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The Ethiopian Conception of Time and Modernity

Messay Kebede

If there is one thing that philosophers agree upon, it is that the meaning of time is a central philosophical question. If we take the Western world as an example, there is no famous philosopher who has not investigated time. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger, to indicate the centrality of time, writes: “all ontology is rooted in the phenomenon of time correctly viewed and correctly explained.”¹ Likewise, according to the French philosopher Henri Bergson, the main reason that philosophical questions are difficult is because “we do not think about real time.”² The fact that the question of time is very confusing has led some philosophers to claim that time is an unreal, illusory notion. For example, the ancient Greek philosopher known as Parmenides, in order to explain that we have to think of being as outside of time, says that “before and after does not exist, because what is constantly exists as One.”³

The main intention of this essay is to ask how Ethiopians perceive this difficult notion of time.⁴ Because time is a decisive question for philosophy, to examine how it is perceived allows us to understand how Ethiopians see the world. Particularly, as the conception of time is tied up with historical thinking, it can show us how Ethiopians have interpreted their identity and their goals. The goals they espouse indicate how they have received modernity. In return, how they received modernity should inform us about why it has been so impossible to modernize Ethiopia.

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1977) 61.

² Henri Bergson, *Oeuvres* (Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1970) 534.

³ *The Presocratics* (New York: Odyssey, 1966) 66.

⁴ In this paper, the terms “Ethiopia” and “Ethiopians” refer to the mostly Orthodox Christian northern part of Ethiopia, previously known as “Habesha.” However, even if this view does not originate in the southern part of Ethiopia, the deployment and dissemination of northern culture has made it representative of all of Ethiopia.

Being and Time

Let us look briefly at the reasons for the importance and difficulty of the question of time.

Whenever we seek to study life, our inquiry leads us directly to the question: “What is the meaning of life?” Life is a phenomenon that has a beginning and end but which also passes through various changing situations. As everything that is natural has a beginning, it is natural that it has an end. Furthermore, since everything that lives experiences growth, it goes through uninterrupted change. The processes of beginning, growing, aging and ending, which are the characteristics of life, are thus expressions of life.

There is a difficult point that needs to be raised here. If we say that when something changes, it loses its essence, our judgments about this thing will be incorrect. Since it has no permanent characteristics, our judgments are falsified each time the thing changes. Continuous change leads, therefore, to the conclusion that the world cannot be known by the human mind. Furthermore, to say that continuous change is real does not seem to make sense. When what exists changes, where does its previous existence go – what can we say happened to it? If we say that it has become nothing, since nothing is nothing, how can something change into nothing? Accordingly, being and time do not seem to go together.

On the other hand, if we say that when a thing changes, its nature does not change, then time is a phenomenon without reality. For unless the thing itself changes, the fact that it has passed through time is without consequence. Therefore the movement and the change that we see is nothing but an illusion.

Going further, when we attempt to think of life correctly and in its fullness, then it coincides with eternity and immutability. Does not life become absolute when it has neither beginning nor end and is free from the characteristics of growth and change? Since nature is

created, does not the power that creates it have to be outside of time? This is why we say Absolute Life is God and why we place it outside temporality.

When we try to reconcile the incongruent characteristics of life, we think of time as a process and a journey. Living, which has a beginning and which involves change, has goals and aims and thus it passes through time. This approach opens a new direction of thought. If the secret of change is the accomplishment of goals, then one of the aims could be to accede to a higher level of life. The accomplishment of this aim could lead to life's absolute level. In other words, the secret of time is the state of eternity.

The question of time is tied to life because it reveals the meaning or secret of life. As Heidegger says, to dwell on the question of time is to unravel the secret of life. This is what makes people say time has a goal. When time has a goal, it becomes a process; this process accomplishes the goal of life. For example, adherents of Christianity and Islam say the process of time prepares us for the state of eternity.

The Ethiopian Situation

We can grasp Ethiopia's understanding of time when we accept that time reveals the meaning of life. We must gain this understanding by examining how Ethiopians, starting from their situation, arrived at the meaning of life. If we do not start from their situation, our elucidation will not be connected with an inquiry into the meaning of life. It would fail to tie time to the meaning of life, thereby making the latter into a thought that just popped up.

We know that Ethiopia's situation turned the question of existence into a major concern. For a country that has existed as a lone island of Christianity for centuries, life inevitably holds a precarious attribute. In particular, the fact of being surrounded by powerful Islamic countries and

exposed to attempts at invasion gave life a precarious meaning. To give life certainty and to create encouraging hope, it became necessary to create a special understanding of history. By giving Ethiopia a special destiny, this history would confirm that Ethiopia will exist victoriously until the end. While the passage of time accomplishes this goal, it also provides the meaning of life. The main source of the understanding of this victory-proclaiming history is the book known as the *Kebra Negast*.

As it is well-known, the meeting of Queen Azeb and King Solomon brought forth two important things. While one is the birth of Menelik who eventually became the king of Ethiopia, the second and most important outcome is the taking of the Ark of the Covenant to Ethiopia. When King Solomon discovered the disappearance of the Ark, he said directly: “The glory of the revered son of Zion has been removed, while the glory of the son of wretched Ethiopia has been raised.”⁵ Since King Solomon fell into deep disappointment and sadness, the spirit of prophecy asked him: “This hath happened by the will of God, and as the Ark has been given to your first son who sits on your father David’s throne rather than a stranger, why are you so sad?”⁶ This saying of the *Kebra Negast* shows precisely that God assigned Ethiopia a special role.

Ethiopia’s understanding of time is not limited to assigning a special destiny to a country; it includes individuals’ lives and social status. Since the life of the individual is constantly changing, since it passes through many highs and lows and incidents, this changing situation finds meaning only when it moves toward a goal. The accomplishment of this goal becomes the process of time. Above all, the answer that Ethiopians have given to the question of whether time moves forward and in one direction points to the essence of their outlook.

⁵ *Kebra Negast*, trans. Sergew Gelaw (Addis Ababa: Commercial Printing Press: 1994) 59.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 60-61.

Cyclicalities of Time

To comprehend the Ethiopian conception of time correctly, we need to accept a basic point of departure. That is, like any pre-modern view, Ethiopians observed time as a repetitive occurrence. What enabled them to attain this idea, on the first level, is the condition of nature. All natural phenomena are cyclical. Day is substituted for night and night for day. When winter passes, summer arrives; when summer leaves, winter replaces it. The warm becomes cold, the cold warm. Life changes into death and death into life.

Like nature, individual and social life confirms the cyclicalities of time. One who is happy today is saddened tomorrow, and goes back to being happy. When a father gives birth to a son, the son becomes a father. The one who has been promoted will be replaced tomorrow by the one who has been demoted. When the rich turns poor, the poor becomes rich. When a king dies, another king comes.

Let us look at one of Kebede Mikael's poem, which correctly reflects Ethiopia's understanding of time. The title of the poem is "Everything Is Deja Vu." Here are some representative thoughts:

Solomon, the fine observer, told us
 There is nothing new beneath the sun

The naïve person is constantly fooled
 Is there anything that stays the same?
 While that which you have put your trust in crumbles
 The unplanned is found happening
 The weak becomes strong while the powerful is humiliated
 Young plants grow while fruits are reaped
 The wide shrinks, while the narrow expands
 The moon becomes beautiful when the sun disappears
 When the rich becomes poor, the poor becomes wealthy
 When one thing becomes murky, another clears up
 The one who was sleepy wakes up
 The warm becomes colder
 The small is big, the big small

The bad is good, the good bad
 It appears like a dream and passes like a shadow
 The nature of this world is unpredictable

In the past, in the future, and today in this world
 There's nothing new; everything is cyclical⁷

The basic outlook we find in this poem is that, since everything is cyclical, there is nothing new. All the changes that are seen only replace what was previously seen; they do not bring anything new. The other important thought that is produced by the cyclical nature of time is that everything is vain. Since nothing stays permanently and even changes into its opposite, everything is relative. Since there is nothing absolute in this world, our lives should not be limited to chasing transient and reversible conditions. Therefore, what the cyclical nature of time exposes is not only that things do not have independent existence; the fact that things change into their own opposites also shows that they do not have the capacity to direct themselves.

Even so, however, we should not denigrate and avoid these things. Rather, we should accept them graciously as they come, because the cyclical nature of time evinces the absolute power of God. God gives and takes back. While He appoints one, He demotes another. While He makes one a lord, He impoverishes another. The lack of permanence in things and their transformation into their opposites points to the existence of God and the fact that the world is ruled only by His will. The other lesson the cyclical nature of things teaches us is not to be trapped by arrogance because we happen to be wealthy and powerful. By giving a false autonomy to the self and things, arrogance produces a metaphysical confusion by shrouding God's rulership.

⁷ Kebede Mikael, *Yeḳiné Azmāra* (Addis Ababa: Birhanena Selam Printing Press, 1946) 97-99.

Time and Fate

At this juncture, it is necessary to point out Ethiopia's uniqueness. Even if all pre-modern views claimed that time is cyclical, such views mostly focused on natural phenomena. However, Ethiopians, by applying this thought to the social, have said that the cyclicity of time is seen in society too. Not only have they claimed that individuals' social place is not permanent, but they also have gone as far as to say it is subject to reversal. As Kebede Mikael's poem says, "the wealthy is replaced by the poor; the weak becomes powerful." In a society that is divided into fixed classes, it is surprising to claim that there is no permanent rule and social position. To say that people's social status is reversible is to say that there is no high or low position that is held permanently.

This view directly reflects Ethiopia's understanding of society. While there are permanent classes, there is no position that individuals inherit by birth. Higher positions, especially, are taken up by individuals who come from lower positions. Ethiopians have called this ability to be move from one class to another "luck." Luck reveals Ethiopia's social mobility.

Since transferring from lower to higher social positions is advancement, we may ask why, instead of calling it luck, Ethiopians did not call it talent. The answer is simple. Talent requires being chosen by God, since it is bestowed by Him. Since we can think of what we receive from God only as a gift or allotment, and not as something we deserve, the right view is the one that speaks of luck.

It is clear that the concept of fate is interlinked with the Ethiopian conception of time. The cyclicity of time opens doors for opportunities. There are varying higher and lower social positions. However, these positions are held by individuals not permanently, but in turn. Because the law of rotation demotes those who have been promoted, permanent positions do not

exist. Thus the opportunity for a person in a lower position to replace someone in a higher position is made available.

The impossibility of having permanent lines of gentry and kingship, as in Europe, is proven by Ethiopia's long history. If we start with the king, no Ethiopian king was able to keep power in his family line. This does not mean that no son of a king has ever inherited the throne. Rather, ascent to the throne was not so much a special right as an outcome of victory over competitors. His victory revealed his destiny, that is, the fact that he was chosen by God. Because of this, in Ethiopia, a son of a "koso" trader, as Tewodros was, could become king.

As many studies show, in Ethiopia, there was not a rigid separation between peasantry and gentry like in Europe. What created difference between individuals was their holding a position as a result of individual fate, rather than because of bloodline. The farmer or peasant, because of his fate, became a payer of duties, but that did not make him a lower person. He therefore unceasingly wished that someday his fate would change and that he would gain someone's higher position.

It is here that we see the beginning of a radical shift from tradition during Haile Selassie's reign. Assigning a special status to his family, the King proclaimed that power would go to his son as the sole heir to the throne. This declaration abolished the cyclicity of time and gave power to a particular family permanently. By equating Solomon's genealogy with Selassie's, it created a special right of transmission of power that was alien to the country. One of the sources of the pre-Haile Selassie sentiment of Ethiopian unity was the equal right of different regions to accede to the throne.

From Cyclical Time to Teleological Time

To reduce Ethiopia's understanding of time to cyclicity would be a mistake. Like any Christian people, Ethiopians believe that time moves toward a single goal. Followers of Islam in Ethiopia accept the goal-oriented nature of time as well. Cyclicity is a repetition that does not move forward or show change and improvement. A goal-oriented process not only moves in one direction but also has a purpose to accomplish.

When God created the world, He also planned its process. Just as the world has a beginning, it also has an end. The end will arrive with the second coming of Christ. Thus not only is the process of time and history not repetitive, but it also heads toward an end. The end is not the end of life but rather its transition to a higher form.

This is where the Ethiopian outlook is different from other African outlooks. According to John Mbiti, the African's conception of time is different from that of the European. Europeans say time has three dimensions. These are: past, present, and future. But for Africans, "time is a two-dimensional phenomenon, with a long *past*, a *present* and virtually no *future*."⁸ Just as in the case of Europeans, Christianity has enabled Ethiopians to have a conception of time that anticipates the coming and the transition to a greatly superior life. Since they saw the three-dimensional nature of time, time for Ethiopians became a teleological occurrence.

It is undeniable that the cyclical conception does not agree with the teleological conception. How could the trajectory of time be cyclical and teleological at the same time? In addition to being a goalless process that turns on its own, cyclicity does not require the intervention of God. Indeed, to give a goal to an oscillating and directionless process appears to

⁸ John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1975) 17.

be contradictory. This is why Kebede Mikael expressed the vanity of the world by saying: “The nature of this world is incomprehensible.”⁹

The opposition between cyclical and teleological process is, however, not real for Ethiopians. If we think deeply about it, what results from the insertion of a goal into a cyclical process is its sudden interruption. This means that God will suddenly stop, by His own will, the cyclical process that He started. Time does not stop because a better situation is created, as the Europeans say. It will stop because God says enough. The continuation of cyclicity shows that humans will never reach a better situation by their own effort. Since humans destroy what they have built, they can never escape, by their own efforts, from the law of cyclicity.

Thus the end of time reveals God’s absolute power. Only when God stops the directionless repetition of time will humans have a fixed or eternal life that is free of cyclicity. Life becomes unchanging and free from ups and downs only when humans receive God’s eternal love. Thus the end of time signifies freedom from cyclical life, that is, it signifies salvation.

We find here the special and important message of the *Kebra Negast*. This message is that, while all things are ruled by the law of repetition, only Ethiopia has a special fate. This message removes Ethiopia from the norm of ups and downs by stating that she will vanquish all her enemies and remain the last one standing. To put it another way, while kings rise and fall by turn, Ethiopia, because she has been delivered from cyclical time, will remain victorious and “will live until the end of time.”¹⁰

The *Kebra Negast* derives this belief from the part of the Bible dealing with the Psalms of David. According to the *Kebra Negast*, David’s prophecy, “Ethiopia shall stretch her hands unto God,” indicates that Ethiopia, staying faithful to the Orthodox religion, will remain victorious to

⁹ Mikael, 99.

¹⁰ *Kebra Negast*, 146.

the end, that is, until the coming of Christ.¹¹ Nothing can destroy Ethiopia; asked whether Ethiopia will not disappear when the false prophet comes, Kebra Negast's answer is "absolutely not." For "has not David prophesied that Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hands unto God?"¹²

True, there will be times when Ethiopia falls down. However, Ethiopia shall never remain fallen. When she falls, it is her own fault; as such, her fall is God's punishment. For example, interpreting the Italian invasion as God's anger, Kebede Mikael said:

God ordered the punishment of the people for five years
Accomplishing His order, it [Italy] left when God said enough¹³

Why would God break with His plan of total destruction by excluding Ethiopia? Once again, the Kebra Negast provides the answer. Since the Israelites did not accept Christianity, Ethiopia replaced Israel and became God's chosen country. This election protects Ethiopia from the laws of cyclical time by giving her a special destiny. It is appropriate to maintain that God provides special care for His chosen country. Confirming that God gave Ethiopia a special place by making her the keeper of the Ark, the Kebra Negast says: "God confers such honor and grace on the Ethiopian king. Due to God's Ark and the heavenly Zion, He raised him higher than all the kings of the world. May God help us fulfill His spiritual will."¹⁴ This statement clearly shows that Ethiopia's special place came from God's will.

What the Kebra Negast's statement shows is that Ethiopia had her own theory of history. By making Ethiopia the center of the world, the historical scheme is designed in such a way that all things, including other countries' histories, march toward the realization of her victory. That world history concludes with Ethiopia's victory proves that she has a special destiny. This means that, unlike the present situation making Ethiopia the follower of other countries'

¹¹ Psalm 68:13

¹² *Kebra Negast*, 146.

¹³ Mikael, 35.

¹⁴ *Kebra Negast*, 149.

histories, other countries used to be led by her history. The greatest message of the Kebra Negast is that it makes Ethiopia history's leading force.

Ethiopia and Modernity

It cannot be denied that Ethiopia's ownership of history has ended since the coming of modernity. Ever since her leadership in history was snatched away by Western countries, Ethiopia has been seen as a backward country, especially by Ethiopians who have tasted Western education. Because of this perception, she has become the follower and copier of Western countries. She has become a follower not only in the fields of economics and technology but also in that of culture.

If it is asked how this happened, the answer lies in the situation that allowed European education to spread unhindered. The theory of history which this education was based on privileges the European viewpoint, values, and social order, thereby defining non-European cultures and ways of doing things as backward. In addition, it declares that other countries can become civilized only when they follow Europeans as their example. Accordingly, Ethiopians become modern only when, abandoning their history and culture, they convert to Westernism.

As the great German philosopher Hegel said: "The History of the World travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of History."¹⁵ Since Ethiopians have accepted this trajectory of history, they have come to think about the future not in terms of improving and cultivating **Ethiopianism**, but in terms of converting to Westernism. The main result of European education is to be alienated from one's history and culture.

Because of the heavy influence of modern education, Ethiopians have put aside the cyclical nature of time, which had been beneficial to them. If we ask what its benefit is, the

¹⁵ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover Publications, 1956) 103.

answer is not difficult. What cyclical time tells us is that everybody's time will come; no country will permanently lead history. All those who were up will fall and those who were down will rise. Greatness is always temporary. Thus leadership of history is held by turn; no one holds it permanently.

It seems that is why Ethiopians, when they first named Western civilization, called it "modern civilization." By "modern," they meant something that time brings and something that is transient. In so saying, they implied that they were not backward; rather, they were temporarily pushed back by a civilization that time brought. Since Europe's current prominence will be replaced by downfall, we should see Europe not as a model to follow but as an opponent. To be sure, we should learn a lot from an opponent; however, we learn not to look like our opponent but to adapt ourselves to a novel situation of change so as to supersede him.

Modernity and Renewal

We said before that if Ethiopians had kept the thought of the repetition of history, they would have escaped from thinking of themselves as backward and as followers of other countries' histories. Since Western history is designed to teach people to follow and copy Europe, it does not encourage independence and the cultivation of creativity. The concept of cyclical time, since it does not travel in a single direction, teaches one not to be pulled but to wait one's turn. Since it says that whatever is up must fall down, it gives everybody a chance to rise.

This is a truth that is proven by history. When Europe was backwards, the peoples of Asia and Africa displayed high civilizations. If we take modern history, Europe's absolute power has been weakened by America's might. The trend of modern Japan and China seems to prepare the restoration of Asia's dominance.

A country does not get its turn if it loses its identity by following another country. It does so only when it shows improvement by renewing its characteristics. Evidently, as long as it presents itself as a copy of another, it will not have a new and better role to play. The place occupied by the model cannot be appropriated by its copy. Unless the one being pulled brings difference, it can never become the one who pulls.

Self-improvement is not copying another: it is renewing oneself. This happens by going back, that is, by going to the source of one's own civilization. This movement will bring a change of direction which is known as "renaissance." To go back is not to bring back the old and the past. To return to one's source of history not only provides spiritual awakening but also begets a clear perspective.

Clearly, in order to see modernity as renewal, it is necessary, as a first step, to break with Europe's understanding of history, which travels in a single line and direction. What we need in its place is the perspective that teaches the repetition of time. If, instead of going in one direction, time is cyclical, a situation conducive to renewal is created. A lost traveler attempts to return to his point of departure; he does not continue on the same mistaken path. A lost individual or society finds its path when it returns to its historical beginnings and grasps its foundation. To return in this manner not only saves from its wandering but also produces renewal and rebirth.

This reveals that the secret of repetition is renewal. Does not life renew itself by going back? The adult is renewed by becoming a child again. All natural things are renewed because, rather than going in one irreversible direction, they have a repetitive character. In this way, that which is damaged is recreated. The weak regain strength. That which is reaped will grow again. When the known becomes obsolete, knowledge is renewed.

Since civilizations fall because of the mistakes and depraved habits that they accumulate over time, the way to purify one's civilization without abandoning its proper historical trajectory is by returning to its source. This return reinstates the correct foundation; it corrects the mistaken direction that has previously been pursued. Return results in purification and preparation for renewed greatness. This suggests that modernity just is renaissance.

A good example of this is Japan. Japan started her path to modernity not by following Europe, but by returning to the source of her own history. It is this movement that allowed for the Meiji Restoration and the renewal of the Emperor's position as a divine figure. Since the return signified that the attempt to modernize had the Emperor's sanction, it facilitated the implementation of necessary social and economic changes in the name of the Emperor. Because modernization was approved by the traditional belief in the divine nature of the Emperor, it not only gained wide acceptance but also created great eagerness among the Japanese for its realization.

Europeans also announced the beginning of their modernization by returning to the source of their civilization. They were able to break with the long and dark era of feudalism by turning to ancient Greek and Roman civilization. They called this change of direction "renaissance." Likewise, on the religious front, the Protestant movement started on the ground that it had become necessary to return to the true faith. Since the existing faith had become tainted with bad and incorrect habits, Europeans called the movement to go back to the source so as to renew it the "Reformation."

But the movement that was initiated in Ethiopia advocated, not rebirth, but the desertion of selfhood and history by following other countries. During Haile Selassie's time, by accepting European education without any limits, Ethiopia followed Western countries. The result of this

education, that is, the generation that tasted modern education, was the Derg regime, which, in turn, claimed that only the Eastern, i.e., socialist, goal was good, thereby putting the country in a worse situation. If, instead of inheriting the Western theory of history, we had followed the Ethiopian conception of cyclical time, we would have attempted to solve the problems of modernity by going back to our source. Modernity would have been renewal rather than denial of self.

More than anything else, the repetitive concept of time encourages the feeling of competition. Unlike the Western conception, it does not move in a single line, and so does not allow for one to be a leader and the other to be a follower. Rather, since it says that everything repeats, repetitive time encourages competition from the beginning. Since it says that the one who is a leader now will fall, it invites one to wait one's turn. It does not say, become a follower, but be ready to replace someone, prepare your destiny. While the Europeans preach that, if you follow us, we offer comprehensive goals and prosperity for all, the cyclical view says that since there is no situation that can make everybody happy, we must see the movement of history as a game of get-what-you-can.

The movement that overthrew Haile Selassie's rule saw itself not as renewal but as revolution. What they wanted was uprooting change rather than renewal. If we ask why uprooting change was sought, the answer is found in realizing that the goal was not to develop Ethiopia but to shape Ethiopia in accord with model countries. Obviously what shaped this view is the European view of time and history taken from modern education.

A country prospers when it becomes the owner of its own history. A country becomes the owner of its history when it sees itself through time and gives an autonomous meaning to its existence. As pointed out at the beginning of this essay, if time is the interpreter of being, a

people who live by other countries' histories is a people without its own meaning and goal. Having no goal of its own, such a people cannot promote modernity. The only thing possible is for it is to become a dependent or a vassal of other countries' modernity. Losing one's own conception of time is to be robbed of one's own goal. We should not be surprised if a people who has lost its direction mucks up modernity.