Japan and Ethiopia: An Appraisal of Similarities and Divergent Courses

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JAPAN AND ETHIOPIA: AN APPRAISAL OF SIMILARITIES AND DIVERGENT COURSES

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The idea of a comparison between pre-1935 Ethiopia with Japan before and during the Meiji Restoration arouses contradictory reactions among students of Ethiopia. Some find the idea indefensible, others judge it quite reasonable and instructive. Those who reject the parallel do so by emphasizing the social gap which separated Japan and Ethiopia, while those who welcome the idea base their arguments on historical similarities and on the identity of objectives of their respective modernizing circles. Thus, among the first group, Shiferaw Bekele contests the seriousness of a parallel between Japan and Ethiopia, arguing that the Ethiopian leaders had only a superficial knowledge of Japan and its modernization: "I see it written that Japan served as a 'model'. This word is not helpful because it gives the wrong impression. The knowledge that the so-called Japanizers had about Japan's westernization was at best elementary... That westernization meant total overhaul of state and society including its mores and values, eating habits, dress and lifestyles was not at all realized. Most thought in terms of superficial changes." Bahru Zewde too, while admitting some analogies, is of the opinion that the social and technological gap between the two countries was so unbridgeable that the model of Japan "remained a subjective urge unsupported by the objective reality."

Among the group of supporters we find Addis Hiwet. He coined the concept of 'Japanizer' to distinguish from "the ultra feudalists--represented by such grand conservatives as Taitu, Habte-Giorgis, and Balch--and the liberal or enlightened feudalists--represented by Tefferi and his corporate group..." a third group, was the group of Japanizers who saw in the transformation of post-Meiji Japan "a living historical model for Ethiopia: the liquidation of feudalism, and the development of capitalism through the agency of the modern state--ie a revolution from above."

Why, then, do I bring back so controversial a topic when at best it can only promise the pursuit of fruitless controversies? This is because I believe that much can be learned about the causes of the Ethiopian failure to modernize if the concept of the Japanese model is taken seriously. Its most glaring outcome is to impute the failure of Ethiopian modernization more to the lack of political determination than to the inadequacy of the objective reality. Due to a subjective error, the failure was caused not so much by the inappropriateness of the objective conditions as by a faltering political will. While Japan pursued systematically and with great determination the necessary course of action, Ethiopia did not. In order to assess the reasons for the Ethiopian lack of determination, it is first of all necessary to determine with precision the
conditions for the acceptability of the notion of the Japanese model.

IN WHAT SENSE IS THE NOTION OF JAPANESE MODEL ACCEPTABLE?

True, as Shiferaw Bekele suggests, serious studies of the Japanese model were not made by Ethiopian intellectuals. Neither did the Ethiopian leaders show any determined will to follow the model, aside from superficial references. Nonetheless, despite their shallow knowledge, some Ethiopian intellectuals and political leaders were amazed by how similar conditions between the two countries were. Unlike Bahru Zewde's assumption, the similarity of objective conditions explains why some Ethiopians naturally referred to Japan. The reference was less the product of a conscious adjustment to a model than the recognition, almost instinctive, of a common objective legacy.

In other words, if the concept of Japanizer is confined to the tiny circle of the radical intellectuals who wanted to correct the wrong trend of the evolution of Ethiopia, it offers little interest. Being a marginal, superficial, and, as we shall soon see, theoretically and politically ill-advised group, its impact was negligible. Where the notion of model becomes interesting is when we consider the attempts made by ruling circles to safeguard Ethiopian independence through reforms and the appropriation of Western technology. Tewodros and Menelik were undoubtedly set on this course of thinking. It was not a theoretical movement, but an option induced by the survival power of traditional Ethiopia. Reforms were perceived as necessary, even if they were not clearly spelt out. Above all, European weaponry was perceived as vital for survival. Survival means here the subsistence of traditional Ethiopia, that is of its religion, values, ruling class and social structure.

According to me, this theme of survival alone authorizes a serious and theoretically fruitful parallel between Ethiopia and Japan. Actually, Addis Hiwet's definition of the Japanese model by such changes as liquidation of feudalism, revolution from above is most misleading. The definition empties the comparison of all meaning, if only because it is heedless of the fact that, in Japan's modernization process, "ethics and social philosophy remained thoroughly Confucian and thus feudal," and that "the great motive force in Japanese modernization was the threat of absorption or destruction by the West." Only when the survival of a traditional elite is admitted to have been the main motive of Japanese industrialization can the parallel with Ethiopia become meaningful. The problem deals less with the attitudes of intellectuals than with the options of a traditional polity when faced with the threat of Western colonialism.

Need we insist on Tewodros's modernizing ethos, especially on how close his inspiration was to the Meiji Restoration? As summarized by Sven Rubenson: "Tewodros perceived as did none of his predecessors among the mesafint that the political anarchy, moral laxity, and technological backwardness of his people threatened national survival. The reforms he announced, the policies he tried to
implement, the very single-mindedness and perseverance with which he tackled the problems, indicate that he aimed at nothing less than a national revival combined with the transformation of his country into a modern state.” Tewodros spoke in terms of restoration of the traditional polity, but such that it would counter the colonial threat. In no way was modernization equated with Westernization; rather, it was a survival option designed to endow the traditional polity with new material means. Tewodros’s attempts to constitute a standing army, to introduce a separation between Church and state, to reduce the landholding of the Church, to institute Amharic as a national language, to build roads and bridges, and to centralize administration, are inseparable from his fanatical attachment to traditional Ethiopia, to its religious values, nobility, and imperial system. The reforms were perceived as necessary to salvage what was most precious and essential. They were infringements serving the higher cause of rescue, not views disparaging Ethiopian values and social fabric as rotten and obsolete, any more than they were meant to replace traditional values by Western ones. Reforms were sacrifices, flagellations for the purpose of national revival, such as only higher fidelity could require. An inner evolution of the Ethiopian system rather than revolution was contemplated. Most of all, Tewodros’s determination to steal Western technology, as evinced by his attempt to manufacture firearms in Ethiopia, was an inspiration which was quite Japanese.

The same spirit has animated Menelik’s approach to modernization. He too wanted to strengthen the state through some centralizing measures and the construction of roads and networks of communication. He understood the importance of modern education and opened to that end the first school where the highest dignitaries were urged to send their sons. He was also “supremely interested in weapons and generally intrigued with machinery and technology” with the view of possessing “for himself and his people the power which resides in the white man’s knowledge of things.” All this was desired for the purpose of restoring the grandeur of Christian Ethiopia. The nationalistic interpretation of modernization, and not as is now the case, the desire for Westernization, brought Ethiopian leaders close to the Japanese path. Incidentally, Haile Selassie’s decision to adopt a constitution which “was in many respects a faithful copy of the Meiji Constitution of 1889” adds an argument to the thesis since, however superficial the knowledge of Japan about Ethiopian leaders may have been, it was enough to inspire them. Haile Selassie’s preference for the Meiji constitution, if properly analyzed, would certainly reveal the choice of a development model centered on the need to salvage much of the traditional system.

Modernization understood as a way to ensure survival and rescue tradition is, therefore, the strong point in favor of a parallel between Japan and Ethiopia. Even if the means utilized proved different, the same spirit has doubtless inspired both countries. Just as Japan wanted to appropriate Western technology to safeguard its independence, values, and social system, so too have the Ethiopian leaders nursed the same goal. It implied the project of modernizing without social revolution, in the sense that it should come from above, but also
that it must avoid wrecking tradition. I call the Japanese model this project of modernization without Westernization or, if you will, the enterprise of salvaging tradition. Modernization is not expected to come from a revolution, from the overthrow of a class by another class. Nor is it the product of acculturation or Westernization. It is not an aspiration, but a duty, an obligation to tradition. Focussing on modern weaponry, it is a rescue mission, no more no less.

Let us now turn to the objection according to which this comparison does away with the chief issue, that is with the far-reaching reforms undertaken by Japan, whereas no such kind of reformist policy was ever planned, let alone applied, in Ethiopia. That is what Marcus notes: though Menelik had heard of Japan and was stimulated by its example, “he opposed the thoroughgoing economic and social transformation that would be inspired by industrial revolution.” Why did Menelik oppose, or at least did not feel the need for, a radical transformation while being animated with the same spirit? Answering this question is knowing why the same goal opted for divergent courses of realization. Since structural differences between Japan and Ethiopia are believed to have caused these divergent developments, let me unravel the similarities shared by the two countries.

The important point is, of course, that both have escaped colonization. Seeing the imputation by most scholars of underdevelopment to the fact of colonization, the preservation of their sovereignty is no small matter. The possibility of indigenous development being conditional on the maintenance of independence, the Japanese model could not have been better appealing than to Ethiopia. But, for the threat of colonialism to generate the will to modernity, a past of imperial glory, which creates the fascination and attraction of Western technology while preserving the attachment to tradition, is necessary. Only then is the fear of being colonized surpassed by the desire to emerge as the peer of European countries. It then takes the clear form of restoration of past glory. Colonialism contests a place previously held, and industrialization is the way to regain that place. In this way, the West is as much a threat as it is a challenge. This spirit of challenge and competition renders colonization all the more unbearable.

Modernization appears as restoration, a reinstatement of past glory because, as one scholar declared, the “best way to look forward is by looking backward....” It is the best way inasmuch as the future becomes not so much an aspiration as the duty, the obligation to retrieve one’s place. This dialectic explains the contempt for the West and the fascination for its technology, both being but the desire to appropriate the technology in a context of preserving one’s identity. More than the lack of technology, what handicapped most colonized countries was their failure to foster early on the ambition to acquire it. Firearms were introduced all over the world before colonial conquest. Yet in most places they were used for mercantile purposes and not against those who brought them. In this regard, a past of imperial glory is quick to induce the desire because new, efficient weapons do no more than stimulate a traditional leaning towards glory and expansion.
Heruy Wolde Selassie, the Foreign Minister of Haile Selassie, in his book written in 1924 E.C. after his official visit to Japan, notes that Japan and Ethiopia have in common uninterrupted and ancient dynastic rules as well as a spirit of fierce independence and isolationism. They also share many identical values, especially as regards warlike values. A similarity is also observed in their recent history, as both emerged from a state of anarchy caused by the supremacy of princes over the imperial authority. In both countries, in their determination to modernize, emperors took the initiative, for instance by according a new constitution to their people, by supporting the expansion of modern education. Summarizing his views, Heruy writes: "in many respects, what Emperor Menelik of Ethiopia and Emperor Meiji of Japan did is comparable."

A more detailed account would find a similarity in the mystical aura of emperorship in both countries. Granted that the two imperial systems were not totally alike, especially regarding their religious reference, nevertheless the unity of the political and the religious endowed in both countries emperors with unrivalled authority. In both societies, hierarchical authority was the foundation of the social fabric, even if the Ethiopian class system never reached the solidification of a feudal society. Likewise, a traditional type of nationalism, predating colonialism and centered on the defense of faith and social system, was the active and permanent drive of the political organization. The perception of a similarity in past history and in the defiant attitude to the West was not confined to Ethiopian and Japanese circles. It was felt in Europe, especially after the victory of Adwa. Hess quotes a Paris journal, La liberté, which, after the victory, wrote: "All European countries will be obliged to make a place for this new brother who steps forth ready to play in the dark continent the role of Japan in the Far East."

My eagerness to highlight affinities will certainly not convince those scholars who remain skeptics, inclined as they are to consider such similarities insignificant in comparison with the differences. The striking difference is, of course, the social and technological gap existing between Japan and Ethiopia. "Even before the Meiji restoration," reminds Bahru Zewde, "Japan had attained a higher stage of social development than Ethiopia in the twentieth century." Before the restoration, agriculture was in the process of being commercialized, and urbanization, with a fast-growing merchant class, was already on the move. The parcellization of power inherent in Japanese feudalism better favored modern political developments than the Ethiopian system. Put otherwise, very much like European countries, Japanese society possessed the necessary prerequisites for a successful transition to capitalism. Such conditions were not visible in Ethiopia so that, unsupported by objective forces, the attempt to imitate Japan was anything but feasible.

Perhaps the strongest argument is the one pointing to imponderable differences in the very process of modernization of the two countries. Whatever the similarities and differences they shared, Japan was rapidly involved in a thorough social transformation while Ethiopia barely went beyond measures of centralization. By causing a deep social change, particularly the destruction of the
feudal order, Japan's radical measures accelerated the development of native
capitalism. Ethiopia shrank from altering the social system: apart from
measures aiming at strengthening the state through greater centralization, the
reforms of Tewodros, Menelik, and even Haile Selassie have purposely avoided
radical social changes. The inadequacy of the system to capitalist penetration
thus maintained, modernization was condemned to be ill-sorted and superficial.
Nothing, then, demonstrates better the incomparability of the two countries than
the attitude of their respective leadership to modernity. Despite their
nationalism and the threat of colonialism, Ethiopian leaders never acted as
radically and consistently as their Japanese counterparts.

Insofar as this radical objection puts subjective factors above objective
conditions, it posits the problem in the only way it can receive a satisfactory
answer. For in clinging to the idea of the inappropriateness of Ethiopian objective
conditions to the growth of capitalism, scholars absolve Ethiopian leaders. Worse,
they deprive themselves of the opportunity of understanding the reasons which
are still hampering the modernization of Ethiopia. Because the same problems
persist, albeit in a different form, they produce the same effect: the delay of
modernization. A better approach is gained if we imply that, given the necessary
determination, Ethiopian leaders would have certainly succeeded in making the
required reforms, thus removing the persistent problems. This possibility cannot
be excluded, in the light of the vividness with which foreign threats were
discerned. As happened in Japan, the will to reform should have sprung from the
need to salvage tradition, comprising among other things the class position and
interests of the ruling elite itself. So the question is: What melted the
determination of Ethiopian leaders? Specifically, why was the sense of threat
changed into confidence, advising the postponement of reforms?

THE SOUTHERN MARCH AND THE DIVERGENT EVOLUTION
OF ETHIOPIA

According to me, the southern conquest is the main reason for the
softening of the reformist determination. It gave confidence to the ruling elite,
particularly after the victory of Adwa. It instilled in "Ethiopians a false sense of
self-sufficiency and ill-prepared them for the greater danger of the 1930's." Marcus is even more specific: "The ease with which Menelik had obtained
weapons led Ethiopians to conclude that the nation would always be able to
purchase war supplies from eager salesmen. The leadership did not consider it
necessary to build up an arm industry, with all the modernization and
reorganization of society that such an effort would involve, but was content to
foster the development of government and the traditional economy through the
introduction of communications such as the railway, telephone, and telegraph."

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

Without entering into the complicated question of the real meaning of the
southern expansion, we can confidently underline its anti-colonial spirit.
Designed to increase substantially the defensive power of the traditional polity, the southern expansion was indeed effective in discouraging, even in defeating colonial designs. That said, there is the other side of the conquest: the overconfidence of the ruling elite, leading to the deferment of necessary reforms.

With respect to the resolution of Ethiopian leaders to stand out against colonial powers, however, one question deserves serious consideration: Were Ethiopian leaders as fearful of the colonial danger as Japanese leaders were? Not that they were not conscious of the threat as such, but rather it took them some time to conceptualize it. Even once conceptualized, it was mitigated by cultural proximity. Ethiopia being a besieged Christian country, the first reaction of Ethiopian leaders has been to consider Europeans as allies. Tewodros thought so and openly expressed “the hope that Britain would help him to modernize his country.” Christianity created such a cultural affinity between Europe and Ethiopia that the Ethiopian elite was inclined to think that, rather than colonizing Ethiopia, colonial powers would want to help it modernize. Menelik too had difficulty in understanding why Italy would desire to colonize a Christian country. Some such consideration never crossed the minds of Japanese leaders. The cultural estrangement between Japan and Europe was too great to allow anything other than a stubborn and resolute defense of identity.

This argument will not take us very far, however. Though cultural estrangement was universal in the colonial world, the Japanese response was unique. Moreover, Ethiopian leaders were promptly awakened to the illusion of alliance by the inexorable logic of colonial conquest. Even if the cultural closeness may have lured them for a while, it did not fool them. So the harder the awakening, the stronger should have been the resolution to modernize in order to counter the colonial threat.

This brings us back to the southern conquest. It is the main cause for the retardation of Ethiopia: the so-called social and technological advance of Japan can hardly be a sufficient reason. China was at a level of social development comparable to Japan; it too suffered humiliations caused by Western powers and fostered a similar urge to emancipation. In spite of these coinciding conditions, China did not follow the Japanese path. Reproducing the Ethiopian experience, it even slipped into underdevelopment. So, the political will is as much decisive as, if not more decisive than the social stage. The important issue is to know why and how the will was prevented from adopting a radical course of action.

The paradox of Japanese modernization is that a conservative class introduced radical changes for a no less conservative purpose, to wit the preservation of the traditional ideology and system of power. In fact, all the social transformation was inspired by one basic aim: the production of modern weaponry. The more we wonder how a conservative class could so behave, the clearer becomes the absence of other options. More exactly, the survival ethos of the ruling class could rely on no other option to achieve its goal than to initiate reforms which, however untraditional and detrimental to the ruling elite, were necessary to save what could and deserved to be saved. They were proper sacrifices for the purpose of rescuing the essential goal. Had Japanese rulers
other options, such as the conquest of new territories, or the prospect of new resources, allowing them the purchase of firearms, they too would have probably shunned the antagonizing reforms. This does not mean that the Japanese elite was simply driven by the absence of choice. The case of China showed the existence of another option as well as the irreplaceability of human decision and willingness to accept sacrifices. Japanese leaders opted for the most difficult but, in the long run, for the most rewarding course. Herein lies their unique merit.

Ethiopian rulers were also confronted with various choices. Naturally, they chose the easiest way, the one with the least change and sacrifice. The condition for survival being the upgrading of military capability, given additional resources, the hard way of manufacturing modern weapons, with the attendant far-reaching social changes, could be exchanged for the much more benign course of purchasing weapons. The case of Tewodros provides enough evidence of this imprudence. Because Tewodros could see no other way out of the danger than by the manufacture of firearms, he was driven towards the Japanese logic. Still alien to the idea of expanding the empire in order to muster additional peoples and resources, he was, so to speak, cornered within the limits of traditional Ethiopia from which he could hardly squeeze more surplus to buy weapons. Given the situation, what else could he do but to increase production? And this policy would mean reforms and the introduction of new methods, in a word resolute modernization.

Tewodros failed, at any rate did not have the necessary time to nurture and launch the project. His irascible character, so little inclined to compromises and concessions, his precipitance, and his intolerance of Islam and the Oromo, partially explain his failure. Characteristically, the need for more surplus led him to expropriate land from the Church whose antagonism is believed to have been an important reason for his downfall. Still, the persistence of the danger and the absence of credible alternatives would have coerced Ethiopian leaders into admitting the need for reforms. To all of them, including the Church, the dependence of their power and influence on the survival of Ethiopian independence would have, willy-nilly, become imperative.

Precisely, this evolution was totally obstructed by the southern conquest. The problem of obtaining more surplus to purchase firearms being solved, beyond hope, by the immense prospects of the southern march, there was no reason for change, no need for reforms. Rapid Ethiopianization and Christianization of the southern populations accompanied by the creation of a southern elite embedded in the state were all that was needed to make additional peoples and resources available to the Ethiopian state and ruling elite. The traditional tax rights on land and the sell abroad of exportable products were enough to purchase a sufficient amount of modern weapons.

The choice of expansion rather than industrialization in the face of colonial threat differentiates, therefore, Ethiopia from Japan. The Ethiopian option was most natural and predictable. Conquest was in the very logic of the traditional system. As a revival and exaltation of its warlike values, it was liable to seduce traditional lords. Most of all, conquest had the incomparable advantage
of not requiring change and reforms. Only the absence of any other alternative would have compelled the Ethiopian ruling elite to generate more surplus internally. And such a course would have been most arduous and unnatural. All the more reason for never taking this course was the victory of Adwa in which Ethiopian leaders found the ultimate validation of their option.

THE AFTERMATH OF EXPANSION

Granted that the southern expansion stopped colonial advances, the fact remains that it did not remove the threat altogether. As would be proven by the Italian invasion of 1935, the solution had obvious limitations. The purchase of firearms could not cope with a more organized and highly equipped modern army. How then do we account for the continuous postponement of modernization, despite increasing threat to Ethiopian independence, during the rise and consolidation of Haile Selassie's regime? Haile Selassie knew that “as far back as 1925, Mussolini was making the initial plan for the conquest of Ethiopia....”

What if, by the time Haile Selassie rose to power, all the Ethiopian potential for modernization, all its Japanese characters had melted like the snow? If so, even if the Ethiopian leadership was aware of the danger, it was too late: the path of change and reform was definitively blocked. The main reason was no longer overconfidence, but a negative structural change due partly to the incorporation of the south, partly to the circumstances related to the rise of Haile Selassie. I will define this negative development by the rise of autocracy, better still by the identification of modernization with autocracy.

Marcus situates the premises of this evolution just after the victory of Adwa. Menelik's “tendency towards autocracy became more pronounced after 1896. Whereas previously he had rarely made decisions without the advice of his major makwanent, after the Battle of Adwa he acted independently. He alone was the Ethiopian state.” To be sure, the prestige of the victory as well as the important resources of the south made the state, i.e. the imperial throne increasingly independent and self-reliant. Neither regional lords, nor other traditionally admitted forms of power devolution could counterbalance the authority of the central government. By means of slow but cumulative centralizing measures, regionalism, and with it the Ethiopian nobility, were progressively undermined. We thus arrive at the real, structural cause of the Ethiopian failure to modernize: the progressive marginalization of the nobility.

The great obsession of Ethiopian emperors since the end of the Era of the Princes, with maybe the exception of Yohannes, has been centralism. The essential target of the 'modernizing' reforms undertaken by Tewodros, Menelik, and especially Haile Selassie, has been the strengthening of the central government to the detriment of regional power. While this evolution was understandable both from the viewpoints of avoiding relapse into the anarchy of the Era of the Princes and of preparing the ground for modernization, it has nevertheless generated, contrary to the traditional order, a grave imbalance of power in favor of the monarchy. Sure enough, centralization is necessary for
modernization, but not autocracy which, instead, turns into an obstacle to modernity.

Among the scholars who discussed the reasons for the failure of Ethiopia to follow the Japanese path, Kifle Selassie Beseat is of the opinion that "the explanation lies largely in the sequence of historical events... and not in any cultural or human factor that might predetermine the failure."25 Convinced that Menelik "followed a bold policy of modernization from 1889 to 1913, as did his contemporary in Japan, Emperor Meiji-Tenno..."26 Kifle Selassie Beseat, somewhat contradicting his thesis, picks out as a major complicating factor the conservatism of the two main religions of Ethiopia, Christianity and Islam. He also underlines the absence of political stability: "Whereas Japan has had only three emperors (including Hiro-Hito) since 1868, succeeding one another peacefully on the throne, in Ethiopia, between the death of Tewodros II in 1868 and the abolition of the monarchy in 1975, seven emperors had ascended the throne, following an armed struggle in each case."27 The third and most important factor is the unwillingness of Ethiopian leaders to apply radical reforms. In the words of Kifle Selassie Beseat: "whereas the Japanese monarchy accepted a modern parliamentary-type Constitution as early as 1889, the successive emperors of Ethiopia never displayed the political acumen to do so, thereby hastening their own downfall and, what is more, preventing the country from becoming really modernized."28

Marcus too, in addition to emphasizing the lack of radical reforms on the part of Ethiopian leaders, attempts to detect the factors which prevented them from adopting a radical approach. As he himself says: "The Ethiopian people were not so disciplined as the Japanese; the empire was newly established and its administration still rudimentary. Capital resources were limited, and there were relatively few skilled and educated Ethiopians who played a significant role in political and economic life."29 Interestingly, Marcus adds the capacity of the empire to maintain the status of the warrior class so that "there was no structural danger from an impoverished warrior class, such as had developed in Japan."30 This is indeed an important reason, given the widespread thesis according to which the decline of the Samurai and the resulting withdrawal of status respect31 are responsible for their conversion into a capitalist class. If anything, by creating the possibility of maintaining the warrior class, the southern expansion has averted the dissatisfaction, and hence the change of the Ethiopian nobility.

All these reasons overlap and their contribution was not negligible. Still, there was no obstacle that a determined will to reform could not have overcome. So that, as suggested by the quoted authors themselves, the great difference between Japan and Ethiopia was the low degree of commitment, compared to the Japanese leadership, of Ethiopian leaders to radical reforms. And if we ask the question of knowing what weakened their determination, the answer is the same: the southern conquest. More than social retardation, political instability, lack of educated elite and capital, the absence of reasons pressing Ethiopian leaders to realize reforms explains the postponement of radical modernizing measures.
Surely, no one changes unless there is reason for doing so.

From the southern conquest also grew the premises of imperial autocracy. By providing fresh and important human and material resources for the defense of Ethiopia, the southern conquest could not but encourage the abnormal, tentacular growth of the central government, thus paving the way for autocracy. The inevitability of this evolution becomes evident if only we refer to the traditional conflict between centripetal and centrifugal forces. When modern means tend to promote a traditional longing, they are certainly adopted all the faster. Such was the frame of mind of Haile Selassie. Greater resources, modern means of centralization, copied from and supported by the West, enabled Haile Selassie, with the help of a relatively educated group, first to tip the balance in favor of the throne, then to breakdown the power of the nobility. A perfectly autocratic system was thus born, all the more defiant as it boasted about its modernizing mission in the face of the reactionary position of the nobility.

In effect, most scholars situate the divergence between Japan and Ethiopia in the question of state power. While the Meiji constitution provided the Japanese monarchy with a modern parliamentary system, no such trend was perceptible in Ethiopia. This omission was the more significant since Haile Selassie’s constitution was a faithful copy of the Meiji constitution, except on “the question of civic liberties and the power of the emperor vis-à-vis the legislative body.” Whereas the Japanese political system increasingly tended to turn the emperor into a mythical figure, the Ethiopian system went in the opposite direction by concentrating all executive, legislative, and judicial powers on the monarch. This evolution is accountable in terms of political will and choice rather than in terms of social and cultural gaps.

Addis Hiwet’s classification opposing the ultra-conservative class of the nobility to the relatively progressive camp of Haile Selassie should therefore be revised. Some scholars go even so far as to describe Haile Selassie’s group as a radical progressive camp, thereby implying that the conflict between Haile Selassie and the nobility was none other than the struggle between modernism and conservatism. The opposition to the rise of Haile Selassie was surely inspired by traditional ideas, but in no way does it follow that these ideas were reactionary. How could they be so when they aimed at preserving the traditional balance of power between the throne and the aristocracy. Speaking of Balcha, the notorious leader of the camp opposed to Haile Selassie, an author writes: “Characterized often as a reactionary xenophobe, Balcha, as a Teferi antagonist, was a pious Orthodox Christian convert of Gurage origin, an excellent administrator and soldier, and an Ethiopian nationalist who at heart felt his opponent was selling the country to foreigners.”

For Ethiopia to develop a parliamentary system, the first condition was doubtless the preservation of the traditional structure of power. A modern parliamentary system could easily grow from the traditional balance of power between the imperial throne and the aristocracy. Modern democratic ideas could take root in Ethiopia only if they could lean on traditional practices instead of being merely hurled from outside. But with the progressive marginalization of the
nobility and the growing strength of the monarchy, the possibility of introducing in the constitution clauses on civil liberties and power sharing was irremediably jeopardized.

What was highly abnormal in Ethiopia was the complete withdrawal of the nobility from the process of modernization. In Japan, the split of the aristocracy between a conservative sector and a modernizing camp was the proof that a significant sector of the aristocracy was actively involved in the process of modernization. No such split occurred in Ethiopia: the entire aristocracy was labelled as conservative and reactionary, whereas Haile Selassie and his careerists were considered progressists. So general a characterization smacks of manipulation. The conservatism of the aristocracy was not negative either, since conservatism changing into nationalism would have rather compelled the class to accept reforms. No, the demarcation was a manner of justifying Haile Selassie's determination to marginalize the nobility in order to realize his autocratic design.

The project of keeping the Ethiopian nobility out of the process of modernization has, therefore, split away the Ethiopian option from the Japanese model. The Japanese path was designed to salvage the traditional system, and thus to preserve the ruling elite, from the higher aristocracy to the lower Samurai. This meant two things: the transformation of the traditional values of the ruling elite into a capitalist drive and the assumption by the same class of the leadership of modernization. The opposite took place in Ethiopia. Far from being transformed, the nobility, increasingly considered as an incorrigible reactionary class, was stripped of its power so that it sank into oblivion. State servants, educated or otherwise, anyhow devoted to Haile Selassie, were the happy substitutes.

Contrary to the "reforms" of Haile Selassie, changes in Japan were meant not so much to exclude the nobility as to force its conversion to modern methods and values. Take the abolition of feudalism. As an author pointed out, "in Japan, feudals are abolishing feudalism. In so doing, they are of course changing themselves into another class." Indeed, the loss of income caused by the removal of feudal rights compelled the feudal class to recover it by using modern methods. Such was not the intention of Menelik and especially of Haile Selassie, who were rather distributing land and tax rights to their warlords in the south. This might appear as a way of showing solidarity with the nobility; in reality, it was blocking its evolution. And as the state progressively assumed the military and administrative role devolving traditionally to the nobility, these grants were insidiously transforming the whole nobility into a parasitic class. Nobles became absentee landlords, cut off from their power base and having no specific social responsibilities. What other terms than bribe and corruption can express the right accorded to nobles to appropriate and consume a surplus in the production of which they had no the slightest contribution? The image of a parasitic, useless, blood-sucking class could not have been better mounted. That the practice of compensating the nobility with undue economic privileges for its political and administrative erosion led, first to the degeneration of the class, then to the...
downfall of the monarchy itself, should not come as a surprise.

NOTES


4. Ibid


15. Ibid, p. 72.


17. Ibid, p. 83.


20. Ibid


27. Ibid, p. 173.

28. Ibid


