

Chapter V

Derailed Modernization: The Imperial Phase

The critical review of the explanation of the failure of Ethiopian modernization from the perspective of modernization theory, that is, from the alleged contrast between tradition and modernity, has revealed that the concept of derailed modernization is more appropriate than the argument stating that inherent defects prevented Ethiopia's modernization. The expression "derailed" puts the blame not so much on inner obstacles as on the spoiling of assets and opportunities. The change of approach speaks of engagement into a wandering path, the outcome of which was and still is the multiplication of difficulties. Indeed, obstacles hinder, but they can also be either removed or circumvented. Not so derailment: because it is a wandering path, it initiates a movement that continuously bumps against itself, and so is caught in a self-destructive cycle. Let us see how Haile Selassie laid the foundational phase of the wandering course.

The Imperial Interpretation of Modernization

Haile Selassie's early autocratic aspiration could not but welcome the principle opposing tradition to modernity. This basic axiom of modernization theory signified to him that the removal of all those traditional authorities limiting the imperial power is the sine qua non of modernization. Even if Haile Selassie was not exposed to the theory through the traditional academic avenue, he was educated at home by French missionaries. For these missionaries, the modernization of Ethiopia cannot be any different from the rest of African countries, except that it will be done through the instrumentality of a native emperor who has endorsed the normative status of the West. It will not be called colonization, but the difference is only one of form rather than content. Instead of being a direct colonial rule, it will be executed via the autocratic rule of the emperor. The liquidation of backward beliefs and institutions will, therefore, be as forcefully carried out, as in a colonial rule. However, not being revolutionaries, neither the missionaries nor Haile Selassie himself wanted to eliminate the nobility as a class or the church as an influential institution. As we saw, Haile Selassie aimed at breaking the power of the nobility, while maintaining it as a necessary component of his regime.

The deep link between Haile Selassie's autocracy and modernization theory stands out when we reflect on the use of the theory to justify autocracy. Indeed, the theory is perfectly in tune with the explanation according to which the existence of powerful regional forces and the subsequent weakening of the imperial power in the course of Ethiopian history account for Ethiopia's backwardness. In effect, as we saw, expatriate advisors, teachers, and their Ethiopian disciples have relentlessly propagated the idea that the main culprit for the Ethiopian lag is the chronic absence of peace and political stability. In difference to other Black African countries, Ethiopia had reached in the past a level of civilization that could qualify as advanced, even by

Western standards. The progress of that civilization was blocked because of conflicts and wars that regularly ravaged the country. The solution to Ethiopia's problems is then obvious: Ethiopia will modernize and catch up with the West only through a political change that eradicates regional powers and establishes a strong and centralized imperial state.

The missionaries who introduced Haile Selassie to the modern world must have brandished the model of France's history of state centralization. Generally speaking, the consensus is that European countries modernized thanks to the centralization of state power, which ended the fragmented and decentralized system of feudalism. The attainment of political stability subsequent to the dissolution of regional armies and the establishment of a centralized authority guiding and supervising the modernization process ensured the successful implementation of modernizing reforms in Europe. The lesson here is that peace cannot prevail so long as regional nobles are allowed to have their own armies, and modernization cannot succeed unless a centralized authority is planning and overseeing it.

Another lesson from Europe is that modernization necessitates the separation of church and state. However, owing to the ignorance of the Ethiopian clergy and the proverbial reluctance of the Church to welcome modernizing reforms, the separation must not reach the level of full autonomy. Instead, the imperial state must assume a tutorial role, which became completely possible after Haile Selassie put an end to the tradition of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Alexandria nominating Egyptians as heads of the Ethiopian Church. The suspension of the Alexandrian link has been praised as an important and positive achievement of Haile Selassie. In reality, since the nomination of Ethiopian *Abunas* could no longer occur without his approval, the real fallout of the reform was to put the Ethiopian Church "more under imperial control."¹ To quote Stéphane Ancel and Éloi Ficquet, "The monarch took control over the church through two parallel strategies. The first was to obtain from Egypt the right to have an Ethiopian patriarch and Ethiopian bishops. The second was to put all the country's parishes and monasteries under a centralized authority."²

Undoubtedly, the tenets of modernization theory were highly appealing to a monarch determined to acquire absolute power. The theory provided the emperor with the ideological weapon that he needed to slash the power of the two traditional competitors against the imperial power, namely, the nobility and the church. But there is more than the use of the theory for an absolutist design. It also offers protection against the humiliating discourse of colonialism, which protection makes it all the more acceptable. Indeed, the attribution of Ethiopia's backwardness to the lack of peace and stability, in particular the implication that the rise of warlordism interrupted its great inroads in the past, suggest that Ethiopians did not lag behind because of some racial inferiority. Seeing that the colonial discourse ascribes the absence of "great civilizations" in black Africa to the racial deficiencies of black peoples, the explanation of Ethiopia's backwardness moves the blame from race to the deterioration of its social fabric toward war and anarchy. The apparent removal of the attribution of backwardness to racial disabilities is not only reassuring; it also rehabilitates Ethiopians in the eyes of the colonizers, and so justifies Ethiopia's entitlement to modernize without the need for direct colonization.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the entitlement of Ethiopia to be its own agent of modernization was a belief shared by many early Ethiopian scholars of modernity. The belief presupposed the change of the explanation of Ethiopian backwardness from race to political obstacles. In whatever particular way the scholars analyzed the country's retardation, the consensus was that Ethiopia, which had a brilliant past, entered into a slumbering existence that caused its massive lag behind Europe. The solution, the scholars said, is to awaken from this

lethargic state, and modernization is just this act of waking up. That is why writings and speeches predating the 1935 Italian invasion defined modernity as “light” or “dawn” and analogized the transition from traditional culture to modernity as a passage from darkness to light, from night to day, from sleep to wakefulness.

For instance, a book published in 1924 in which statements of Ethiopians are collected refers to a newspaper, characteristically called “The Dawn of Ethiopia,” that defines modernization as the moment when the people of the world are “awakened from their sleep.”³ Modernization defined as light and awakening suggests that Europe, too, had slept for a long time. However, compared to Ethiopia, European countries woke up earlier. The book reproduces the poem of an Ethiopian by the name of Mambaru. One of its verses reads as follows:

The people of Europe were like us:
By the increase of knowledge and work,
They mounted to the sky in order to float there.⁴

The clue to the Ethiopian conceptualization of modernity lies in the translation of the Eurocentric “civilized versus primitive” or “superior race versus inferior peoples” into “light versus darkness,” “awakening versus sleepiness.” In thus putting everybody in the same initial condition of ignorance and darkness, the conception affirms the fundamental sameness of all humans, regardless of their race or nationality. To speak in terms of dawn and awakening also affirms the equal potential of all humans to be awakened.

Haile Selassie totally adhered to the conception of modernity as light and awakening. Thus, in one of his important statements he talked of Ethiopia as a “Sleeping Beauty . . . that is beginning to awaken from her sleep.”⁵ He also named the official newspaper he founded *Berhanena Selam*, that is, “Light and Peace.” As much as these expressions counter the racial explanation, they also imply that Haile Selassie, the early Ethiopian intellectuals, and some important Ethiopian leaders had endorsed the idea of a backward Ethiopia being awakened by the arrival of Westerners, the providers of light. Granted its emancipation from the racist paradigm, some such conception of modernization still views Westerners as tutors and Ethiopians as tutees. Also, it falls short of describing the West as an opponent: since Ethiopians only need to be awakened, it considers the intervention of the West, not as colonization, but as a helping hand. The path of Ethiopia is not to modernize against the West; rather, it is to follow the Western model through the assistance of the West itself.

The advocacy for tight centralization provides a good illustration of the concept of derailment, which rests on a misplaced understanding of the requisites of modernization. In the same way as the policy of nationalization adopted by post-imperial regimes, it discloses the wrong-headed belief that the best solution for Ethiopia’s problems is to give more power to the central state at the expense of social forces. Take the southern expansion. In explaining its real meaning, we said that it was an anti-colonial move inspired by the strong survival will of traditional Ethiopia. We also indicated that it had substantially increased its defensive power and thwarted colonial threats. Unfortunately, it quickly developed another side that led to the overconfidence of the ruling elite and the deferment of necessary reforms. The overconfidence rested on the belief that the use of expansion to strengthen the state and its controlling power was enough to protect the country. Hence the softening of the will to reform, particularly after the victory of Adwa, which was viewed as a vindication of the unnecessary of further reforms. To quote Bahru Zewde, the

victory gave the ruling class “a false sense of self-sufficiency and ill-prepared them for the greater danger of the 1930's.”⁶

The 1935 successful Italian invasion of Ethiopia displays the severe myopia caused by the expansionist solution. Though the Ethiopian ruling elite was beforehand aware of Italy’s preparation for another war, it was powerless to stop it. The continuous postponement of reforms due to overconfidence denotes a mindset victim of the illusion that centralization of power makes the state stronger and, hence, more able to deal with the problems facing the country, whatever the problems may be. Ethiopian leaders were all the more inclined to nurture this illusion as it supported their longing for absolute power. The longing blinded them to the truth that giving more power to the state could jeopardize the finding and implementation of real solutions to the problems. To the extent that the southern expansion enabled the state to wield an unprecedented level of authority and power thanks to new resources and increased revenues to the state, it made possible its evolution into a “modern” autocracy under Haile Selassie. The notion of botched modernization is in full display in this misuse of a positive move that saved Ethiopia from colonialism. Without a doubt, the use of the southern expansion to strengthen state power stood in the way of the full integration of southern peoples as well as of the implementation of much-needed reforms.

Autocracy and its Aftermaths

The fact that the southern expansion created a structural modification unfavorable for thoroughgoing modernizing reforms shows that the culprit for the botched modernization is manifestly the progressive establishment of autocratic rule. Its consequences, namely, the emergence of a grave imbalance between regional powers and the central power, the institution and embedment of a parasitic landowning class, and the dispossession of society of any kind of autonomous standing, are impossible to reconcile with a real modernizing program.

Harold Marcus situates the premises of the evolution toward autocracy just after the victory of Adwa. He writes: Menelik's “tendency toward autocracy became more pronounced after 1896. Whereas previously he had rarely made decisions without the advice of his major *makwanent*, after the Battle of Adwa he acted independently. He alone was the Ethiopian state.”⁷ Surely, the prestige of the victory as well as the important resources of the south made the imperial throne increasingly more powerful, independent, and self-reliant. Neither regional lords nor any other traditional institution could counterbalance the authority of the central government. By means of slow but cumulative centralizing measures, regionalism and, with it, the Ethiopian traditional nobility, were thus progressively stripped of their customary authority. Let us be clear: some form of centralization was necessary, given the impossibility of implementing a modernizing program in a social system breeding political instability, as was the traditional society. Still, when centralization gives absolute power to the imperial throne in the name of modernization without any safeguard against abuses, the very ones likely to go against the modernizing project itself, one must admit that the hidden but intended objective is to use modern methods and institutions for a non-modern purpose.

The mentioned divergence between the Japanese path and that of Ethiopia precisely stemmed from the Ethiopian drift toward autocracy. Indeed, while the Meiji Constitution provided the Japanese monarchy with a parliamentary system, no evolution toward the formation of a parliament invested with some power came to pass in Ethiopia. This difference was the more significant the more slavishly Haile Selassie's constitution imitated the Meiji constitution, except

on the question of “the power of the emperor vis-à-vis the legislative body.”⁸ Whereas the Japanese political system increasingly tended to turn the emperor into a mythical figure, the Ethiopian system went in the opposite direction of concentrating all powers in the hands of the monarch.

Given that the control of absolute power required the marginalization of the traditional counterforces, especially of regional powers, the traditional nobility, and the church, it brought about the progressive and systematic divestment of these forces of any important role in the modernization process. The purpose was to present Haile Selassie as the sole inspirer, planner, and executor of the modernization of Ethiopia. In order to accomplish this role, Haile Selassie appealed to careerists devoted to him and somewhat exposed to Western education to assist him in the consolidation of his autocratic rule. With the same purpose in mind, he opened modern schools and exhorted parents to send their sons and daughters to these schools, the ultimate goal being the formation of educated bureaucratic and military elites fully committed to him.

It should be noted that the political marginalization of traditional counterforces did not entail a demotion from their social ranks; nor did it clear the way for their transformation into a new class interested in supporting the modernization of the country. As a matter of fact, the imperial plan had a two-fold purpose. The first one was to portray the traditional nobility in general as antithetical to modern reforms, so as to justify its political marginalization. In this regard, the early Ethiopian intellectuals called Japanizers gave an inadvertent helping hand to the autocratic project of Haile Selassie through their description of the nobility as an irremediably conservative and reactionary class. As an Ethiopian scholar notes, the Japanizers “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.”⁹ The indiscriminate characterization of the nobility as reactionary did not probably correspond to reality since, as was the case in other countries, there is always a split between the ultra-conservatives and those who understand the need for reforms. All the same, the wholesale accusation of ultra-conservatism was accepted as a true portrayal of the Ethiopian nobility, with the consequence that it boosted the justification of autocracy. The sad part of the indiscriminate bashing of the nobility was that it missed the other side of conservatism, namely, its attempts, no doubt clumsy, to oppose autocracy by defending the traditional balance of power between the throne and the nobility.

The second imperial purpose was to turn the nobility into a class dependent on the power of the throne, thereby changing its opposition to autocracy into forced support. This could be done if, in compensation for its loss of power, which included the right to raise and command a regional army, the nobility is made to have high stakes in the preservation of a powerful imperial regime. In effect, both Menelik and especially Haile Selassie engaged in the task of distributing land and tax rights to warlords, notably in the south. It is this practice of distributing land that most strikingly exposes the degeneration of the southern expansion. As we saw in Chapter III, it led to the institution of two different social systems in the northern traditional part and in the recently integrated southern part. The traditional Ethiopian system of landownership excluded private property as well as the existence of a landless peasant class. The economic power of the nobility was based on *gult* rights—i.e., on the right to tax land—and not on direct ownership. The original land policy of Menelik, known as the *sisso* system, was designed to introduce such *gult* rights in the southern part. According to the policy “two-thirds of the land was confiscated and declared state property, while the remaining third was left to the ‘natives’.”¹⁰ However, *gult* holders in the south “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.”¹¹ Even though the progressive transformation of tax rights into private ownership of land had begun during Menelik's time, after his death it was

accelerated and legalized by Haile Selassie's various land reforms. Thus, while the northern part retained the traditional *rist* system, "tenancy emerged in the mid-1930s" in the southern part.¹² It was generalized and perfected through successive measures until the land policy of 1966 openly decreed "the stark fact of irredeemable loss of land."¹³

This dualist system of "overlordship in the north and landlordship in the south," to use Gebru Tareke's felicitous expression, confirms that the *rist* system was the main stumbling block to the rise of a landed nobility.¹⁴ Because kinship right regulated the *rist* system, it prohibited private ownership, and hence the appearance of landless peasants. However, what neither the imperial power nor the nobility had managed to achieve for so many centuries became possible in the south, where a different land tenure prevailed and, most of all, where the status of conquered territory reduced the possibility of sustained resistance. Combined with the ethnic disparity between the conquerors and the conquered, these factors greatly facilitated the institution of private holding. Tenancy appeared in Ethiopia because the *sisso* system in the conquered territories permitted huge lands to be declared state property, which, in turn, allowed the transformation of *gult* rights into private possessions. While the north retained the sense of kinship property enabling it to resist state encroachment and privatization, state intervention in the south de-communalized land ownership and accelerated the appearance of tenancy.

The state's control of vast territories could not be anything other than a decisive backer of the imperial power. It could be used to reward loyal associates and, more importantly, to compensate the nobility for its political loss. The distribution of state-owned lands to the nobility provided entitlement and protection for landownership to nobles and associates who had no affiliation to local communities. And as the state progressively took over the military and administrative role that traditionally belonged to the nobility, these grants were insidiously transforming the whole nobility into a parasitic class. Cut off from local-based communities and having no specific social responsibilities, nobles became absentee landlords. This right accorded to the nobility to own land privately, how else could it be described but as a form of bribe, a corrupting scheme? The contrast between Haile Selassie's refusal of land reform and his acute awareness of the need for such a reform confirms that land was used as a bribe. One would definitely deduce the imminent announcement of land reform after hearing the following imperial diagnosis: "The fundamental obstacle to the realisation of the full measure of Ethiopia's agricultural potential has been, simply stated, lack of security in the land. The fruits of the farmer's labour must be enjoyed by him whose toil has produced the crop."¹⁵ This correct assessment did not prevent the enacted "reforms" from going in the direction of expanding and strengthening tenancy. The tag of a parasitic, useless, blood-sucking class could not have been better tailored.

It is here that we find another crucial distinction between Japan and Ethiopia. Reforms in Japan were not so much meant to exclude the nobility as to force its conversion to modern methods and values. Take the abolition of feudalism. As one author pointed out, "in Japan, feudal people are abolishing feudalism. In so doing, they are of course changing themselves into another class."¹⁶ Nothing of the kind happened in Ethiopia: not only was the nobility secluded from participating in the modernization effort, but it was also changed into a dependent and parasitic class. As such, it could defend its interests only by opposing reforms and supporting the imperial autocracy. Thus, although Haile Selassie claimed that he has "assumed the sacred duty of guiding Our beloved country along the path of progress and enlightenment and of amalgamating Ethiopia's traditions and customs with the demands of the modern world," in reality, the so-called synthesis of modernity with tradition was just a distortion of tradition in the direction of autocratic rule.¹⁷ The

truth is that Haile Selassie used modern means to eliminate all those traditional aspects that stood in the way of autocracy while retaining the mythical religious meaning of emperorship.

Another, but no less critical outcome of Ethiopia's derailed modernization under the imperial autocracy was the gestation of a major problem that will adversely impact future developments. I am referring to the termination of the federal status of Eritrea in 1962 and its annexation as an Ethiopian province. The establishment and consolidation of an imperial autocracy could not tolerate the federal autonomy of Eritrea for long: from the early days of the federation, the imperial government engaged in various measures undermining the federal status, like banning political parties and imposing the Amharic language. Soon after, not only guerrilla movements protesting the annexation were set off, but they also gained momentum as Eritrean frustrations grew to the point of embracing a secessionist agenda from Ethiopia. Needless to say, the mishandling of the Eritrean issue is one of the major predicaments that Haile Selassie bequeathed to the regimes that came after him. It is not an exaggeration to say that the resilience of the EPLF guerrilla movement in Eritrea, not only inspired and influenced ethnonationalist ideologies in Ethiopia, but more importantly, it lent decisive support that strengthened the guerrilla movement that was to implement ethnonationalism in Ethiopia, to wit, the TPLF. Hardly can one think of a legacy that is more detrimental to Ethiopia and its modernization than the botching of the Eritrean federation. Quite rightly, the incompatibility between autocracy and the federal status of Eritrea can be seen as the matrix of the ethnonationalist turn of Ethiopian politics.

The Imperial Educational System and Eurocentrism

There is no doubt that Haile Selassie, who had a clear insight into the decisive role of education for his program of modernization, viewed the expansion of modern education as his major task. As he himself put it: "We assumed the obligation to foster and expand education in Our nation both as a solemn duty, because the nation can flourish and grow only as the ranks of the teachers and students are expanded and filled."¹⁸ The question is: What kind of education did Haile Selassie have in mind? Obviously, the kind of education that is suitable to an autocratic rule that assumed the task of "modernizing" the country. In other words, an education that is modern/Western without being liberal and too deferential to past norms. In effect, the autocratic project went hand in hand with an educational policy that had little tolerance for academic freedom at all levels of the teaching process as well as in research and publications. To lay its foundation, Haile Selassie mostly relied on an expatriate teaching staff, notably with a religious background, both to design the curriculum and to do the teaching. He also sent young Ethiopians abroad for further university studies who, on their return, became members of the teaching and administrative staff.

As mentioned in the last chapter, many university professors criticized the regime's repressive policy and exposed its detrimental effects on the educational system as a whole. Because of the lack of academic freedom, higher institutions failed to educate students properly, that is, to teach them to become rational, realistic, and open to peaceful and democratic debates. Without freedom in teaching and research, students cannot develop sober, realistic, and critical thinking. By contrast, the acquisition of realistic and critical thinking protects students from extremist and dogmatic views. Indeed, students can neither connect with the true reality nor develop rational views on social realities by critically confronting various theories if the right to teach freely and disseminate objective research findings is outlawed and punished as a crime. Unfortunately, what many professors feared became reality, as Ethiopian students progressively succumbed to extremist ideologies propagated by fringe groups.

To understand fully the debacle of the Ethiopian educational system, it is crucial to reassess the impacts of the Westernized system of education. When a non-Western country copies and implements the educational system of the West, the mission of that education can only be to modernize the society in the image of the West, which means literally to civilize the country, to drag it out of its barbarism. The image presents the West as the educator and non-Western societies as tutees. Not only is such a system closely affiliated with the colonial design, but it is also the perfect instrument for natives' internalization of the unequal, racist tutor/tutee relationship. Unsurprisingly, the exported nature of the system of education aroused, especially during the early years of its introduction, the strong opposition of the Ethiopian Church and most members of the nobility. Though the opposition was a normal defensive reaction against the intrusion of an alien system, it was again interpreted as another evidence of the anti-modernism of the two institutions.

Many criticisms can be labeled against the educational system under Haile Selassie. Poorly funded, it suffered from the lack of both human and material resources. Also, it was unequally distributed between regions and limited to some urban centers to the near exclusion of rural areas. Another concern was the excessive emphasis on academic teaching at the expense of technical/vocational trainings. Nonetheless, these criticisms, serious as they are, do not get to the core of the problem, which is that the educational policy lacked national direction and objectives. According to many scholars, the main reason for the lack of a national direction arises from the decisive role that foreign advisors, administrators, and teachers played in the establishment and expansion of Ethiopia's educational system. Because of the influential role of foreigners, the defining feature of the system was that it was "essentially constructed to serve a different society than the Ethiopian one. . . . Curricula as well as textbooks came from abroad. There was little in the curricula related to basic and immediate needs of the Ethiopian society."¹⁹

The fact that the curriculum tended to reflect at all levels courses offered in Western countries could only have a severe alienating effect. Notably, that Catholic and Protestant academic staff played an influential role in the design and teaching of the curriculum clearly meant that the educational system had forsaken the goal of defending and promoting the national culture, which was interwoven (as perceived at the time) with the Orthodox religious legacy. Add to this uprooting effect the glaring inadequacy of the system to the goal of national development, even though the imperial regime used to reiterate that development was the main objective of education. Copied from the West, the system was not geared toward the production of graduates trained to serve the specific needs of the country, still less to partake in and contribute to the national development plan and effort.

Official speeches repeatedly stressed the need to correct the system, "to Ethiopianize the entire curriculum"²⁰ But nothing substantial was done concretely. The little improvements that were introduced here and there, for example, the offering of more courses on Ethiopia, such as history courses, did not address the real problem. When the main issue was the ideological reorientation of the entire educational system, a quantitative increase of courses devoted to Ethiopia could hardly be consequential. Courses dealing with Ethiopian legacy, environment, and socioeconomic problems were simply appended to a curriculum that remained largely Eurocentric both in its inspiration and contents. Put plainly, the Ethiopian educational system failed to accomplish the two basic tasks of any education, namely, the transmission of the cultural legacy of the country to the next generation and the production of graduates trained to attend to the needs of the country. Worse yet, by propagating the Eurocentric paradigm, the system produced students with a declining sense of national identity, nay, with a marked contempt for their own legacy. In so doing, what else could it foster but "a rootless social caste?"²¹ The usage of the Eurocentric

paradigm essentially signified that Ethiopian students were taught to see the world and their country through the lenses of the West. They were thus analyzing their own country and themselves, not from their own perspective, but from the borrowed and decentering perspective of the West. In other words, they were relating to Ethiopia, their own country, as colonizers related to non-Western countries. It is not surprising if they ended up thinking and behaving as colonizers, thereby showing the same urge to dispose of whatever is traditional because they labeled it “backward,” “uncivilized.”

Insofar as modern teaching was introduced by expelling the traditional system of education, Ethiopian students had nothing to fall back on except to internalize the Western way of seeing things. Let there be no misunderstanding: essentially religious and little in sync with modernity, the traditional system was rightly criticized. But it is one thing to say that the system had to be renovated, quite another to entirely throw away the old in favor of an alien system. The path taken by Ethiopia was not to update, modernize the traditional system; it was to erase it so as to implement an alien, nay, a belittling system of creeds and norms. In leaving the transmission of legacy out of the educational system in the name of modernity, what else could have come to pass but the complete “Westernization” of the Ethiopian youth? What is more, as the course of subsequent developments confirms, from Westernization to the fascination with Marxism-Leninism, judged more consistent in its aversion toward past legacy and norms, the passage is an easy one.

The expulsion of the traditional education from modern schools naturally entailed a considerable decline of the influence of the Ethiopian Church. The resistance of the church to modern ideas and its refusal to reform itself is said to have been the major stumbling block to the reformation of the traditional education. Yet, the problem was not so much the resistance of the church as Haile Selassie’s reluctance to encourage its modernization. Rather than involving the church in the process of modernization, he opted for a policy that shielded it from modernization. The reason is always the same: in his bid to establish autocratic rule, the aloofness of the church from modern life was the best way to curtail its traditional authority. Since the state’s appropriation of the monopoly of education represented a great loss of authority, Haile Selassie compensated the church, as he did with the nobility, with land grants and other privileges. This form of bribe did nothing but transform the church’s “relative autonomy into dependency on the state’s policies.”²² Given that “the Churches in Europe managed to lay down the basis for most of secular higher learning,” the charge of unsuitability to keep the Ethiopian Church out of the modernization process was just a bogus pretext.²³

Again, a comparison with Japan is most instructive. The way Japan introduced modern education is singularly different from the Ethiopian experience. The difference does not lie in the fact that Japan did not import or imported less from the Western educational system. It borrowed from the West extensively, both by using foreign instructors and textbooks and by sending young Japanese to Western countries for higher studies. As a Japanese scholar writes: “the methods of constructing a modernized curriculum were modeled after European and American schools, and necessary materials and tools for teaching were introduced from those countries.”²⁴ The great difference, however, was that the Japanese ruling elite quickly realized the danger of alienation. Without a firm foundation in the traditional heritage, an educational system modeled on the West could very well be quite uprooting. To counter this dangerous development, the government issued a decree known as “the *Kyôgaku Taishi* (Principles of Education) of 1879,” which introduced the traditional Confucian philosophy and ethics into the modern educational system. The declaration emphasized the importance of “the virtues of benevolence, responsibility, loyalty and fidelity

based on the precepts of [Japanese] ancestors” and added that “in the teaching of morality, the Confucian morality will be primary.”²⁵ This interpenetration of the traditional and the modern shaped a mind able to appropriate Western science and technology while remaining Japanese, and this invested modern education with a national foundation and purpose. In this way, introducing modern education amounted to the process of reforming and adapting the traditional teaching to the modern world.

Haile Selassie’s policy of education did not contemplate correcting measures similar to Japan’s because it was saddled with a basic inconsistency. The inconsistency stands out when we contrast his statements with the implemented system. In his official speeches, he often praises and defends the traditional legacy of Ethiopia, but in practice he did nothing to protect it. For instance, in one of his speeches, he said:

Ethiopia is a country with her own cultures and mores. These, our cultures and customs, more than being the legacy of our historical past, are characteristics of our Ethiopianness. We do not want our legacies and traditions to be lost. Our wish and desire is that education develop, enrich, and modify them.²⁶

In practice, however, “the imperial regime did very little to inculcate respect for Ethiopian traditions of social and political organization. It left the curriculum and most of the teaching in secondary schools to expatriates who quite naturally spread the gospel of modernization.”²⁷ The explanation for the inconsistency lies in the conflicting requirements of autocracy. The latter opposes tradition as much as it needs it. The solution is then to change the opposition of tradition to autocracy in such a way that it capitulates and becomes amendable to autocratic rule. This is exactly the manner Haile Selassie dealt with the nobility. The latter was not simply eliminated; it was preserved in a form that made it unable to counterpoise the imperial power. The same solution was applied to the church: it was maintained but stripped of its traditional influence. In becoming dependent, just as in the case of the nobility, the church was put in a position where it could only champion autocracy. In the same way, the traditional cultural heritage was neither abandoned nor renovated; it was simply neutralized by being kept out of the modernization process, and so rendered unable to hinder the exercise of autocratic rule.

In adopting the Eurocentric paradigm, the educational system turned away from the nurture of a competitive spirit against the West. The proof of this is that Ethiopia’s Westernized elite never engaged in the task of defining the Ethiopian legacy as the outcome of a different cultural line, as was attempted by some theoretical developments in Africa.²⁸ These African theories refused the qualification of backward or primitive by arguing that Western norms cannot evaluate cultural trends that are dissimilar from those of the West. The case is different when the West is viewed as a model: the guiding principle then becomes passive imitation rather than competition. By contrast, the perception of the West as an opponent encourages deviations, that is, urges for the mobilization of those traditional characteristics and peculiarities liable to bolster the competitive edge of the developing country. It is because the imperial system forsook the defense of identity that the educational system did not feel the need to renew and transmit the legacy. The final significance of all this is clear enough: a system of education entirely modeled on the Western system presupposes and consecrates the imperial regime’s acceptance of Ethiopia’s peripheral status. In becoming a periphery of the West, Ethiopia ceased to have its own objectives and courses of action. The missing national ideology in the system of education was thus just a manifestation of this loss of national objectives and centeredness.

The irony is that the modern schools that Haile Selassie opened to serve his autocratic project became the breeding ground for the liquidation, not only of the nobility, but also of the imperial power itself. What is more, in a country renowned for its protracted and stubborn religiosity, a great number of Ethiopian educated youth, including some bureaucrats and junior officers, converted to Marxist atheism. How did this ideological and cultural turnaround become possible in a country with a proven tenacious will for self-preservation? Answering this question is also probing further into the momentum of derailment that impacted adversely on the modernization process.

¹ Patrick Gilkes, *The Dying Lion* (London, Julian Friedman Publishers, Ltd., 1975), 61.

² Stéphane Ancel and Éloi Ficquet, “The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) and the Challenges of Modernity” *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia*, eds. Gerard Prunier and Elio Ficquet ((London: Hurst & Company, 2015), 74.

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