

6-2006

# The Roots and Fallouts of Haile Selassie's Educational Policy

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**ED.06/Africa/1**

**UNESCO Forum Occasional Paper  
Series Paper no. 10**

**The Roots and Fallouts of Haile  
Selassie's Educational Policy**

**Messay Kebede**

**Paper Commissioned by the Regional Scientific Committee for Africa  
June 2006**

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# **The roots and fallouts of Haile Selassie's educational policy**

by

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## **Abstract**

### **1. Overview of the issue and its national/regional/international context**

This paper attempts to assess the impacts of Haile Selassie's educational policy on Ethiopia's educated elite. It also enquires into the reasons why the policy was adopted in the first place. The negative role that the Ethiopian educated elite has played during, and since, the overthrow of Haile Selassie's regime provides the context of the enquiry. Admittedly, the continuous political crises and economic stagnation of Ethiopia since the 1974 Revolution point to the leading role played by Ethiopian educated elite. The paper raises the question of knowing whether the adoption of an education system that completely relied on Western teaching staff and curriculum – and systematically turned its back on Ethiopian legacy – does or does not explain the infatuation of Ethiopian students and intellectuals with Marxism-Leninism in the 1960s and 1970s. The suggestion is that their propensity to opt for polarizing and confrontational methods of political competition may be the result of a decentering education system responsible for cultural cracks into which radical ideas, which were then in vogue, were injected. The enquiry unravels two major reasons for the adoption of the educational policy: (i) Haile Selassie and his close associates had basically endorsed the colonial idea according to which non-Western societies were backward, thereby conceiving of modernization as the internalization of Western values and institutions; (ii) Haile Selassie was all the more willing to push for Westernization as the marginalization of Ethiopia's traditional values and institutions was the *sine qua non* for the establishment of his autocratic rule.

Though this study deals with the case of Ethiopia, its regional and international implications are obvious, given that it illustrates nothing less than the impacts of Western education on non-Western societies. It adds to those studies that argue that the cultural drawbacks of colonization and neocolonialism are far more serious than any economic downsides. The fact that Ethiopians became psychologically decentralized, as in any colonized country, even though they were not submitted to colonization, confirms the universally uprooting impact of Western education.

## **2. Current or proposed policy framework**

Educational policy in most countries has been designed as the best and unique method to achieve rapid modernization. As a result, the way modernization was perceived conditioned the educational policy. Unfortunately, only with few exceptions, the conception of modernization that has become predominant is the colonial conception, namely, “modernization versus tradition”. This erroneous understanding led to an educational policy that advocated full Westernization through the extirpation of the traditional legacy of lagging societies. The aim of this paper is to show that, so conceived, modern education does no more than continue and even expand the colonial paradigm, which also happens to favour dictatorial regimes for the simple reason that the devaluation of tradition is also how native ruling elites adopt colonial methods and subsequently rise above their own societies.

## **3. Research results in support of this framework**

The research results establish that the education policy is the answer to the question why Ethiopia ended up by showing all the symptoms of a colonized country while not being formally colonized. The alienating effect is concretely referred to the impacts of an education system based on an alien curriculum and involving foreign teaching staff. Cultural analysis easily establishes that the infatuation of the educated elite with radical ideas and polarizing political agendas and methods is a major outcome of an uprooting education system. On the other hand, the need to eliminate the traditional constraints that limited the power of the Emperor, such as regionalism and the ideological authority of the Ethiopian church, explains Haile Selassie’s choice for a policy that undermined tradition. In a word, this paper concretely establishes the conceptual and socio-political roots of Haile Selassie’s educational policy.

## **4. Recommendations for policy-makers**

The study suggests that the way out from the present predicament is the radical reformulation of the educational policy. However, reformulation does not mean much if the attempt to Ethiopianize the curriculum is not associated with an effort to reinforce Ethiopian traditional values and culture. The revival of traditions in the specific sense of ensuring the emancipation of the study of Ethiopian history and culture from Eurocentric concepts is, therefore, the most urgent and primary task. In so far as this task is not carried out Ethiopianization of the curriculum will be without avail. Stated otherwise, the Ethiopian thinking must cease to posit modernization in terms of getting away from tradition so as to achieve westernization. Instead, borrowings from the west must be used to renovate tradition in the fashion of Europeans, who called ‘renaissance’ the breakthrough that inaugurated their modernization through the assimilation of ancient Greek rationality.

## Introduction

It is not possible to understand Ethiopia's continuous political crises and economic stagnation since the Revolution of 1974 without bringing into play the decisive role of its Western educated elite. Admittedly, students and intellectuals have spearheaded the uprising against the imperial regime; they have also been instrumental in the radicalization of the military junta, known as the Derg, which seized power and ruled the country for 17 years. The ethnic movements that brought down the Derg were also launched by intellectuals. The present rulers of Ethiopia are 'remnants' of the Ethiopian student movement of the 1960s and early 1970s. In short, what happened in Ethiopia since the early 1970s is largely the handiwork of Ethiopians educated in modern schools.

Seeing the incessant political instability and persistent economic inertia of the country, one cannot help but wonder whether the nature of the Ethiopian system of education was not an accessory to the gestation of these lingering tribulations. *What else could explain the failure to stabilize and put the country to work but the emergence of an educated elite too prone to radical and oppositional views?* True, the reluctance of the imperial regime to make the necessary reforms had polarized the country and created the conditions of class and ethnic confrontations. No scholar can seriously underestimate the impact of repression and lack of reforms on the radicalization of students. As Bahru Zewde puts it, radicalization reflected "the growing impatience with a regime which was not prepared to reform itself. As the century wore on, the medicine prescribed also grew in virulence". (Bahru Zewde, 1994:490).

But the evil legacies of Haile Selassie's long reign do not fully explain the drift of the country into the path of radicalization and confrontation, given that reformist and less oppositional solutions were available. The venture into a revolutionary path is the direct product of the infatuation of Ethiopian students and intellectuals with Marxism-Leninism. Hence the assumption that the education system may have caused cultural cracks into which radical ideas, which were then in vogue, were injected. The best way to validate the assumption is to assess the impact of modern education on the cultural setup of Ethiopian students by laying out the kind of thoughts it encourages. To weigh the cultural metamorphoses caused by modern education, a brief review of the traditional, premodern system of education is necessary.

## **I. The Ethiopian traditional system of education**

Scholars who have reflected on the traditional system of education agree on its Ethiocentric orientation and contents. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church assumed the exclusive task of designing and propagating an education system whose central subjects were the religious beliefs, values, and practices of the Ethiopian Church. In addition to religious instruction, the teaching had a secular component that dealt with Ethiopia's history and socio-political organization. So tied up with the Church was the teaching that scholars speak of "Church schools which bore the main burden of education for sixteen centuries", that is, until they were progressively supplanted by modern schools. (Pankhurst, 1955:232).

A brief review of the curriculum is enough to show the Ethiocentric orientation of the country's traditional education system. The system had three distinct and successive stages, which can be said to correspond to elementary, secondary, and higher levels. The first level "taught reading and writing in Ge'ez, and Amharic . . . and simple arithmetic. The emphasis was upon reading the Scriptures in Ge'ez, the original language of the Church ritual." (Pankhurst, 1955:234). This elementary education was dispensed to students who became ordinary priests and deacons. Students who wanted to pursue higher levels of study had to go to the great churches and monasteries. Higher studies begin with the "*Zema Bet*" ("School of Music") in which students study the musical composition and the liturgy of the Ethiopian Church. (Milkias, 1976:81). The next stage was called "*Kiné Bet*," which means "School of Poetry". (*Ibid.*). It focused on "church music, the composition of poetry . . . theology and history, painting . . . manuscript writing." (Pankhurst, 1955:237). The *Kiné* level also added the teaching of philosophy whose "main text was *Metsahafe-Falasfa Tabiban* (Book of Wise Philosophers), with passages from Plato, Aristotle, Diogenes, Cicero, etc.". (Milkias 1976:81). The third level, called "*Metsahaf Bet* (Schools of texts, or books)," provided an in-depth study of the sacred books of the Old and New Testaments as well as of books related to monastic life. (*Ibid.*). It also included the study of three major books of Ethiopian history and code of laws, namely, "*Tarike-Negest* (monarchic history), *Kibre-Negast* (Glory of the Kings), *Fetha-Negest* (laws of the Kings)". (*Ibid.*1976:82). World history was taught at the third level: the ancient world and the histories of the Jews and the Arabs made up the substance of the teaching. The student who successfully went through the three stages earned the title of "*Liq*" or "*debtera*".

The focus on the Christian doctrine and values, the use of indigenous languages, and the extensive reading of books and textbooks that are impregnated with native contents bear witness to the fact that the subject of study was Ethiopia, its legacies, characteristics, and history. Not only did the materials deal with Ethiopian history, customs, languages, and values, but the spirit of the education system was also to produce scholars able to serve the Church and, by extension, the country with a sense of dedication to its characteristics and sense of mission. Describing the requirement of the

school of poetry, Sylvia Pankhurst says that teaching “must be rich in content, revealing a deep knowledge of the Bible, of Ethiopian history, and of the stories and legends which have gathered during the centuries around the great personalities and events of religious and national tradition”. (Pankhurst, 1955:245).

Take the Ethiopic text known as the *Kibre Negast*: it establishes kinship between the rulers of Ethiopia and King Solomon of Israel, the favourite nation of God. The epic narrates the visit of an Ethiopian Queen, Sheba or Makeda, to King Solomon and the subsequent birth of a son who became the King of Ethiopia under the name of Menelik I. Besides stating the blood ties of Ethiopian rulers with the Solomonic dynasty, the epic relates the transfer of God’s favour from Israel to Ethiopia. Unlike the Jewish people, acceptance of Christianity promoted Ethiopians to the rank of God’s chosen people. The bonus for being God’s favoured country is, of course, the assurance of the survival of Christian Ethiopia in a hostile environment dominated by heathens and powerful Muslim countries. Clearly, the *Kibre Negast* is a national epic: it lays the foundation for the merger of church and state as the best guarantee for Ethiopia’s survival, and so “defines the secular and religious foundation of Ethiopian nationhood”. (Mulatu & Abate, 1988). It also imparts a direction to history such that Ethiopia is where the sun rises and sets. The impregnation of students with the spirit of *Kibre Negast* enabled them to see the world from the viewpoint of Ethiopia. In a word, the discourse centered Ethiopia by endowing it with a specific mission, which became the repository of its national identity. (Messay Kebede, 2003). An objection can be raised according to which the Semitic element is so heavily present in the *Kibre Negast* that it is difficult to consider it as Ethiopia’s national epic. The author of this paper gives the answer that the Ethiopian version of the *Kibre Negast* specifically refrains from assigning a Semitic or Sabaean origin to Queen Saba. Moreover, the connection that it establishes between the Ethiopian ruling elite and Judaism is cultural rather than racial. (See Messay Kebede, 2003, pp.1-19, for further discussion).

The emphasis on serving the Church did not entail the exclusive confinement of the traditional system to the formation of priests, deacons, and church teachers. Religious education extended to the secular realm, since “church education also produced civil servants . . . such as judges, governors, scribes, treasurers, and general administrators”. (Wagaw, 1979) This extension to the secular society was a natural consequence of the basic and all-embracing cultural function of religion in Ethiopia. Religious instruction conveyed the norms of social behaviour, the meaning of the social hierarchy, and the rights and duties attached to the social status of individuals. The education system was thus both mundane and spiritual: it taught a religious belief that was inextricably intertwined with a definite social system and a mode of life. According to the renowned Ethiopian novelist and essayist, Addis Alemayehu, the traditional education had served as “a powerful means to unite the spiritual existence with the secular mode of life”. (Alemayehu, 1956:107).

In addition to its highly integrative and nationalistic function, the other virtue of the traditional system was its freedom from political influence and vicissitudes. The source of this freedom emanated from the complete autonomy of the Church from the state in terms of education. Because traditional schools were “run by the church without the intervention of the state”, education was not politicized. (*Ibid.*,1956:101). On the contrary, church education transcended political rivalries to concentrate on what was permanently Ethiopian, and so was an agent of unity and national cohesion. As one author writes: “acting as the sole repository of Christian culture and identity, an educated elite of priests and *dabtaras* preserved a heritage which for fifteen centuries united the Christian community against surrounding alien cultural influences”. (Kalewold, 1970).

Modern critics of the traditional system have, of course, no trouble exposing the severe shortcomings of the traditional system of education. Thus, Mulugeta Wodajo points out that the techniques and the contents of the education system were not particularly apt to develop the understanding; nor were they liable to cultivate the intellectual faculties of creativity, criticism, and imagination. These deficiencies sprang from the emphasis on “the role of rote memory” in the traditional education system. (Wodajo, 1959). Worst yet, the teaching used a language that was not current and familiar to students, as “all the texts are in Ge’ez and hence are meaningless for the child”. (*Ibid.*, 1959). However, Wodajo tempers this negative evaluation by the recognition that the high level of poetry made “great use of the imagination and creative mind of the pupil” and that “it is a source of sorrow to see the decline of the ‘*Zema Bet*’ without any worthwhile substitute in the Government schools”. (*Ibid.*, 1959:26). Some critics have underlined the discriminatory nature of the church education, since only parents who were Orthodox Christian could send their children to the traditional schools. “Church schools did not serve the whole nation, therefore, and so cannot be considered impartial or democratic,” says one critic.(Wagaw, 1979:12).

Where critics are unanimous and most vociferous is in their denunciation of the total expulsion of scientific courses from the traditional system of education. Being basically religious, the teaching had little inclination to include scientific and technological components. The reluctance changed into an outright rejection as the religious doctrine progressively turned into a rigid dogma. The dismissal of whatever is not in line with transmitted beliefs was so endemic that Teshome Wagaw speaks of an approach to education that “became increasingly rigid, to the point of ossification”. (*Ibid.*, 1979:viii). The education system simply stuck to the old belief according to which “as the heavens and the earth are ruled by God all enquiries into the working of the heavenly bodies and the laws of nature were and are regarded as sinful”. (*Ibid.*, 1979:17).

As so rigid a system was particularly unfit for modernization, Ethiopia, like all Third World Countries, reached the conclusion that the best way to get out of the disabilities of the traditional system and catch up with the economic and social advances of Western countries was through the resolute sidelining of traditional schools and the

rapid spread of modern education. The latter is a shortcut to development: what Europe has achieved through a long and gradual process of evolution can be captured and rapidly disseminated by an appropriate system of education. And as science, technology, and enlightened beliefs and values are the distinctive features of modernity, no better means exists to effect a rapid modernization than through the adoption of the Western system of education.

For Ethiopia, the adoption of the Western system meant an abrupt shift from the religious content of the traditional system to a secular teaching, just as it implied the dissolution of the traditional conservatism by the inculcation of the innovative spirit characteristic of modernity. Accordingly, the formation of an educated elite entirely opposed to the characteristics of the traditional elite became the major goal of the new system. The task was particularly difficult: the traditional system directly counteracted the effort of modernization by its very purpose of producing a mind that repudiates whatever is not sanctioned by tradition. To show the extent to which the traditional system was diametrically opposed to the spirit of modernity, Wagaw writes:

*“The purpose of church education is not to extend man’s understanding of the world, but rather to lead men to accepting the existing order of things as it is, to preserve whatever has been handed down through the years, and in turn to pass it on unchanged to the next generation”. (Ibid, 1979:21).*

Given its complete irrelevance and opposition to the modern world, the traditional system of education was beyond salvation. It had to be entirely rejected and replaced by modern schools. Before making a judgment on the wisdom of the decision to virtually eliminate church schools, one must reflect on the characteristics of the system that replaced the traditional education. Let there be no misunderstanding: the author’s assessment of modern education in Ethiopia is not inspired by the argument that church schools should have been preserved. As Alemayehu noted, given the realities of the modern world and the new challenges it poses, “it is very difficult to say that an education restricted to the teaching of religion and mode of life can fulfill the needs of the society”. (Alemayehu, 1956:108).

But it is one thing to say that the system had to be changed, quite another to entirely throw away the old in favour of an alien system. The path taken by Ethiopia was not to update, modernize the traditional system; it was to erase past practices so as to implement a new system. The decision to leave out the legacy emanated, moreover, from an unfair criticism of the traditional system. Granted that the traditional education had been quite reluctant to include scientific studies, the truth remains that the indiscriminately negative evaluation of tradition by norms borrowed from another culture is a one-sided approach. Not only is such a criticism alien to the very notion of human pluralism, but it also promotes Western culture to the rank of universal culture. Some such Eurocentric stand naturally fails to appreciate the positive aspects of the traditional

culture, just as it becomes headless of the accomplishments it achieved in accordance with its own norms and goals.

The question whether a *Tabula Rasa* policy was wise is all the more legitimate the more the expected benefits of the new system proved evasive. Indeed, so radical and rapid a shift was bound to encounter great difficulties. Even those who are very harsh about the traditional education admit that Ethiopia's modern education has lamentably failed. The causes of the failure are no doubt multiple. Some of them emanate from a rapid change that failed to provide the appropriate material and human conditions. Others are products of misconceptions and policy impediments. These causes will be examined with some detail with the view of understanding how the deficiencies of the education system have a hand in the radicalization of the intelligentsia.

## **II. The drawbacks of Ethiopia's modern education**

The late Emperor Haile Selassie is universally recognized as being the pioneer as well as the active and dedicated promoter of modern education in Ethiopia. With few supporters, he stood up to the stubborn opposition of the powerful Ethiopian Church and most members of the nobility. That is to say the inauguration of modern education in Ethiopia did not occur under favourable conditions. It had to be instituted against powerful conservative forces in a socio-cultural condition that completely lacked the necessary material and human requisites.

Sure enough, thanks to the effort of the previous emperor, Menelik II, some rudiments of modern education existed. Menelik had created one modern school in 1908, and some Ethiopians had become exposed to modern education. Unfortunately, most of these Ethiopians, who could have provided the necessary transitional administrative and teaching staff, were exterminated during the Italian Occupation of 1935-1941. According to the estimate of one author, "about 75 per cent of those who had some modern education were wiped out during the years of occupation". (Wagaw, 1979:48). All the efforts of Menelik and Haile Selassie himself, first as Regent and since 1930 as Emperor, to provide a transitional staff were thus annihilated. As most of the pre-war educated Ethiopians combined traditional training with modern education, they could have secured a smooth transition. Because of their extermination, the post-war effort to establish and spread modern education had to rely exclusively on expatriate advisors, administrators, and teachers.

Before analyzing the downsides of the complete reliance on expatriate staff, one should note how the country's economic backwardness had severely hampered the spread of modern education and affected the quality of the teaching. One consequence of the scarcity of human and material resources was that "educational opportunity was not equitably distributed among the regions of the country, favouring instead only a few provinces and urban centers, and administration was therefore highly centralized". (*Ibid.*, 1979:183). Addis Ababa, Eritrea, Showa, and the most important urban areas took

most of the students. This unequal distribution resulted in a very low level of enrolment in modern schools. Statistical data show clearly the extent to which imperial Ethiopia was behind most African countries:

*“In 1961, when the average enrolment in primary schools on the African continent was estimated at over 40 per cent, the estimated primary school enrolment in Ethiopia was 3.8 per cent. On the secondary level, estimated average enrolment for the appropriate age group on the continent and in Ethiopia was 3.5 and 0.5 per cent, respectively”. (Balsvik, 1979:6-7).*

Equally low was the budget allotted to education by the imperial government. Thus, “in a comparison of 17 African countries’ expenditure on education over a period of years in the 1960s, Ethiopia ranks lowest with 11.4 per cent of the national budget”. (*Ibid.*, 1979:15). Some such low levels of expenditure negatively affected the quality of the teaching. Even in the urban centers, such as Addis Ababa and Asmara, the paucity of teachers and teaching facilities was such that “extreme overcrowding in the classroom” was the rule. (*Ibid.*, 1979:26). To these overcrowded classrooms were added the impediments caused by the lack of qualified teachers and the paucity of textbooks, which paucity “severely lowered the standard of teaching in the schools and encouraged extensive copying and memorization as methods of learning”. (*Ibid.*, 1979:26).

The sluggish economic progress of the country under Haile Selassie’s rule and the restricted expansion of modern education contributed to the spread of social discontent. On the one hand, as the system was not expanding fast enough, especially to the rural areas, the opportunity for education took the form of a privilege with “the inevitable effects of accentuating class divisions and perpetuating the ‘ruling class’ idea.” (Wodajo, 1959:27). In other words, the limitation became a source of grudge for young Ethiopians who could not enrol or continue beyond elementary education. On the other hand, unemployment became a primary concern for those who did enrol and reach high schools and even university level. The alarming number of graduates who could not find jobs in the cities was a clear indication that the education system was producing more people than the economy could absorb. The promise of a better life, which was one of the arguments that the imperial regime used to make modern education attractive, was thus flatly contradicted. Instead, schools and colleges produced disillusioned students who fell prey to revolutionary ideas.

On the severe material and human shortcomings was grafted an educational policy that lacked direction and national objectives. According to many scholars, the main reason for the lack of a national direction is to be found in the decisive role that foreign advisors, administrators, and teachers played in the establishment and expansion of Ethiopia’s education system. That the curriculum tended to reflect at all levels courses offered in Western countries was a glaring proof of their harmful influence. As one author puts it, “appointed foreign advisors tended to think that what had proved

successful in their countries would also benefit Ethiopian development”. (Balsvik, 1979:4). What is more, the external teachers were neither fully qualified nor appropriately trained. They mostly came from India and the Peace Corps Programme, and as such “were not trained to meet with the specific needs and problems of the Ethiopian society”. (*Ibid.*, 1979:23). Besides financial, infrastructural, and technical problems, the introduction and development of modern education thus faced the paramount issue of Ethiopianization. To quote one author:

*“The most important characteristic of the entire set-up of modern education in Ethiopia was that it was imposed from the UK, the USA, and influenced by various other European countries and thus 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. To the average child the school was essentially an alien institution of which his own parents were entirely ignorant”.* (*Ibid.*, 1979:6).

Strange as it may seem, though Haile Selassie consistently presented himself as the active promoter and patron of modern education and supported this role by regularly visiting schools, handing certificates and prizes, sending students abroad, and stressing the importance of education to development in many of his speeches, he has never clearly fastened his educational policy to the goal of national development. This lack of articulation has been pointed out by an indepth study of the entire education system known as “The Sector Review” published in 1971. In light of the increasing number of dropouts and unemployed and the glaring inadequacy of the education system to meet the needs of the country, the Ministry of Education and Culture decided to undertake a review of the entire education system. The project involved Ethiopian scholars and experts from Haile Selassie I University, ministries of education, agriculture, community development, and the Planning Commission. It also included foreign members from UNESCO, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Ford Foundation, and Harvard University Development Advisory Service. The final report of this serious and extensive assessment deplored “the lack of a clear statement of national ideology”. (Wagaw, 1979:186).

Nothing could better illustrate the non-national orientation of the education system than the manner in which Haile Selassie I University was founded and organized. The responsibility of supplying the necessary administrative and teaching staff to what was at first only a college went to American Jesuits. The Mormons replaced the Jesuits when “in 1961 a University of Utah survey team organized the graduation of the college into Haile Selassie I University”. (Colburn, 1994). The fact that the administrative and academic staff was predominantly American inevitably entailed the modeling of the

University on American universities: teachings as well as organizational structures reproduced the American model, which also provided the textbooks.

Though the traditional and official religion of Ethiopia was Orthodox Christianity, it was not given a place at the University and Ethiopian students were placed under the influence of Catholic and Protestant academic staff. The dominance of expatriate staff with alien religious affiliations indicated from the beginning that the University had forsaken the goal of defending and promoting the national culture, which was interwoven with the religious legacy. Herein lies the main difference with the traditional education which, as one saw, was prompted by the goal of protecting and disseminating the national culture. Doubtless, Haile Selassie opted for a religious staff because he could rely on their political conservatism. Under their leadership, the University would not become a playground for radicalism. But this prudent policy backfired: the apolitical attitude of the staff drove students to read underground books and pamphlets. Because they were not offered a liberal alternative, neither could they develop a culture of openness, debate, and moderation.

Not only did the University fail to defend students' traditional identity, but it also exposed them to the influence of underground radicals by not championing a culture of political debate and openness.

Let us ponder on the Ethiopian paradox. The issue of endowing modern education with a national content and direction is a problem that Ethiopia shares with other African countries. All studies in Africa deplore the irrelevance and alienating effects of the education system. The appropriate solution, the studies suggest, is the Africanization of the system. According to Ali Mazrui, "first, the staff should be Africanized and secondly, the curriculum should be Africanized". (Mazrui, 1978). Only thus can the education system become relevant and national. Whereas African countries can impute the lack of national direction to colonization and its aftermaths, Ethiopia offers the unique case of failing to inaugurate and develop a national system of education while not being hampered by colonial rule. Beyond missing the opportunity of harnessing education to a national policy of development, the Ethiopian system took a turn that was even less protective of the national identity than the system prevailing in the colonized African countries.

Consider the study of history. Given the exceptional status of Ethiopia as an African country that remained independent as a result of pushing back colonial forces and the great pride this victory inspires to Ethiopians, one would assume that an essential component of history courses at various levels would be devoted to explaining the reasons for Ethiopia's independence. Nothing of the kind happened: because history courses reproduced the schema of Western history, there was no provision for the

Ethiopian exception. Asked to give an idea of how history courses described Ethiopia, a former student said: “.. we were only told that ‘she’ had preserved ‘her’ independence”. (Cassiers & Bessette, 2001:333). And as the preservation of independence was not explained, it appeared as an aberration or an accident. This omission ceases to be surprising when one recalls that the history course for eight grade students used for many years a bulky textbook entitled “*The Old World – Past and Present*”. On top of designating Africa as ‘The Dark Continent’, the textbook “mentions Ethiopia as Abyssinia in only one paragraph, referring to it as an ‘Italian colony’”. (Milkias, 1982). Though Ethiopians are proud of their independence, much of the benefit of withstanding colonial powers was thus taken away from them by the introduction of a system of education that had a colonial character. One should speak less and less of independence and subscribe to the idea that Ethiopia, too, ended up by becoming a colony. The introduction of Western education had accomplished what military means had failed to achieve.

It must not be made to seem that Haile Selassie and officials of his regime were not aware of the serious shortcomings of the education system. Official speeches repeatedly stressed the need to correct the system, “to Ethiopianize the entire curriculum”. (Wagaw, 1979:123). But nothing substantial was done concretely. True, attempts were made to inject courses dealing with Ethiopian realities into the curriculum. Thus, at the university level, a noticeable place was progressively attributed to the study of Ethiopian history; courses on Ethiopian geography and law were given a much needed boost. Mention should also be made of the creation of “the Institute of Ethiopian Studies” with its museum and library in which researchers and students could find appreciable documentations on Ethiopia.

Granted these efforts to Ethiopianize, the issue that needs to be discussed is whether the efforts successfully redirected the teaching. Indeed, the issue being one of ideological reorientation rather than of quantitative increase of courses devoted to Ethiopia, the proper question is “*to what degree did [Ethiopianization] take place and to what extent did agreement exist as to the university’s role as a force for change and development in Ethiopia?*” (Balsvik, 1979:61-62). It is safe to say that 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. Moreover, the University could hardly become an engine for change and development without a free and critical examination of Ethiopia’s problems. Haile Selassie’s autocratic rule did not grant such a right even to the University. This suggests that the lack of national direction of the education system may be due to the nature of the imperial regime itself.

*How otherwise could one explain the apparent inconsistency of Haile Selassie’s educational policy?* Underlining the fundamental role of the University as guardian of Ethiopian culture, Haile Selassie said in his inaugural address:

*“A fundamental objective of the University must be the safeguarding and the developing of the culture of the people which it serves. This University is a product of that culture; it is the grouping together of those capable of understanding and using the accumulated heritage of the Ethiopian people. In this University men and women will, working in association with one another, study the well-springs of our culture, trace its development, and mould its future”.* (Haile Selassie, 1979:19-20).

This major speech ascertains the connection between education and modernization: the fundamental goal of education is to modernize Ethiopia, but to modernize it in the spirit of its traditions and culture. The study of Ethiopian culture becomes essential because (1) the Ethiopian legacy is useful and galvanizing; (2) modern education is put at the service of Ethiopia only when it connects with the culture of its people. Education must serve the nation, and it can do so only by promoting its culture. Development cannot occur if the beliefs and traditions of the people are demeaned or ignored. Haile Selassie reiterates the need to base development on the legacy: “although such education may be technical”, he pursues, “it must nonetheless be founded on Ethiopia’s cultural heritage if it is to bear fruit and if the student is to be well-adapted to his environment and the effective use of his skills facilitated”. (*Ibid.*, 1967:20-21). One of the basic tasks of the University is, therefore, to ensure historical continuity by building bridges between the past and the new.

More yet, Haile Selassie recommends the study and development of Ethiopia’s cultural heritage as the best way to fight iconoclastic ideologies. In an apparent reference to the socialist ideology, he says:

*“These young people face a world beset with the most effectively organized programme of deceptive propaganda and of thinly-screened operations ever known; they deserve the best that can be taught by their parents, by religious institutions and by the university, to prepare them for a wise choice among contending ideals”.* (*Ibid.*, 1967:25).

The elaborate propaganda designed to mislead young and impressionable students into wrong beliefs and attitudes is effectively countered if they are taught that the values they admire in other cultures are also part of their heritage. People desist from converting to alien ideologies once they are shown that what they have is the best.

What is most baffling is that none of these loudly proclaimed directives was applied. Though the speeches call for a syncretic approach to modernization, the real practice was to hand over Ethiopian schools and higher education to expatriate staff, thereby chasing the representatives of the traditional culture out of modern institutions. One way of achieving the proclaimed goal was to design a system of education that integrated the modern with the traditional. Scholars are unanimous: Haile Selassie never

pushed for a serious effort to integrate, which alone would have provided modern education with a national orientation. “The greatest shortcoming of the education system in Africa in general, and in Ethiopia in particular, is that it is poorly related to and interlinked with the traditions of education which predate the coming of the modern school”, writes an acute critic of the Ethiopian system. (Negash, 1996:37) Let no-one raise the objection that the resistance of the Ethiopia Church made the integration impossible. The attempt to set church against modernity simply overlooks that “the Churches in Europe managed to lay down the basis for most of secular higher learning”. (*Ibid*, 1996,37). In Europe, modernity grew out of Christianity so that there was a historical continuity between the secular and the religious. Being ruled by a Christian elite, Ethiopia could have gone through the same kind of evolution.

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 blocked its modernization. The reason is clear enough: in his bid to establish autocratic rule, the aloofness of the Church from modern life was the best way to curtail its traditional authority. And indeed the appropriation of the monopoly of education by the state represented a great loss of authority to the Church. In order to curb opposition, Haile Selassie bribed the Church with land grants and other privileges, thereby transforming “her relative autonomy into dependency on the state’s policies”. (Loukeris, 1997:217). Unsuitability for modernization as much as the need to transfer the traditional authority of the Church to the autocratic state explains, therefore, the marginalization of church schools.

In failing to integrate the traditional with the modern, the system produced students with a declining sense of national identity, nay, with a marked contempt for their own legacy. Without the involvement of the moral and cultural values and the specific features of the national heritage, the education system cannot have a national goal. A draft paper on “educational objectives” by a Task Force composed of three Ethiopian experts who were involved in “the sector review” of 1971 prophetically stated: “an education system that merely provides knowledge and skills without the essential blend of such [moral and cultural] values is in danger of producing soulless and rootless robots”.(Amare *et al.*, 1971:14). The Ethiopian education system failed to accomplish the basic task of any education, namely, the transmission of the cultural legacy of the country to the next generation. Let us go further, by propagating the Eurocentric paradigm, the system was but denigrating the Ethiopian legacy. In so doing, what else could it produce but “*a rootless social caste?*” (Hiwet, 1987:45).

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 education system. It borrowed from the West extensively, both through the use of foreign instructors and textbooks and by sending 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”. (Tokiom, 1968:53). The great difference, however, is that the Japanese ruling elite very soon realized the danger of alienation. Without a firm foundation in the traditional heritage, an education system modelled on the West was nothing but uprooting. In effect, “the impact of foreign influences upon the traditional culture of Japan had resulted in a state of social disturbance and ideological confusion such as Japan had never before experienced”. (Keenleyside *et al.*, 1937:98).

Unless Japanese students quickly countered the borrowed system with a commitment to their own traditions and values, modern education was going to give way to an imperceptible but forceful colonization. Hence the Government’s Decree known as “the *Kyōgaku Taishi* (Principles of Education) of 1879,” which introduced the traditional Confucian philosophy and ethics into the modern education 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”. (Tokiom, 1968:54). This interpenetration of the traditional and the modern inaugurated the appropriation of Western science and technology by a mind that remained Japanese, thereby investing 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. Unlike the path taken by Ethiopia, the Japanese understood that the best way to counter the subversive influence of the West and other alien ideologies was by preventing the formation of an ideological vacuum among students. The more the education system assumed the task of enhancing, glorifying the Japanese cultural heritage, the stronger the counter-offensive against the demeaning impact of Western education became. The display of the good things that tradition has to offer assured the success of the crusade against alienation.

The other important disparity of Japan is the use of the national language. Japanese leaders have encouraged the learning of foreign languages for the purpose of translating books and having access to Western knowledge. This strictly utilitarian function prevented foreign languages from usurping the traditional prerogatives of the national language. The preservation of the national language as a medium of instruction made modern knowledge easily accessible to a large number of people. More importantly, it provided a good basis for the defense of the culture itself by avoiding the expulsion of the native language from the realm of modern studies and researches. If “the Japanese borrowed more techniques than values from the West”, unlike Africans, it is because they “undertook their modernization primarily through the Japanese language, and did not become linguistic converts to an alien idiom”. (Mazrui, 1978:32-33). Though Amharic was given the status of a national language, it was used as a medium of

instruction only at the elementary level. *Could this limitation suggest anything other than the acceptance by the Ethiopian leaders themselves of the congenital inadequacy of the national language to express higher levels of knowledge?*

The conspicuous inconsistency of the imperial regime requires an explanation: since official speeches stated the ideal formula while nothing was done to implement it, we can neither speak of mistake nor of lack of awareness. Tekeste Negash expresses the disparity between discourse and practice thus:

*“The official policy during the period of Emperor Haile Sellassie was that Ethiopia, as an ancient and civilized society, should opt for a carefully selected adaptation of European ideas and systems. 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”.* (Negash, 1990:74).

Among those scholars who have studied closely the malfunctions of the imperial system of education, many have noted the inconsistency between the official speeches and the actual practice without, however, explaining it. Either they spoke as though the Emperor and his entourage were not really aware of the alienating impact of the education system or imputed the inconsistency to a faulty determination. What needs to be shown is that what appears to be the product of unawareness, or lack of firmness, was in reality the ‘outcome of a deliberate policy’.

### **III. The theoretical and socio-political roots of the imperial system of education**

To understand the roots and function of modern education in the imperial system, it is necessary to refer to the very conception that Haile Selassie and his close followers and advisors had of modernization. Given that knowing the causes of the Ethiopian retardation indicated what must be done to catch up with Europe, their conception of modernization also included an assessment of the reasons why Ethiopia lagged behind European countries. That Ethiopia shared with the West a Christian belief and had preserved its independence for so long made the question of its retardation all the more enigmatic.

Since Ethiopia had shown great advances in the past, its lag behind can only be explained by the occurrence of some obstacles, which interrupted the course of progress. Among the early intellectuals who supported Haile Selassie’s modernizing tendency, the two most prominent ones, namely, Afework Gebreyesus and Gebrehiwot Baykedagn

assign Ethiopia's decline to the rise of a warrior class as a result of the weakening of the imperial power in favour of regional lords. The decline of the central power plunged Ethiopia in a state of continuous political instability. For centuries, internal conflicts and wars blocked socioeconomic progress and the development of knowledge by promoting warlike values and plunder as a noble way of life. "Whereas other peoples were progressing thanks to their knowledge and know-how, we [Ethiopians] remained so far behind because of our conflicts," writes Baykedagn. (Baykedagne, 1993:16). As to Afework, he describes Ethiopia as a country ruled for centuries by authorities who, on top of mercilessly robbing the people, did nothing but "eat, drink, and sleep, like sheep being fattened for Easter". (Bahru Zewde, 2002:120). A more recent thinker, Kebede Mikael, attributes the cessation of progress not so much to evil social and political developments as to Ethiopia's isolation since the rise and spread of Islam. He writes, "Ethiopia, isolated from the world, to which the route was barred to her, existed for a long time in the impossibility of making contact with the modern world". (Kebede, 1949:i). Cut off from the major centers of civilization by the *Islamic encirclement*, Ethiopian creativity and progress could not but decay.

In whichever way Ethiopian intellectuals analyzed the Ethiopian retardation, the consensus was that Ethiopia, which had a brilliant past, entered into a slumbering existence that caused its massive lagging behind Europe. The only solution is to wake up from this lethargic state, and modernization is just this act of waking up. That is why pre-war writings and speeches defined modernity as "light," "dawn" and assimilated the transition from tradition to modernity to 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", which defines modernization as the act by which the people of the world are "awakened from their sleep". (Eadie, 1924:99). 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 that says:

*"The people of Europe were like us:  
By the increase of knowledge and work,  
They mounted to the sky in order to float there".  
(Ibid., 1924:229).*

The whole secret of the Ethiopian conceptualization of modernity lies in the translation of the Eurocentric "civilized versus primitive" or "the superior race versus the inferior one" into "light versus darkness", "awakening versus sleepiness". By thus putting everybody in the same initial condition of ignorance and darkness, the conception affirms the fundamental sameness of all humankind regardless of race. By speaking in terms of dawn and awakening, it also states the equal potential to be awakened.

That Haile Selassie totally adhered to the conception of modernity as light and awakening is made clear by a statement in which he talked of Ethiopia as a “Sleeping Beauty . . . that is beginning to awaken from her sleep”. (Milkias, 1982:26). Also, recall that Haile Selassie named the newspaper he founded *berhanena Salam*, that is, “Light and Peace”. These expressions clearly reveal that Ethiopian leaders themselves had endorsed the idea of a backward Ethiopia being awakened by the arrival of Westerners, the providers of light. Some such conception of modernization turns Westerners into tutors and Ethiopians into tutees. The necessity of tutorship requires that Ethiopian schools and colleges reproduce the Western curriculum. The essential purpose of education is to learn from Europe so as to imitate its values, institutions, and achievements.

If in many of his speeches Haile Selassie mentioned the need to defend the Ethiopian legacy and yet did nothing practically, it is because he blamed tradition for the lack of progress. What was achieved in a state of slumber had no intrinsic value; it was rather an obstacle to progress. Hence the resolution not to push for the incorporation of the traditional into the modern: the formula for progress was modernity versus tradition. This means that Haile Selassie had himself already accepted the Western view of Ethiopia. In the words of two French scholars, “everything happened as though the Emperor was a super spy in the service of Westerners working towards the mental colonization of his own people!” (Cassiers & Bessette, 2001:334).

The imputation of Haile Selassie’s reluctance to defend tradition to his own alienation, which some scholars trace back to the fact that “unlike many of his compatriots, [he] had an early exposure to Western culture”, would be a partial view. (Amare, 1984: 64). While it is true to say that he did nothing to integrate the traditional legacy into modern education, it is also undeniable that he has preserved and even enhanced many traditional features. In one of his speeches, he even 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”.* (Haile Selassie, 1967:35).

The imperial inconsistency has an easy explanation if one recalls that the features of Ethiopia that Haile Selassie wants education to develop have to do with the defense of absolutism. Tradition developed, enriched is for him the manner his autocracy finds roots in the past, the best example being the reference to the traditional title of the Emperor as the elect of God. All the features he has preserved are those that either justify or effectively support his absolute power. The imperial institution, the nobility, the Church are among the most important features that Haile Selassie preserved but, be it noted, in such a way that they reinforce the exercise of absolutism. Thus, the nobility and the

Church were conserved after they had been dispossessed of their traditional autonomy and power base. This confirms that the imperial ambiguity in the defense of tradition was caused by alienation working in conjunction with the need to take from tradition elements that supported absolutism while leaving out those that went against it. This selective dealing with tradition explains why it was banned from modern schools but preserved, albeit in altered forms, in other sectors. Before expounding this point further, one must reflect on the implications of Ethiopian leaders' conception of modernization.

One major implication of Ethiopians' acceptance of backwardness is that modernization was not posed in terms of defending one's identity, still less of competing against the West. Again, a comparison with Japan is quite edifying. One saw the rigorously national orientation of Japanese education. The orientation was due to the major objective of education, which was to give Japan the power to resist Western powers, better still, to become an equal and successfully compete against them. Evidently, the West was not viewed as a model, but as an adversary, and "Japan could hope successfully to compete in the modern world only if the rulers of the state were supported by a trained as well as united people". (Keenleyside *et al.*, 1937:74). Since modernization was coined in terms of competing with the West, some such conception of modernization discarded the idea of a passive imitation of the West. Instead, it advocated the use of all the resources to win the competition, including those traditional elements that gave advantages to Japan. When the West is taken as a model, the idea of competition is put aside in favour of reproducing the Western model. Imitation rules out deviations from the model, which dictates the norms of modernization. By contrast, the perception of the West as an opponent encourages deviations by advising the mobilization of those traditional characteristics and peculiarities that bolstered the competitive edge of the developing country.

For the imitative paradigm, modernization is the process by which lagging societies catch up with advanced societies. The operation amounts to fashioning the lagging society in the image of the Western model. Unfortunately, the outcome does not meet the expectation: instead of catching up, the lagging society turns into a periphery, a satellite of the model. Given that imitation does no more than suppress local initiatives and reduce the people to passive imitators of an external mode, no wonder marginalization is its outcome. Mazrui writes, "If both modernization and development are seen as a struggle to 'catch up with the West' the twin processes carry considerable risks of imitation and dependency for the Third World". (Mazrui, 1978:320).

Haile Selassie's view of modernization was not impregnated with a competitive spirit. Considering Western countries as benevolent tutors, especially after he regained his throne in 1941 thanks to the assistance of the British, he saw the West both as an ally and a model. Such was not the view of Menelik, his predecessor, who understood modernization as a competition with the West rather than as Westernization. He is reported to have said: "we need educated people in order to ensure our peace, to

reconstruct our country and to enable it to exist as a great nation in the face of the European powers". (Wagaw, 1979:26). So defined, modernization is about competing with the West: it combines the borrowing of Western technology with the defense of one's identity and the mobilization of Ethiopia's traditional assets. Compare Menelik's statement with the speech that Haile Selassie, still regent, made in 1925 while visiting the Tafari Makonnen Lyceum:

*"Of Ethiopia's greatness and antiquity, and especially of the long years when, surrounded by pagans, she struggled for her faith and her freedom, we ourselves, her own children, can indeed bear witness.... But it is not what she was that can profit Ethiopia, but what she may become.... Knowledge must be sought and found whereby Ethiopia too, an African state which has preserved her independence, may be led towards progress and may attain political stability and the well-being of her people". (Ibid., 1979:35).*

Modernization is described in terms of progress, which is to achieve political stability and well-being. The emphasis is not on the confrontation with the West, which is no longer seen as the enemy or the threat. This conception of modernization activates, not the spirit of rivalry, but the zeal of the copyist who tries to secure the benefits of the model.

*What else does this conception of modernization reflect but Haile Selassie's acceptance of the status of Ethiopia as a periphery of the West?* He eased himself into this acceptance by transferring the past greatness of Ethiopia to his own person. As an individual, he will play a great international role, thereby substituting his personal megalomania for Ethiopia's past glory. Although he acquiesced to rule over a peripheral country, his reign will be great as a result of him becoming a leading figure in the non-Western world. But for this leading role to be possible, Haile Selassie must first build political institutions that allow him to achieve absolute power in his own country.

To reduce the building of autocracy to the exclusive pursuit of personal ambition would be a one-sided view. Absolutism also emanated from the very understanding of Ethiopia's lag behind which, as one saw, was attributed to the decline of the imperial power in favour of the regional nobility. The decline created a state of political anarchy with incessant conflicts and destructive wars that halted Ethiopia's progress. Getting out of this predicament meant nothing less than the establishment of a central power strong enough to marginalize the warlords. Moreover, to the extent that centuries of ignorance and warlike values have spoiled the Ethiopian culture, modernization required the enlightened leadership of an absolute monarch who would use all his power to take the country out of backwardness. In short, centralization was the key to Ethiopia's path to modernization.

Modernization under absolutism dismissed the establishment of a liberal system as much as it demanded the creation of a bureaucracy entirely committed to the Emperor

and emancipated from traditional obligations to the Church and the nobility. Here is the main goal of the education system: it was inspired less by the purpose of transforming the country than by “the need of having a bureaucracy free from the umbrella of the church and the feudal lords, and thus the creation of an elite which owned an unswerving loyalty directly to him”. (Milkias, 1982:26). *Is there a better method of creating this kind of bureaucracy than the institution of a system of education entirely copied from the West?* The uprooting effect of this type of education would cut off the educated elite from its traditions and confine its allegiance to the Emperor alone. Just as Haile Selassie had made the nobility and the Church dependent on him by becoming the protector of privileges inserted into a modernizing system, so too he had designed an education system whose main function was to create a new elite divorced from the people and hence entirely loyal to him. The Westernization of education in Ethiopia was not meant to train people who would serve as agents of development; it was devised to produce an uprooted elite entirely shaped to serve an autocratic rule. Disconnected from the traditional life and values, which it even learnt to despise, such an elite would be committed to the task of marginalizing the nobility and the Church. It would promote centralization by hailing absolutism as the only way to modernize the country.

A system of education entirely modeled on the Western system was also in line with the acceptance of Ethiopia’s peripheral status by the imperial regime. The lack of a national ideology clearly harnessing modern education to Ethiopia’s developmental needs was a manifestation of the loss of centrality. In becoming a periphery, Ethiopia had ceased to have its own objectives and course of action. Its integration into the imperialist world as a dependent partner required the production of a local bureaucracy trained to serve as a connecting link with the capitalist economy. The task of implementing the directives of core countries called for a de-nationalized bureaucracy, which was best fashioned by an imported system of education.

One should not overlook the ideological interest of Western countries: in assisting the Emperor to create an uprooted bureaucracy and intelligentsia, hopefully with some penchant for liberal values, Western states, especially the American Government, were advancing their goal of containing communism. The global policy of containment of communism in Third World Countries induced the United States of America (USA) to invest “heavily in the ideological sector (i.e. education) of its ‘anticommunist’ campaign”. (*Ibid.*, 1982:26). Because of its history, its symbolic value as the only non-colonized country, and its leading role in African politics, Ethiopia was a central focus of the campaign. To keep Ethiopia within the orbit of the liberal camp had an exemplary value for the rest of Africa. As a result, “Ethiopia was the main beneficiary of the Peace Corps Programme when it was launched in 1962”. (Amare, 1984). Moreover, Ethiopia was the only country that could come under American influence as former colonial powers maintained control over other African countries.

#### IV. From rootlessness to revolutionism

What was devised to produce a docile instrument of autocracy and satellization backfired: having lost its attachment to tradition and being cut off from the people, the Ethiopian educated elite became increasingly receptive to revolutionary appeals. The ideological root of this receptivity was none other than the endorsement of the causes of Ethiopia's retardation propagated both by the imperial regime and Western teachers and textbooks. The colonial characteristics of the Ethiopian education system stemmed from a theoretical construct that opposed modernity to tradition, and so put the blame for Ethiopian technological lag on its traditions. Nowhere did the education system make a provision for an alternative view describing Ethiopian society as an autonomous civilization that pursued goals different from Western countries. The qualification "backward" makes sense only through the assumption that Ethiopia had goals that were similar to the West, especially as regards the technological conquest of nature. Not only is such an assumption factually indefensible, but it is also based on the idea that Western civilization is universal. The claim reflects a theoretical construct that fraudulently interprets an idiosyncratic pursuit as a universal characteristic.

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. The author has particularly in mind the theory of negritude (see Messay Kebede, 2004 for further discussion) – which refused the qualification of backward or primitive by arguing that African cultural trends were dissimilar from those of the West – and he disputes the prevailing interpretation according to which negritude is an ideology of assimilation based on the acceptance of European superiority. Instead, he maintains that negritude is an affirmation of human pluralism devoid of any ranking. It counters Eurocentrism to the extent that it defines Western culture as one particular culture among others. While the Western trend pursued the conquest of nature, African cultures followed the path of harmony and integration. Denouncing the Eurocentric interpretation of history, Léopold Sédar Senghor writes:

*"The Europeans claimed that they were the only ones who had thought out a Civilization to the level and the dimension of Universality. From this to maintaining that European civilization was to be identified with the Civilization of the Universal is only a step and one which was taken many years ago. It was not difficult for us to show that every 'exotic civilization' had also thought on a universal scale and that the only merit of Europe on this point was that through its conquests and its technology, it had diffused its own civilization throughout the world". (Senghor, 1976).*

The Ethiopian educated elite utterly refused to dissociate itself culturally from the West, which it considered as an embodiment of universal norms. An editorial of

*Challenge*, the Journal of the Ethiopian Students Association in North America, disqualified the defense of cultural particularism thus:

*“Those who try to write off Africa or Ethiopia from the mainstream of historical development by either conjuring up the dead past of an African socialism or citing the uniqueness of Africa are not only evading the outstanding problems of our time, but also do fall right in the laps of the racist theory that tries to exclude Africa from the best achievements of history. We believe that there are law-governed principles that operate in all kinds of human society regardless of race, sex or origin”.* (Challenge, 1972:7).

As a segregationist view, cultural particularism implies that Africans are not governed by universal laws so that Western realizations are out of their reach. In the eyes of the Ethiopian educated elite, the more Africans stress their particularity, the further they remove themselves from the European type of achievement, such as science, technology, etc.

The inability to detect the features of an eccentric trend and development in what is presented as universal history constitutes the most pernicious impact of Western education on non-Western cultures. One aspect of this fallout is the propensity to radicalism, which begins with the conviction that the realizations of non-Western cultures have no value, being but the outcome of frozen traditions. To be sure, the endorsement of Eurocentrism is by itself not enough to foster revolutionary leanings. Without the economic failure and the repressive nature of the imperial regime as well as the postponement of the necessary reforms, Ethiopian students and intelligentsia of the 1960s and early 1970s would not have embraced so enthusiastically the Marxist-Leninist doctrine. But without the mental orientation imparted by the internalization of Eurocentric views, neither would they have been so eager to demolish the defining features of the country. The education system created a predisposition that was materialized by the addition of the socioeconomic failures of the regime.

On account of failing to synchronize tradition with modernity, the education system produced, what was said, a rootless intelligentsia. This rootlessness found a political expression when university students, assuming “the role of the only organized opposition, began campaigning for a clear break with the country’s history and tradition”. (Negash, 1990:8). As the education system was not inspired by the goal of creating persons with the ability to interpret, enrich, and adopt the heritage to new needs and changing conditions, it naturally encouraged the formation of a revolutionary ethos by fostering the desire to create a *Tabula Rasa*. The other side of this destructive trend was the generation of a crisis of identity and meaning. The rejection of traditional beliefs and values as a result of modern education brought about an ideological void, which in turn activated the longing for substitutes. Consequently, many young joined religious sects,

which provided institutionalized mechanisms for releasing tension through shouting, crying, and weeping. Sects hitherto unpopular in Ethiopia, such as the Watchtower, the Bahai, and the Mennonites, attracted increasing numbers of young people desperately searching for meaning in their lives. (Amare, 1984:8).

An even greater number will try to fill the void by responding to the revolutionary appeal of the socialist doctrine, which “presented itself as one of several religions with its own articles of faith, its priests and prophets, and its messages of eternal salvation”. (Amare, 1984:8).

In producing intellectuals who knew more about Western societies than Ethiopian realities, the system fostered the tendency to project what is true of advanced countries onto Ethiopian society, which is then read through Western lenses. This projection of advanced traits on a different society favours idealism and radicalization to the detriment of realism and moderation. When what is different appears as lagging, the idea of an accelerated catching up becomes quite tempting. So that, in addition to the natural enthusiasm characteristic of young age, the tendency of students to become idealistic and extremist is nourished by a state of mind created by an alien system of education. When concepts and theories are learned outside their particular and historical contexts, they assume a normative connotation. Ideas cease to be reflection of existing realities when their insertion into local conditions is lost; instead, they become transcendent, Platonic norms to which reality must be made conformable. Far from being instruments of analysis and understanding, such ideas turn into mystifying notions. Rightly Girma Amare remarks, “infatuated with such ideas college students tend to maintain an extreme and idealistic position”. (Amare, 1966-67:10).

Ironically, this distorted system drove students to reproduce the mistakes of the regime which they so vehemently denounced. The revolutionary idea that the educated elite found attractive was the one that advocated an authoritarian type of modernization. Once students and intellectuals cut themselves off from the people whose traditions they considered as backward, they cannot avoid developing an elitist attitude. The consequence of the West asserting its power through science and technology is that those Ethiopians who have access to Western education view themselves as partaking in that power. The task of pulling the society out of backwardness becomes their calling all the more so as the monarch failed to live up to his modernizing promises. Their leadership will be even more centralized and totalitarian because their revolutionary ideas entitle them to represent the working peoples. Born of the modernization theory according to which those who assimilate Western culture are entitled to unimpeded authority, elitism is how students turn into “more sophisticated and infallible *semi-gods*”. (Negash, 1990:54). No other sector of the society can contest the exclusive leadership of the educated elite, which alone holds the key to modernity. That the enormous prestige of modern education – an outcome of the denigration of tradition – creates an entitlement to unrestricted power, a cursory reading of the university student paper entitled *Struggle*,

furnishes ample examples. The paper reiterates the “vanguard” role of the educated elite; for instance, the issue of April 1967 writes: “the future of the old country that still refuses to convince itself that its past glory is merely history now lies in his [student] hands”. (Ottaway, 1976:476).

A review of the case of Chinese students brings out both the root cause of elitism and the extent to which the latter is “a prelude to Marxism”. (Scalapino, 1967:190). It was at a very early stage that Chinese students adopted the notion of “guided democracy,” since it goes back to the writings of Sun Yat-sen and other authors. These writings discussed “the notion of tutelage; the necessity of a “vanguard”, a modernizing elite; and the need for specific stages of development, each involving different authority-institutional patterns”. (*Ibid.*, 1967:212). The recourse to tutelage is hardly compatible with liberal values; it calls for an authoritarian system controlled by intellectuals rather than by ordinary politicians and people. What this early commitment to tutelage indicates is that the idea surfaced naturally, even before Lenin theorized about it and came up with the notion of “vanguard party”. The view that Western educated natives must assume power and rule in the name of the people until the latter become enlightened and capable of governing themselves is the primary source of elitism. The mental bent of elitism, itself induced by the acceptance of the backward nature of the Chinese traditional education system and values, created, in turn, a favourable ground for Marxism-Leninism. With the emergence of elitism, liberalism appears as an inadequate path and an abdication of responsibility. If the people must be tutored, the social theory that gives intellectuals full authority, namely, the ideology of socialism, becomes imperative.

## Conclusions

Haile Selassie had justified absolutism as the only way to extract the country from backwardness. His students professed the same pattern of thought, albeit under the different name of “vanguard elite”. What was designed as an instrument of autocracy rebelled but then only to succumb to similar wanderings. This convergence testifies to the similarity of their inspiration, to the fact that they are on two sides of the same derailment. The students were not the remedy for Haile Selassie’s bankruptcy; they were rather its exasperated expression. Witness when the whole issue should have been the re-centering of Ethiopia, the ideological movement from autocracy to the extreme left simply deepened the loss of national direction to the great delight first of Leninization and then of ethnicization of the Ethiopian intelligentsia.

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**Biography of Professor Messay Kebede**

After the completion of his philosophical studies in France, Dr. Kebede returned to his country, Ethiopia, and taught philosophy at Addis Ababa University from 1976 to 1993. He also served as Chair of the department of philosophy from 1980 to 1991. His university career was brutally interrupted when the Ethiopian Government dismissed him with 40 other instructors from Addis Ababa University for sheer political reasons. He came to the USA in 1996 and was hired by the University of Dayton in 1998.

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