From Marxism-Leninism to Ethnicity: the Sideslips of Ethiopian Elitism

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For many scholars, colonialism and neocolonial policies remain the root causes of Africa's numerous impediments, ranging from the persistence of poverty to the ravages of ethnic conflicts. However, the number of scholars who prefer to ascribe these impediments essentially to the persistence of traditional views and methods and to the lack of reforms radical enough to trigger a sustained process of modernization is not negligible. My position contests this either-or debate and identifies the culprit as the rise of African elitism--a phenomenon implicating the specific effect of colonialism in conjunction with internal African contributions. I take the case of Ethiopia as a pertinent illustration of the precedence of elitism over other hindrances. The fact that Ethiopia, though not colonized, has followed the same declining course as other African countries underlines the derailing role of modern education whose embedded Eurocentric orientations were quick to uproot those sectors of Ethiopian society which were exposed to it. The outcome was elitism, which spearheaded the trend of deeper marginalization and incapacitation of the country. But first, let me give a concrete meaning to the concept of elitism.

What Is Elitism?

The determination of elitism as a characteristic effect of colonial rule is not hard to establish. The first scholar who drew attention to the phenomenon of elitism in Africa is a Western missionary by the name of Placide Tempels. In his controversial book, *Bantu Philosophy*, written in 1945, Tempels defends the idea that the Bantu people have a rationally constructed philosophy. The revolutionary message of the book is easily admitted when it is recalled that the denial of philosophy, which was almost a universal European attitude, was the manner the rationality of Africans was contested. Since the denial was none other than the justification of colonialism as a civilizing mission, it is no surprise if many African scholars hail Tempels as "a real revolutionary, both in philosophy and in anticolonial discourse."[1]

In addition to refuting the colonial allegation of irrational and immature peoples, Tempels has reflected on the evil consequences of denying philosophy to native peoples. The trend of considering the African cultural legacy as a collection of irrational and absurd beliefs, he noted, turned the clearing of the African mind of these beliefs into a prerequisite for the inculcation of Western ideas. Instead of dialogue and exchange of ideas, acculturation thus took the direction of uprooting natives on the grounds that they would become fit for Westernization only through the removal of their cultural legacy. Tempels consistently blames this colonial method for causing irreparable damages, especially for accelerating dehumanization and loss of centeredness among the Bantu. "In condemning the whole gamut of their supposed 'childish and savage customs' by the judgment 'this is stupid and bad', we [missionaries] have taken our share of the responsibility for having killed 'the man' in the Bantu,"[2] he writes.

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[1] D.A. Masolo, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p.67.
[2] Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy* (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1952), p.20.

A characteristic result of this inhuman method is the advent of the *évolués*–a French term to characterize those natives who supposedly evolve into civilized Africans as a result of colonial education. Tempels has no kind words to describe the *évolués*. He calls them from the start "*déracinés* and degenerates"[3]; elsewhere he speaks of them as "empty and unsatisfied souls--would be Europeans--and as such, negations of civilized beings," as "moral and intellectual tramps, capable only, despite themselves, of being elements of strife."[4] All these severe flaws point the finger at colonial methods: molded to despise their legacy, these uprooted Africans have so internalized the colonial attitude that they end up by nurturing a contempt for their own peoples similar to that of the colonizer. To show that colonial education produces people with a colonizing turn of mind, Tempels stresses that the *évolués* "have no longer any respect for their old institutions, or for the usages and customs which, nevertheless, by their profound significance, form the basis of the practical application in Bantu life of natural law."[5] Since the primary function of the *évolués* is to serve as a local instrument of colonial rule, their teaching, training, and mode of life dispose them to construe the dislike of their own legacy as a norm of civilized behavior.

In particular, when on top of being cut off from their society and pristine beliefs these *évolués* feel in their bones the inhumanity of their colonial masters, what else could rise within them but disillusionment and general cynicism? How can they avoid cynicism when, for all the loss of commitment to their tradition they have gone through, the colonial society still rejects them? Is it surprising if these would-be Europeans internalize all the vices of the colonizer without assimilating any of the positive aspects of modernity? Tempels fully understands the awkward position of the *évolués*: mesmerized by the power of the colonizer, yet repulsed by his racist contempt. He defines them as "profoundly distrustful or embittered," by the obvious lack of "recognition of and respect for their full value as men by the Whites."[6] Because their hopes have been raised only to be knocked down without mercy, humiliation is for these people a source of constant torment. So mortifying is their humiliation that it seeks appeasement even in manifestations of eccentricity and megalomania, obvious as it is that the need to impress the colonizer at all costs grows into an itch.

This means that the opposition of the *évolués* to colonial rule hides deeper emotional disorders of the kind pushing them toward negative and destructive behaviors. In this respect, the error has been to take at face value the rebellious stand of the *évolués*. No doubt, their role has been decisive in the struggle for independence. But one thing is to rise against an alien rule, quite another to develop an independent policy and turn of mind. To overlook this distinction is to miss the extent to which the perpetuation of the colonial rule under the guise of independence remains the appalling reality of Africa.

Let us agree to call African elitism the entitlement to an uncontested leadership inferred from the privilege of being exposed to modern education. The inference singles out the *évolués* as heirs to the civilizing mission. It is as though Westernization passes on to local elites the right to rule, that is, to continue the unfinished business of colonialism.

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[3] Ibid., p.19.
[4] Ibid., p.117.
[5] Ibid., p.118.
[6] Ibid., p.116.

In other words, to rule is still a civilizing mission with this difference that it is assumed by natives rescued from primitiveness. The entitlement to rule maintains the belief that Africans are indeed primitive, and so calls for methods of government similar to the colonial rule. The reality of native rulers thinking and acting like former colonizers makes up the substance of African elitism. Basil Davidson has described well the process of its institution thus:

> The regimes installed at independence became rapidly subject to upsets and uproars. Striving to contain these, the multi-party parliamentary systems gave way increasingly, whether in theory or practice, to one-party system. Most of these one-party systems at this stage, perhaps all of them, decayed into no-party systems as their ruling elements became fully bureaucratized. Politics came to an end; mere administration took its place, reproducing colonial autocracy as the new 'beneficiaries' took the place of the old governors.[7]

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Colonialism, it follows, remains the major source of hindrance not so much by its plunders and destructions--which though not negligible were nevertheless reparable--as by its ideological legacy. The colossal human wreckage caused by the internalization of the colonial discourse and so aptly personified by the *évolués* is how Africa was handed over to psychopathic personalities.

To be specific, what defines elitism is the normative union of knowledge with power, that is, the assumption that those who get exposed to Western education should also rule. Behind this entitlement to rule, we find the ethos of the *évolués* who, having internalized the Western discourse, take on the task of rescuing their society from barbarism and ignorance. It is because modernization is perceived as a passage from savagery to civilization that knowledge, enlightenment entitles one to power. So defined, modernization construes power as tutorship, and so designates the educated elite as the legitimate heir to colonial rule. The situation, then, is that educated Africans present themselves, in the words of Davidson,

> as those who were to be the instruments of applying the European model to Africa, and therefore as the saviours of the continent. Being sure of the values of their Western education, they were convinced of their superiority over their vast majority: who but they, after all, possessed the keys to the powerhouse of knowledge whence European technology and conquest had flowed?[8]

The assignment to civilize completely redefines the role of the state. According to the influential liberal theory, modern states implicate a contract of citizens among themselves and with the government as a result of which the latter becomes accountable to the former. Classical Marxist theory insists that the contract does not involve the working people, there being no doubt that governments protect the interests of ruling classes. The attribution of a modernizing role to the state adds a civilizing mission to the normal administrative and political functions of the state. In other words, following the colonial paradigm, from representative of social forces the state grows into a tutor. And who can direct this state if not those natives who have access to Western knowledge.

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[7] Basil Davidson, *Let Freedom Come* (Boston: An Atlantic Monthly Press Book, 1978), p.298.
[8] Ibid., p.148.

Since civilization must come from outside, power must become tutorship. This equation produces elitism in all its various forms.

One African scholar who has closely studied the phenomenon of elitism and its negative effects is V. Y. Mudimbe. Specifically referring to "elitism and Western dependency,"[9] Mudimbe shows that both are products of Africans talked into the smearing of African past and legacy by Western indoctrination. The proven method of the indoctrination is "the static binary opposition between tradition and modernity"[10] whose consequence is to rule out the presentation of modernity as an extension, a continuation of tradition. Pushed to the other side of modernity, tradition appears as the major obstacle that must be liquidated for evolution to take off. The consent to this liquidation precisely produces the *évolué* as the one who, having a foot in both the modern and traditional worlds, best promotes the hierarchical order of colonialism by serving as a reliable liaison between colonized and colonizers.

It scarcely need be pointed out that the acquiescence of Africans to the colonial description of African tradition is what nurtures the elitist mentality by reviving the *évolué* sleeping in every "educated" African. It causes a characteristic blur assimilating the use of colonial conceptions and methods to an enlightened and positive approach. As a result of this mix-up,

> the indigenous societies of Africa will be not so much transformed as replaced by modern, secular societies; and the key agents of this process will be indigenous elites, including business elites or capitalists, conceive of as bearers of the necessary universal values of global modernity.[11]

As substitutes for colonizers and in default of being able to whiten themselves, the *évolué*s resolve on a condescending and paternalistic attitude which, however far it falls short of being racist, is nevertheless entitlement to privilege and uncontested leadership.

To sum up, the elitist attitude echoes the colonial mentality means that the moral bankruptcy of the educated elite is a direct consequence of the endorsement of the idea of primitive Africa. The act by which Africans welcome Western education is the act by which they acquiesce to the colonial discourse on Africa: the one is inseparable from the other. As a result, educated Africans are unable to adopt a moral standard: the contempt--mostly unconscious--that they feel for Africanness totally deprives them of ethical relationships with themselves and their original society. Disdain and non-accountability appear to them as the only way by which they demonstrate their complete emancipation from their legacy. Imperative, therefore, is the recognition as a major explanation of African numerous impediments the fact that modern African states have simply replaced the colonial states. Because "Africans replaced the Europeans officials right to the top of the bureaucracy"[12] without the prior dismantling of the colonial state and methods, especially without a far-reaching decolonization of the educated and political elites, small wonder the same structure and turn of mind produce similar results.

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[9] V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p.160.
[10] Ibid., p.189.
[11] Bruce J. Berman, "African Capitalism and the Paradigm of Modernity: Culture, Technology, and the State," *African Capitalists in African Development* (Boulder: Lynne Reinner Publishers, 1994). p. 237.
[12] Ibid., pp. 250-251.

The Ethiopian Drift into Elitism

A noticeable and important distinction between Ethiopia and other African countries is, we know, its escape from colonization after a decisive military victory in 1896 over a colonial power. Combined with the other distinctive characteristics of Ethiopia, namely, the protracted existence of an Ethiopian state (the so-called Solomonic dynasty) with a well-defined class structure (the *gebar* system) and a nationalist ideology (the *Kibre Negest*), the repulsion of colonial aggression announced the inevitability of the rise of an African power on a par with modern European states. So promising was the prospect that many observers predicted the repetition of the Japanese experience by Ethiopia. To show that expectation was high in Europe, especially after the victory of Adwa, a Paris journal, *La liberté* editorialized: "All European countries will be obliged to make a place for this new brother who steps forth ready to play in the dark continent the role of Japan in the Far East."[13]

In light of this expectation, the failure and underdevelopment of Ethiopia turn into an appalling enigma, all the more so as the usual explanation of the African impediment by colonialism is here ruled out. Ethiopia escaped colonization means essentially that power and ideological leadership did not devolve on the *évolués*. Instead, there was a remarkable continuity, as evidenced by the opening of Ethiopia to the modern world through the agency of its traditional ruling elite. So that, this fact of Ethiopia becoming underdeveloped while no leadership of the *évolué* type hampered its evolution seems to backfire on my thesis ascribing the African predicament to elitism. If there is one country in Africa that was protected against the rise of the *évolués*, this country was Ethiopia.

Let us not rush to conclusions, however. Ethiopia's escape from the political domination of colonialism must be viewed against the background of the large doors that it naïvely opened to Western education in the name of modernization. In our study of the *évolués*, we have emphasized that the disastrous consequences of colonial conquest result less from economic and social disruptions than from mental colonization. Accordingly, the reckless opening of Ethiopia to modern education brings us back to the same issue of elitism with even greater strength, since we catch the uprooting and alienating effect of such an education working in a sovereign way. It shows that the inglorious and cumbersome conquest of Africa was not necessary: to achieve the colonization of the mind, with its set of marginalizing thinking, copyism, and dictatorial methods, in short, elitism, the spreading of Western education was enough.

Nowhere is this truth better illustrated than in the radicalization of Ethiopian student movements and educated circles in the 60s and 70s. True, this radicalism implicates Haile Selassie's postponement of necessary social and political reforms. But the postponement does not fully explain the shift to radicalism: a predisposition portraying the ills of Ethiopian society as so entrenched and stubborn that nothing less than a radical reshuffling was required must be added to the lack of reforms. The overwhelming dominance of revolutionary mood over reformist tendencies cannot be satisfactorily explained otherwise than by the corrosive effects of Western education on the student movements and intelligentsia. The dichotomy between tradition and

[13] Quoted by Robert Hess, *Ethiopia: The Modernization of Autocracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1970), p. 59.

modernity and the subsequent presentation of the break with tradition as a necessary precondition of modernization--this bedrock of Western education--explains the leaning toward revolutionary analyses to the detriment of reformist remedies.

This analysis finds a remarkable support in Tekeste Negash's book, *The Crisis of Ethiopian Education*. In that book, Tekeste brings out the essentially uprooting role that modern education has assumed in Ethiopia during Haile Selassie's reign and, with greater reason, during Derg's "socialist" rule. In his eyes, the teaching of a "boundless hatred of their country and its society"[14] to students has been the main purpose of modern education. Its outcome has been the elitist mentality, which talked students into perceiving themselves as "infallible semi-gods"[15] destined for undivided leadership. Tekeste traces back the origin of this megalomania to the ideological vacuum created by the distortion and neglect of the teaching of Ethiopian history. Taught only in grade ten, Ethiopian history was pictured by textbooks, especially by those of the Derg, as the unspeakable reign of a rotten feudal system whose backwardness and limitless exploitation of peasants condemned the country to be one of the poorest nations in the world. In thus squarely blaming tradition and the past for the present ills without balancing it with an account of the positive side, the history course amounted to an infusion of "shame, contempt and disgust."[16] Such remarkable realizations as the evolving of "a political state that endured for nearly two thousand years" and the achievement of a rich and varied culture which integrated different ethnic groups into "a functioning political framework"[17] were systematically downplayed.

This grave deficiency together with the systematic pursuit of debasement prompted Tekeste to speak of a "curriculum" with a "strikingly colonial character."[18] Even though, unlike the Derg, Haile Selassie had constantly pleaded for an approach balancing tradition and modernity, his prudence was nullified by his reliance on a massive foreign teaching corps whose commitment to Ethiopian interests was peripheral as well as by his intention to use modern education to consolidate his own autocratic rule. The debasement has today reached its climax with the establishment of an ethnic regime and the proliferation of ethnic movements whose grudges against the Ethiopian state, however legitimate they may be, are so excessive and one-sided that they echo the colonial disparagement of whatever is natively African. On the strength of his conviction that "underdevelopment cannot be overcome until such time when the citizens of a country begin to appreciate their history,"[19] Tekeste advises that "the cultivation of Ethiopian nationalism and patriotism . . . deserves priority."[20]

The history of Ethiopian intellectual movement squarely confirms the merit of this analysis. Let us take the case of the first intellectuals, those whose contributions took place before the Italian occupation of 1935. Addis Hiwet called them "Japanizers" because they who saw in the transformation of the post-Meiji modernization of Japan "a living model for Ethiopia: the liquidation of feudalism and the development of capitalism

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[14] Tekeste Negash, The Crisis of Ethiopian Education (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1990), p. 8.
[15] Ibid., p. 54.
[16] Ibid., p. 64.
[17] Ibid., p.66.
[18] Ibid., p. 69.
[19] Ibid., p. 54.
[20] Ibid., p. 88.

through the agency of the modern state--i.e. a revolution from above."[21] Yet the label "Japanizers", appealing though it may be, is misleading if only because the predominant inspiration of said intellectuals was less to modernize tradition than to copy the West. Not only did they openly call for the establishment of Haile Selassie's autocratic rule through the disablement of the Ethiopian nobility that they considered as incorrigibly reactionary and rotten, but most of them had also a profoundly iconoclastic view of Ethiopian culture and traditions. None of these views reflects the Japanese style, which took, we know, an integrative course resulting in the incorporation of many traditional elements into the process of modernization, besides avoiding the path of autocracy.

The alienation of these first intellectuals is best exemplified by Afework Gebre Yesus, the author of *Tobbya*. A great admirer of the West, Afework crossed the threshold of treason by turning into a staunch collaborator of the Italians during their occupation of Ethiopia. His tragedy is symptomatic of the deep contradiction of the Ethiopian intellectual movement: he loved Ethiopia as much as he admired the West. The conviction that the Ethiopian ruling class was utterly reluctant to modernization led him to endorse colonization as the only means to modernize Ethiopia. The error is to see his move as an accident or an exception: Afework was simply consistent. For him, since modernization means Westernization, what matters is the resolution to modernize, not the specific nationality of the modernizing agent. In this regard, the Ethiopian ruling elite has demonstrated its non-candidacy by its utter reactionary views and policy. So that, Afework's treason, correctly analyzed, reflects the hidden inspiration of all Ethiopians exposed to Western education, to wit, the longing for colonization. Whether this colonization is effected by Westerners or natives is immaterial so long as the contents and the goal are clearly set. We can even say, as Afework did, that the original being better than the copy, a direct colonization will achieve better results than modernization by proxy. Accordingly, the truth is that, while some of the first Ethiopian intellectuals, to quote Bahru Zewde, "may have fleetingly considered foreign rule as a way out for their country's backwardness, few went as far as Afework did."[22]

The other most important figure among the "Japanizers," namely, Gebre Hiwot Baykedagn, while ruling out recourse to foreign rule, arrives at the same image of Ethiopia in deadlock. For him too, the archaic beliefs and customs of Ethiopia and the hopelessly conservative attitude of the nobility and the clergy stand in the way of Ethiopian modernization. The solution is to get rid of these obstacles, the instrument being this time, not foreign rule, but Western education. The main goal is to produce an elite capable of replacing the nobility and the clergy. This strategy of replacing the traditional elite with Western educated state servants had one prerequisite: the rise of an autocrat who would be powerful enough to marginalize the traditional elite. Thus, following his belief that what Ethiopia needs is "a man of order, energy, intellect and

[21] Addis Hiwet, *Ethiopia: From Autocracy to Revolution* (London; Review of African Political Economy, 1975), p. 68.

[22] Bahru Zewde, "Review of Alain Rouand's Afa-Warq 1868-1947: un intellectual ethiopien temoin de son temps," in *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 27, 1 (1994), p. 225.

experience . . . who is both a friend of Progress and Absolutism,"[23] Gebre Hiwot identified Haile Selassie as the most appropriate candidate.

The deviations of these two representatives of the early intellectuals of Ethiopia indicate where lies the difference between them and those of the 60s. Undoubtedly, a deeper assessment of the Ethiopian deadlock and a complete loss of confidence on the traditional elite as well as on the emerging modern sectors single out the educated men and women of the 60s. The reluctance of Haile Selassie to apply reforming measures and the apparent connivance of the "bourgeois" sectors will lead to greater desperation about a class or a sector of Ethiopian society ever assuming the leading role in the positive transformation of Ethiopia. Totally abandoning the Japanizers' call for an autocrat, the intellectuals of the 60s came round to the idea that intellectuals *themselves* must seize power to implement the necessary reforms.

In this regard, no theory has been more influential than Leninism. In particular, the views that Lenin develops in his famous book, *What Is To Be Done*, appeared relevant to Ethiopia. Under the pretext that in the era of imperialism native aristocratic or bourgeois classes prefer alliance with imperialist forces to a revolutionary change, Lenin develops the principle that intellectuals, going beyond their normal role as bureaucrats, technicians, researchers, educators, and critics, should also become political leaders. To the perceived deadlock of Third World countries, itself due to the absence of a revolutionary bourgeoisie, Lenin proposes the theory of revolutionary intellectuals as a substitute. His argument that power and knowledge must come into the same hands is further strengthened by his assumption that, left to itself, the working class would be "able to develop only trade-union consciousness" so that the leadership must pass on to "the educated representatives of the propertied classes, the intellectuals" [24] Other Marxist intellectuals (Antonio Gramsci, Mao Tse-tung, Frantz Fanon, etc.) have added their voice, turning the conjunction of power and knowledge into a credo of revolutionary movements in Third World countries.

What is one to conclude from this? That the radicalization of the Ethiopian student movements and educated circles in the 60s and 70s, especially their strong leaning toward Marxism-Leninism, no doubt a product of the deferment of reforms, is a logical development of the growing impact of Western education. To the question why the reformist option was marginalized, the answer is that the theory that best produced an iconoclastic analysis of Ethiopia, of its ruling class and beliefs, was none other than Marxism-Leninism. Despite its undeniable commitment to justice and equality, the theory echoes the colonial description of native societies by its evolutionary views, its rejection of traditionality, and most of all, by the historical role that it assigns to the *évolués*. Moreover, the theory would not have had such influence were it not arousing and legitimizing the political ambition of educated circles. In a word, it is the theory that gives elitism its most powerful backing.

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[23] Richard Caulk, "Dependency, Gebre Heywet Baykedagn and the Birth of Ethiopian Rformism," in *Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, ed. Robert Hess (Chicago: University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, 1978), p. 572.

[24] V.I. Lenin, "What Is To Be Done," *Selected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 19), vol. 2, p. 53.

What we know of Ethiopian student movements and Marxist Leninist parties, be it the EPRP or MEISON, confirms their elitist drift. All referred to the reality of the Ethiopian social impasse and, agreeing with Leninism, thought the way out to be the seizure of political power by radicalized intellectuals. The move creates a new type of power, that is, a power aiming at liberating the masses rather than enforcing a particular interest. In a word, it creates a tutorial power: in the name of a class or large sections of the people, conceived unfit to conquer political hegemony, an enlightened group aspires to or seizes power. It claims to have the mandate for tutorship until the class or the people become mature enough to assume the task of self-government. Because politics thus shifts from administration to domestication, elitism is unthinkable without the assignment to modernize, itself understood in terms of snatching the ignorant masses from traditionality. Entirely agreeing with the colonial paradigm of civilizing mission, elitism asserts that, in light of the larger society being immobilized by centuries of apathy, fatalism, and barbarism, salvation must come from outside, from the enlightened few. When leading Ethiopian intellectuals hailed the revolutionary role of organized intellectuals, little did they realize that they were advocating a revamped version of the colonial rule.

Most importantly, Ethiopian intellectuals did not realize how implacably they were heading towards a dictatorial regime in the name of the people. The way they described themselves and their goal could not but institute dictatorship for the simple reason that the moral authority and selfness they bestowed on themselves as liberators of the working peoples turned them into semi-gods with no accountability to any social force. So disinterested and generous a goal is by definition beyond any question and so demands absolute submission. This is how a former activist describes his comrades: "EPRP's leading activists had no hidden agenda except struggling for what they believed was just--the well being of the Ethiopian poor . . . I am convinced that Ethiopia still mourns the death of its brightest and selfless children" [25]

In thus presenting themselves as having no particular interest, nay, as being beyond any interest except the cause of the poor, the intellectuals puffed themselves with such a moral authority that they soared above accountability, thereby giving themselves over to the worst type of paternalism. Relations among people can never be on an equal footing if the one party claims that it has no other interest and motivation than those of the other party. Such a claim annuls equality by turning the one into a granter and the other into a grantee. It is high time that intellectuals present themselves to the Ethiopian peoples as ordinary persons having specific interests and many limitations. Only thus can they evolve a contractual relationships with the masses whose support they need to defend their interests in the framework of a pluralist society. Only when they admit that they have particular interests can they get out of paternalism by clearly understanding that in defending the interests of the masses they are but defending their own particular interests. This is called general interest and partnership as a result of solidarity being created on the basis of mutual interests and not on the one party granting rights to the other party and deceitfully claiming to be without interest.

Crucially important was that most people became convinced that elitism was the way to go. Allow me to resort to my own experience. I still remember vividly the time

[25] Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1998), p. 492.

when people, especially women, were cheering us in the streets with *yililta* the first day of the opening of schools after the long vacation of the rainy season. We were then a bunch of kids going from the gulele area where we lived to the French school of Lycée Guebre Mariam on foot. Nothing was more expressive of the popular expectation than this cheering crowd. The Ethiopian saying, *yetemare yigdelegn*, best incarnates the expectation that modern schools produce the saviors of Ethiopia. Without doubt, this popularization of modern education goes to the credit of Haile Selassie. Thanks to his constant exhortation and the direct involvement of his uncontested authority, the popular response was not hard to come by: as a scholar notes "even bearded and senior men push their way into the schools, humbly but determinedly anxious, like their children, to learn English."[26] The prestige of being Western educated was such that the legitimation of power became unthinkable without some intellectual halo. And what could be more sanctifying than the brandishing of the theory of Marxism-Leninism? On top of claiming to be entirely scientific, the theory has an answer to all the questions. Above all, its deep humanitarian goals give it an unmatched moral authority. All this worked toward the belief that Marxism-Leninism alone entitles to power.

The irony, however, is that Ethiopian Marxist-Leninists were beaten at their own game by a sector of the military apparatus. Consecutive to the overthrow of the imperial regime, a group of military men, calling itself the Derg, hijacked the Marxist-Leninist discourse and rose to power by claiming to have the historic mission of leading the country toward socialism. To crown it all, the man who was among those that the criterion of high education least advantaged, namely Menguistu Haile Mariam, emerged as the uncontested leader of the Derg and established an absolute power. Yet, something of the intellectual justification remained, since Menguistu presented himself as the most dedicated promoter of Marxism-Leninism. To prove his commitment, in default of having the intellectual references, Menguistu resorted to terror and killing, the only way he knew to impress and convinced Ethiopians and the then socialist countries that he was indeed a true Marxist. This is to say that the intellectualization of power is responsible for both creating the Derg and causing the erratic and sanguinary behavior of Menguistu. No sooner is the state viewed as more of a tutor than an administrator, in line with the colonial idea of civilizing mission, than it ceases to be accountable to the society. You cannot recognize people as sovereign judges while believing that they are ignorant, passive, and unable to govern themselves. Democratic attitude requires the respect of the people, a course of thinking that elitism cannot adopt, diverted as it is by the mentality of the *évolué*.

Granted that the exposure to Western education has prepared the ground for the adoption of Marxist-Leninist approach in Ethiopia, the fact remains that the adherence to the theory would not have been systematic and widespread without the Eritrean issue. Though Ethiopia was not colonized, the centeredness of the traditionalist thinking was irremediably contaminated from within by the annexation of Eritrea, which was an Italian colony since 1890. The immediate result of the incorporation was that Eritrea became the Trojan horse of colonialism, especially in schools and among students as well as among military officers. The undermining from within of Ethiopian centeredness took two interrelated directions. The one direction has to do with many Eritreans having no or lost

[26] Margery Perham, *The Government of Ethiopia* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1947), p. 256.

loyalty to the Ethiopian ruling elite: their involvement in the Ethiopian society introduced a dissenting voice that was bound to be catching. It specially targeted the Amhara ruling elite for which most Eritreans had but contempt. Essentially inherited from the colonial time, this contempt considered the Amhara as utterly backward and the Eritreans as civilized, *évolué*. This view made the Amhara rule particularly intolerable so that the Italian colonization of Ethiopia, though it failed militarily, was revived by the Eritrean incorporation.

The second direction points to the Eritrean input into the radicalization of Ethiopian student and intellectual movements. To accommodate the Eritrean dissent, especially to counter the separatist tendency, the Ethiopian students movements and intellectuals had to agree to a radical reshuffling of Ethiopian society. They had to contemplate the end of the monarchy and all that it represents, thereby forsaking the reformist line. The radical theory of Marxism-Leninism was most welcome as it claimed to provide a solution to the question of nationalities. As theorized by Marxism-Leninism, the only genuine response to the Eritrean unrest could only be the absolute equality of all the nationalities based on the class interests of the working masses and the institution of regional autonomy. As one former member of the EPRP wrote:

> the majority of the Ethiopian radicals did not accept the inevitability of Eritrean independence. They believed that the recognition of the right to self-determination and the expediency of the formation of an independent state were two separate issues. They were still hopeful that, in the proper circumstances, class solidarity would prevail over nationalism and Eritreans would choose to remain with Ethiopia. [27]

It is my firm contention that without the attempt to accommodate the Eritrean demands, no major drift into Marxism-Leninism would have occurred, and by extension, no ethnicization of Ethiopian politics would have resulted. As in other countries, the radical option would have attracted a minority while the rest would have stood for a reformist course.

From Marxism-Leninism to Ethnicity

Unsurprisingly, the separatist tone of the Eritrean resistance had a great impact on the Tigrean educated elite. Already sensitized by the protracted rivalry between Amhara and Tigrean ruling elites and upset by the marginalization of Tigray following the triumphant establishment of a centralized monarchy under Haile Selassie, the Tigrean educated elite was but ready to push the ethnic issue as the major problem of Ethiopia. Also, neighborliness, linguistic identity, blood relationships, etc., worked toward a rapprochement between Tigrean and Eritrean analyses of Ethiopia even if, it is true, few Tigreans endorsed the Eritrean view of the Ethiopian state as a colonial rule.

To unravel the connection between Marxist-Leninist ideology and ethno-nationalism, it is necessary first to reflect on the colonial ideology itself, especially on the promotion of the idea of race in conjunction with colonial racism. Indeed, one lasting legacy of the colonial rule in Africa is the categorization of peoples as belonging to different and unequal human races. That this colonial heritage has opened the door to the

[27] Kiflu, *The Generation Part II*, p. xxxii.

ethnicization of African social life is not hard to establish. Fanon, for instance, gives a good idea of the logical connection between race and ethnicity when he elaborates on his warning that the mere replacement of colonial rulers by Africans will only indulge in a dependent policy reproducing the syndromes of colonial governments. In postcolonial Africa, he notes, "we observe a falling back toward old tribal attitudes, and, furious and sick at heart, we perceive that race feeling in its most exacerbated form is triumphing."[28] Inherited from colonial mentality, the rise of ethnicity is thus nothing more than racism in the African style. It is definitely an expression of colonized mentality in that it classifies, separates, excludes peoples on the basis of natural characteristics. To show that the dependent African elite exactly reproduces the principle of colonial rule, Fanon reminds us how "by its very structure, colonialism is separatist and regionalist. Colonialism does not simply state the existence of tribes; it also reinforces it and separates them."[29]

This is to say that people who have come under colonial rule have great propensity to value ethnic belonging. If so, the conceptualization of ethnic issues as the major problem of Ethiopia must be attributed to the ethnicization of the Eritrean opposition, which ethnicization is an outcome of the colonial heritage of Eritrea. For those who doubt the connection, I remind that the view of Ethiopia as an Amhara colony, before being espoused by Eritreans and some Oromo intellectuals, was an idea that Italians had originated to undermine the Ethiopian resistance. They have promoted the notion of "Greater Tigre" as well as that of "Greater Somalia," and during the five years of occupation have divided Ethiopia along ethnic lines to activate "the revolt of the non-Amhara populations such as the Oromo and the Muslims."[30] This reminder of the colonial authorship of the assimilation of the Ethiopian regime to a colonial rule only strengthens the extent to which Eritrean and Ethiopian ethno-nationalist movements feed on the colonial view of Ethiopia.

Naturally, the Eritrean characterization of Ethiopia had a prime seductive effect on Tigrean and Oromo educated circles. The rivalry between Amhara and Tigrean elites and the injustice of the land ownership in the south respectively paved the way for the ethnicization of Tigrean and Oromo intellectuals. While Tigreans denounced Amhara domination, some Oromo intellectuals, going further in the direction of the colonial theory, began to target the disintegration of Ethiopia and the emergence of an independent Oromia. The part played by missionary education in the generation of Oromo intellectuals committed to secession should not be ignored, given that the secessionist trend is unthinkable without significant encroachments, Protestant or otherwise, on the advances of Orthodox Christianity. This authorizes us to characterize the rise of ethnicity in Ethiopia as a contamination of legitimate grievances with racist views through the agency of Eritrea. As Leenco Lata admits, "Eritrea's incorporation into Ethiopia thus unexpectedly resulted in heightening the grievances of other southern peoples."[31] Seeing how people easily give in to the pragmatic criterion of success as an expression of truth, little wonder the definite impact of Eritrean resistance on Ethiopian

[28] Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1982), p. 158.
[29] Ibid., p. 94.
[30] Alberto Sbacchi, Ethiopia Under Mussolini (London: Zed Books Ltd, 1985), p. 157.
[31] Leenco Lata, *The Ethiopian State at the Crossroads* (Lawrenceville: The Red Sea Press, Inc.), p. 165.

opposition movements has been their growing conviction that ethnicization conditions success.

Another explanation of the shift from Marxism-Leninism to ethnicity is the resonance of the ethnic paradigm with the Leninist ideal as it appears in *What Is to Be Done*. The odyssey of selfless intellectuals liberating the working people from class exploitation is replayed with even greater fervor when these intellectuals think of freeing from ethnic oppression none other than their own kin. Equally relevant to ethnic mobilization is the Leninist supposition that working people need tutors to defend their interests. In addition to being taught to identify their separate interests, the ethnically oppressed need tutors whose devotion is warranted by the sharing of the same blood. That is why, just as Marxist-Leninists leaders do, ethnic nationalists like to theorize. The possession of a theory of history is what lifts them from ordinary politicians to saviors and liberators of their people. This theoretical aptitude, in turn, establishes their exclusive legitimacy. Just as Marxist-Leninist groups used to claim the exclusive right to represent the interest of the working masses, so too ethnic movements deny other groups the right to represent people if they are not ethnically related to them. This battle for legitimacy was effectively fought in Ethiopia: while the MAESON and the EPRP claimed "the exclusive right to implement Lenin's formula in Ethiopia . . . the TPLF adamantly rejected such a subordination of national liberation struggle to class struggle. By doing so, it succeeded to fend off these parties' encroachment into Tigrean society."[32]

A pertinent and recent example of the theoretical mania of ethnic movements is the debate that Meles Zenawi forced on his party to justify the dismissal of his opponents. The debate introduced the concept of "Banapartism" and the idea of "new Ethiopianness."[33] Given that Meles had in mind nothing more than the denunciation of the dangers of corruption, his reference to Bonapartism--a concept borrowed from Karl Marx--has clearly no other purpose than to link his discourse with a prestigious theory of revolution. In this way, not only does he impress his Tigrean basis, but he also exposes the theoretical poverty of his opponents, in particular demotes the military glory that they brandish at him. One can only agree with those delegates who could find no other way to express their bewilderment than to ask: "was it necessary to identify the problem as 'Bonapartism?'"[34] Some of them accused Meles of sabotaging the agenda of the meeting by putting forward an "unnecessary and obscure" notion, "just to pass off as a scholar."[35]

Precisely, perfectly aware of the importance of theoretical ascendancy in the justification of power in Third World countries, Meles grasps with both hands the opportunity of following in the footsteps of Lenin, Mao Tse-tung, Kwame Nkrumah, etc., by playing the role of the philosopher-king to an audience longing for theoretical absolutions in default of possessing a high level of intellectual sophistication. We find theoretical ability ranked as the major requisite for leadership in the interview that Meles recently gave to Abyotawi Democracy, the official journal of the EPRDF. In that interview, Meles explains his own ascendancy thus:

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[32] Ibid., p. 210.
[33] See Amharic *Reporter* (Addis Ababa: MCC), number 36 (Ginbot 1993).
[34] Ibid., p. 9. My translation.
[35] Ibid. My translation..

> What is important is the clarity of vision. Once you possess clarity in vision and a correct political line, competent leaders will necessarily emerge. From this viewpoint, the splinter group's lack of clarity and incorrect political line is one that has lost track and is bound to lead them to confusion. It is impossible to provide competent leadership while one is in such a state of confusion.[36]

One serious objection springs to mind: insofar as ethnicity is an attempt to return to the past and revive traditional identities and commitments, is it not contradictory to tie it to the colonized mind? Is not the search for a precolonial authenticity turning its back on the colonial legacy and modeling? No doubt, there is some such meaning. However, other than echoing, as we saw, the racist categorization of colonialism, the shift from Marxism-Leninism to ethno-nationalism involves the elitist ethos. Indeed, scholars have been struck by the modernist language of ethnicity: it speaks in terms of justice, democracy, self-determination, and educated groups are its most ardent supporters and leaders. Because of this modern content, many scholars rightly warn against any identification of ethnicity with tribalism. Yet behind the modern and democratic language, there looms an ascriptive entitlement to power. As one scholar notes, "the rigidity of ascriptive characteristics that define ethnicity compared to the fluidity of alternative bases of identity (especially class) accounts for the comparative advantage of ethnicity in sustaining group solidarity."[37] In going back to the past, elites discover a new form of entitlement: the ascriptive right of kinship. According to this principle, the representatives of ethnic groups have or exercise power as a matter of natural right, of belonging to the same natural group. They are the natural representatives of the group; their entitlement is in the blood, in the ethnic belonging. No other people have the right to represent them: others are precisely outsiders. Nor is there a more compelling principle of unity than natural solidarity; it even transcends classes and common economic interests. Class mobilization maintains the entrenched disadvantages by subordinating particular interests to common interests when what excluded groups need is the defense of their particularity. Because the alleged common interests usually favor the dominant ethnic group, minority groups prefer ethnic mobilization to class unity.

But then, ethnicity is where the ideology of unanimity, deposited in the Leninist notion of working masses, achieves its perfect expression. Grant that "ethnic nationalism" is "a divide-and rule strategy,"[38] as Leenco now concedes, and the ethnic group becomes the embodiment of unanimism: besides having common characteristics and history, members of an ethnic group are supposed to think alike and to have a common interest beyond class and status divisions. Better still, ethnic solidarity is presented as a normative behavior on the grounds that kinspersons are the most devoted representatives of the ethnic group. No better way exists to deliver a whole people in the

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[36] Walta Information Center webpage, "Full Text of the Interview of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi With Special Publication of 'Abyotawi Democracy,' Organ of the EPRDF." (Unofficial Translation)

[37] Shaheen Mozaffar, "The Institutional Logic of Ethnic Politics: A Prologomenon,"*Ethnic Conflict and Democratization in Africa*, ed.Harvey Glickman (Atlanta, Georgia: The African Studies Association Press, 1995), p. 37.

[38] Leenco, *The Ethiopian State at the Crossroads*, p. 238.

hands of elitism than to promise a breakaway ethnic state or a state functioning on the basis of ethnic solidarity.

[39] Recall the logic that pushes Nkrumah to argue in favor of the one-party system. It says that the one-party system "is better able to express and satisfy the common aspirations of a nation as whole, than a multiple-party parliamentary system, which is in fact only a ruse for perpetuating, and covers up, the inherent struggle between the 'haves' and the 'haves-nots.'"[40] Evidently, the principle works beautifully well for ethnicist politicians whose basic credo is the origination of common aspirations from ethnic membership. Not only ethnic solidarity replaces class solidarity, the dividing line being here between the ethnically related and the alien, but also diversity is believed to be detrimental to the struggle. The notion of ethnicity is thus responsible for illusory conceptions of unity that loses sight of the social, economic, and ideological diversity within the ethnic group. From the alleged ethnic identity, it is wrongly deduced that all members think alike. This allows despots to stifle differences and initiatives in the name of the ethnic unanimity: all that is dynamic, plural, and democratic is stigmatized as un-ethnical.

The enthronement of the enlightened few, who alone illuminate the road to freedom, follows as a matter of course. Nothing is more captivating than the elitist image of rescuer: dragged from their natural society and subjugated to an alien power, the oppressed ethnic groups need the tutorial leadership that puts them back into their authentic and original milieu. The ethnicist leader who claims to deliver his people from ethnic oppression gives no different spectacle from, say, that of Nkrumah forcefully implementing African socialism on a people that he otherwise declared to be socialist by tradition. In both cases, the elitist slip clearly transpires in the call for a tutorial state. There is no disparity between the ethnic principle of popular mobilization behind the enlightened few and Nkrumah's pronouncement on the success of the anti-colonial struggle. For both movements, success depends on the intervention of those who control knowledge. As Nkrumah puts it,

> this triumph must be accompanied by knowledge. For in the way that the process of natural evolution can be aided by human intervention based upon knowledge, so social evolution can be helped along by political intervention based upon knowledge of the laws of social development.[41]

Clearly, then, the imperative of a mass party guided by the enlightened few is how power and knowledge fall into the same hands, and government, thus armed with an ideology, changes into tutorship. The ethnic ideology of the return to the source gives a messianic stature to local elites, turn them into rescuers of the oppressed. Once ethnic solidarity becomes the principal rule, it stifles all dissident views by authorizing the characterization of all internal opposition as a betrayal of common interests. It exactly institutes unanimity around the leadership canonized as the sole interpreter of the interests of the ethnic group. As was the case with Marxist-Leninist groups, this apology of unanimism is a justification for dictatorial regimes and undemocratic methods of

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[40] Kwane Nkrumah, *Consciencism* (New York: Monthly ReviewPress, 1965), pp.100-101.
[41] Ibid., p.104.

ruling. If both ideologies converge on the necessity of the one-party system and the banishment of dissident views as well as on the rejection of individualism and the praise of the collective, it is because they work toward the goal of consecrating the absolute power of the enlightened few. The attraction of Marxist-Leninist groups to ethnicity is therefore inherent in the nature of ethnicity itself. If, as Leenco remarks, "the members of the fronts that were more successful in implementing the Leninist organizational strategy tended not only to act as one person but to speak as one, too,"[42] how much more so may ethnic leaders and the ethnic society they fashion.

This analysis of ethnicity must not be interpreted as a condemnation of ethnic politics in Ethiopia. The fact that an excluded group organizes itself and fights the exclusion cannot be rejected without going against democratization. Moreover, the inclusion of pluralism strongly favors the development of modern values by stimulating openness and competition. What is adverse, however, is the tendency of ethnic politics to harbor a separatist spirit by identifying the nation with the ethnic group. The use of ethnicity to break up the state confuses what is essentially a problem of democratization with the emergence of a new ethnic state whose democratization is yet to come. Because ethnically related people now control the state, issues pertaining to democratization and modernization are not done away with yet. On the contrary, the ideology of relatedness can even get tougher to democratize inasmuch as it is little prone to the impersonalization of the state. The question is then to know to what extent the defense of the ascriptive rights of ethnicity is compatible with the principle of modernity decreeing the dependence of the status and place of individuals on their achievement. Unless the entitlement promoted by ethnicity is reconciled with the competitive principle, the style of household politics will prevail to the detriment of public accountability and democratic rules.

One of the major reasons for the proliferation of corruption in the Ethiopian society is the excessive valorization of relatedness to the disadvantage of impersonal relations and accountability. To recognize corruption as the major scourge of the Ethiopian society is to admit the corrosive effect of ethnicization. Blaming "Bonapartism" only creates a muddle that may retard the admittance of a wrong policy, but does not reduce, even slightly, the evil. The present crackdown of the government on corruption, assuming that it is sincere, can succeed only if the system is so changed that a growing impersonalization of Ethiopian society takes place. This means the promotion of pan-Ethiopian standards in conjunction with the operation of free market relations, in short, the urgent need to get out of the ethnic paradigm.

[42] Leenco, *The Ethiopian State at the Crossroads*, p. 90.