the length of duration of a given country; it is, above all, to show how inherent forces enabled the country to overcome for an extended time serious challenges. "Inherent forces" comprise the long-established values, beliefs, and institutions of the country as well as the resilience of the social system. To bring out the role of these forces in Ethiopia, it is imperative, first, that we set aside the explanation imputing its survival to geography.

Many Western scholars have credited Ethiopia's survival to the isolation and protection provided by its mountains and the deserts that surround it. According to them, these formidable natural obstacles have turned the country into a natural fortress, thereby discouraging invaders and at the same time isolating it. For instance, one author uses such expressions as "mountain fortress," "mountain citadels," "impregnability of the highlands," "inaccessibility and inhospitable fringes" to ascribe Ethiopia's survival to its topography.<sup>8</sup> Undoubtedly, such an environment is extremely unfriendly for invaders. Even if we assume that the invading army finally succeeds in overcoming the inaccessibility of the mountains, it will soon be faced with insurmountable problems of supply and regrouping that it would become hopelessly vulnerable to even minor counter-assaults. Should this army decide to shun the mountains, a better method of penetration would not be available. It could rely neither on navigable rivers nor on ways of access other than inhospitable deserts. Hence, the tempting idea that Ethiopia owes its survival to the "virtual impregnability of the highland-fastness."<sup>9</sup>

Surely, it would be wrong to say that the topography did not make any contribution to the survival. It did, but in combination with other more critical factors. By itself, that is, as an exclusive

explanation, it becomes easily questionable. Indeed, neither the deserts nor the mountains have discouraged invaders, given that Ethiopia has constantly fought against outside attackers, and even pushed back some of those who reached its inlands. A case in point is the British invasion of Ethiopia in 1868: it was successful despite topographical obstacles, precisely because of disunity caused by frustration against Emperor Tewodros's rule. Moreover, the numerous borrowings from outside that typically characterize Ethiopian culture, the most notable being those associated with the Coptic Church, do not support the idea of Ethiopia's isolation. The argument of natural obstacles loses much of its strength when the invaders are modern colonial armies, as was the case with Italy's attempts. The need to revise the emphasis on geography becomes inevitable when we note that many scholars have accused the Ethiopian landscape of having been quite inimical to the unity of the country. Richard Greenfield remarks that "isolated and mountainous plateau massifs have proved, to date, almost insurmountable obstacles to the kings who sought to unify their country."<sup>10</sup> This is so true that kings had to move their capitals from place to place to keep regional lords in check. No less true was the fact that the mountains offered regions the possibility of maintaining diverse conditions, including ethnic and linguistic distinctions, thereby putting additional strain on the unity of the country. That geography was a factor of division hardly backs the view that Ethiopia owes its survival to the mountains. The right approach is the one that states that Ethiopia preserved its unity and, hence, its independence, despite the divisive effect of the topography.

A more interesting perspective would be to associate the geographical features with the development of Ethiopians' insular character. The insularity derives from the belief that God has assigned Ethiopians the mission of protecting Christianity in the wake of the expansion of Islam. The survival in Ethiopia of a Christian state, even as all previously Christian countries in the neighborhood and elsewhere fell to Islam, seemed to indicate God's involvement. As a result, the mountains were seen as fortresses that God erected to help the guardians of the true faith accomplish their mission. The churches of Lalibela, monolithic and hewn out of rock, best symbolize the assignment to serve as a bulwark for a besieged faith. We can also say that the divine mission that the mountains echo has nurtured a fierce spirit of independence. The feeling of being entrusted with the protection of the true faith naturally fosters an unwavering commitment to the task, and this goes a long way in accounting for the survival of Ethiopia. The fact that geography never isolated Ethiopia, nor thwarted would-be invaders, compels us to investigate in the direction of other more important factors, since the more ragged the environment is, the stronger must be the cultural and institutional cements binding together people that geography has otherwise compartmentalized.

## **The Colonial Issue**

Since geography is obviously not enough to explain the survival of Ethiopia, especially when modern armies are involved, some scholars have concocted the idea that colonialism has been for Ethiopia an opportunity rather than a real threat. The thesis has two versions. The one says that Ethiopians "took an active part of their own in the scramble, competing effectively with the French, Italians and British along Ethiopia's borders."<sup>11</sup> By conquering and annexing huge territories inhabited by various populations (such as the Oromo, the Sidama, the Gurage, the Harere), Emperor Menelik II substantially expanded the size of his empire. The conquest enabled him to purchase firearms and build a powerful army, both by the size and quality of its weaponry. In other words, he was able to compete successfully against the European colonial powers thanks to the

colonial subjugation of neighboring African peoples. Be it noted that the thesis assures us that the term “colonization” is perfectly applicable to Ethiopia, even if it is an African country. Both in terms of violence and exploitation, Menelik's conquest of the south was no less fierce than its European counterparts: it was an equally “ferocious process of conquest, annexation, incorporation and subjugation of peoples and territories.”<sup>12</sup>

So stated, the thesis of the Ethiopian colonization of the south raises an immediate objection. According to its generally accepted definition, the concept of colonization presupposes that the country in question has reached a capitalist stage of development, and Ethiopia was nowhere near to being a capitalist country. The proponents of the theory counter-argue by pointing out that both the economic exploitation and cultural oppression of the southern peoples were of a level comparable to the deeds of colonial powers in other parts of Africa. Economically, the system established in the south led to land expropriation, heavy taxation, and land grants to warlords and soldiers as rewards for their service, all at the expense of the indigenous populations who, on top of losing their traditional right to land, had to work for their new lords. Culturally, the imposition of Christianity as well as of Amhara culture and language, through which a mitigated form of assimilation was attempted, entailed the suppression of local cultures, a deed justified by the perception of these cultures as inferior. Let it be added that comparable needs prompted the colonial expansions in Ethiopia and European countries: just as increasing needs for new markets, raw materials, and new lands for settlement explain European colonialism, so too land impoverishment, deforestation, and high population density in the north “propelled the Abyssinian expansion southwards a century ago.”<sup>13</sup>

The thesis does not exactly go to the extent of elevating Ethiopia to a degree matching the power of European countries. Rather, it says that the participation of Ethiopia in the scramble must be placed in the context of the rivalry between Great Britain, France, and Italy. Because of this rivalry, any advance by one of the powers was interpreted as an undue advantage over the others. Apart from enabling Menelik to play one power off against the other, the rivalry had effectively created a stalemate. Hence the Tripartite Agreement of 1906: it explicitly admitted the stalemate by acknowledging the maintenance of “the integrity of Ethiopia” as “the common interest of France, Great Britain, and Italy.”<sup>14</sup>

The second version of the colonial thesis continues to speak of colonialism, but adds the qualification “dependent.”<sup>15</sup> This version does not agree with the presentation of Ethiopia as an African country that competed against European powers in the scramble for Africa. Far from it: in reality, says the thesis, colonialism spared Ethiopia for the simple reason that it promoted it as a junior partner of European colonization of Africa. The need for this changed interpretation arose because of the mentioned major theoretical objection, which is that a backward country like Ethiopia cannot be placed at the level of a colonial power, let alone become a contender to European colonial powers. Contrary to the European colonial objectives, the Ethiopian expansion had neither the purpose of extracting raw materials, nor the want of new markets, far less the need to export capital. However, what a precapitalist country like Ethiopia cannot do becomes achievable if European colonial forces work in partnership with the said country and provide the necessary assistance. European assistance made up, so to speak, for the precapitalist inadequacies; it provided the “guns and skills” that broke down the resistance of the southern peoples.<sup>16</sup>

A question comes to mind: Why was Ethiopia chosen to become an agent of colonial powers and not the Oromo or the Sidama? The usual answer alludes to cultural affinity, that is, to Christianity: obviously “a religion common to the Ethiopian and European ruling classes” promised a better partnership.<sup>17</sup> All in all, the method of dependent colonialism was “cheaper and

easier than direct colonization.”<sup>18</sup> Not only was the task of conquering and pacifying the southern populations left to the Ethiopians, but also European imperialist powers had at one stroke both avoided war among themselves and saved themselves the trouble of conquering Ethiopia.

Assessing critically the colonial interpretation of the southern expansion is simply elucidating the malaise that exposure to both versions inevitably causes. The malaise springs first from the feeling of being the target of a deliberate attempt at confusion, for, just as the anatomy of an ape, although otherwise differing little from that of human beings, is yet marked by an unbridgeable gap, so is an irreducible disparity clearly demarcating the southern expansion of Ethiopia, despite some similarities, from Western colonialism. The underlying assumption of the theory, that is, the depiction of the southern expansion as a racist undertaking, is obviously the disparity that agrees the least with the Ethiopian case. Whether Ethiopia is presented as an independent player or an agent, the factor necessary to paint the march as a colonial mission is that the people who initiated it are racially and culturally different from the southern peoples. That is why the advocates of dependent colonialism speak of the opposition between “the Semitic-speaking highland kingdom of Abyssinia” and the south, “a different ecological zone” inhabited by “the Cushitic nations of the region.”<sup>19</sup> The fact that the northern peoples are Semitic and Christian explains, according to the theory, the choice of Ethiopia as a junior partner. The same reason indicates why some scholars thought that it was appropriate to characterize Ethiopia as a competing colonial power. Yet, the bare truth is quite different: however harsh and oppressive the southern conquest may have been—if we are to believe some of the accounts emanating from proponents of the colonial interpretation—it “did not legalize racism and segregation and attendant inequalities, typically associated with Western colonialism.”<sup>20</sup> Rather, so open was the system that a great number of individuals from the conquered populations rose quickly to positions of power, some reaching the peak. To be sure, the northerners pandered to a feeling of superiority, but it was more cultural than racial. Precisely, because it was only cultural, it remained alien to the idea of erecting a racial barrier, in the fashion of European colonization.

There is more: both versions miss the indigenous nature of the expansion. Historians readily admit that the Oromo and the northerners were the main contenders in the Horn of Africa prior to the scramble. The contention was such that the Oromo penetrated far into Gojjam, Begemder, and even Tigre. In particular, the Yejju dynasty, an Oromo family, ruled during the “Era of the Princes” a great part of what was then Ethiopia. In light of the long history of competition between the two peoples, it is indefensible that the two versions misread an indigenous historical trend toward integration as an overseas conquest akin to a colonial operation. The right reading would acknowledge that expansion was inevitable in that one had to conquer the other. The question is not whether the conquest could have been avoided, but rather who would be the conqueror. Firearms changed the balance in favor of the northerners, which firearms were purchased to respond to a need emanating from the imperial ideology. The imperial need, in turn, came, as we saw, from the choice of expansion as the means to counter the threat of colonial forces.

According to the first version of the colonial thesis, the competitive stalemate between the three colonial powers hampered their project of conquering Ethiopia. The explanation does not answer the question of why the colonial powers, which so far had agreed to divide amicably between themselves all the lands stretching along the Red Sea, as they did with the Somali people, would fail to strike a bargain concerning Ethiopia. The only plausible answer is that the intervention of a local rival, powerful enough to strip colonial expeditions of their character of being nothing more than minor excursions, caused the stalemate. In other words, the intrusion of an indigenous African player became a complicating factor in the rivalries between the three

colonial powers. Italy refused to abide by the agreement; it was called to order by its defeat at Adwa. The theory of dependent colonialism, too, refuses to admit that the intervention of an African player changed the situation. Worse yet, it rejects the existence of a fourth player, as though the Italian defeat of Adwa never happened and that the French or the English never contemplated the project of colonizing Ethiopia. Yet, the fact that they needed an agreement shows that the French and the British (the exception being Italy) had to give up their project of colonizing Ethiopia. What could be the reason for the agreement if not that they were not ready to bear the costs of an expensive conquest, not to mention the need to prevent rival colonial powers from scoring an advantage in case of a successful conquest?

Now that we have defined what is meant by the survival of Ethiopia and pushed back the controversies that the notion raises, we can move forward to examine the survival forces intrinsic to Ethiopia's sociocultural makeup. Instead of attributing the survival to external factors or opportune circumstances, the examination will show that it is an outcome of the functioning of inner features.

---

<sup>1</sup> Seven Rubenson, *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence* (London: Heinemann, 1976), 269.

<sup>2</sup> Harold Marcus, *The Life and Times of Menilik II: Ethiopia 1844-1913* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 198-99.

<sup>3</sup> Shifferaw Bekele, "Gäbrä-Heywät Baykädañ and the Emergence of a Modern Intellectual Discourse," *Sociology Ethnology Bulletin* 1 (1994): 112-13.

<sup>4</sup> See Bahru Zewde, "The Concept of Japanization in the Intellectual History of Modern Ethiopia." *Proceedings of the Fifth Seminar of the Department of History* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 1990), 11.

<sup>5</sup> Robert A. Scalapino, "Ideology and Modernization: The Japanese Case," in *Ideology and Discontent* (New York: The Free Press, 1964), 9.

<sup>6</sup> Marcus, *The Life and Times of Menilik II*, 199.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>8</sup> C. F. Rey, *The Real Abyssinia* (London: Seeley Service & Co. Limited, 1935), 18.

<sup>9</sup> Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1974), 194.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Greenfield, *Ethiopia* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968), 117.

<sup>11</sup> L. H. Gann and Peter Duignan, "Introduction," in *Colonialism in Africa 1870-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 15-16.

<sup>12</sup> Addis Hiwet, *Ethiopia: From Autocracy to Revolution* (London: Review of African Political Economy, 1975), 35.

<sup>13</sup> John Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 8.

<sup>14</sup> Bonnie K Holcomb and Sisai Ibssa, *The Invention of Ethiopia* (New Jersey: The Red Sea Press, 1990), 7.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Asafa Jalata, *Oromia & Ethiopia* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1993), 52.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Holcomb and Sisai, *The Invention of Ethiopia*, 15.

<sup>20</sup> Daniel Teferra, *Social History and Theoretical Analyses of the Economy of Ethiopia* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), iii.