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Eurocentrism and Ethiopian Historiography: Deconstructing Semitization

Messay Kebede

A society cannot properly map out and accomplish its future if it mistakes its history for that of another society. Saddled with alien predicaments, such a society is bound to stumble constantly. A case in point is Ethiopia: among the various factors that contributed to the present plight of Ethiopia, a false or borrowed reading of its history figures prominently. Focusing on the alleged Semitic origin of Aksumite civilization, this paper uncovers the manner the allegation structured the disparity between the north and the south to the point of ushering in the colonial interpretation of the southern expansion in addition to misconstruing the causes of Ethiopia's socioeconomic retardation.

The Founders of Ethiopian Studies

No better illustration of the external seal of Ethiopian history is to be found than in the designation of expatriate scholars as founders of Ethiopian studies. Thus, according to Edward Ullendorff, "the most illustrious name in Ethiopic scholarship is that of Job Ludolf, who, by his massive contributions to the study of Ge'ez, Amharic, and Abyssinian history, may justly be called the founder of the Ethiopian studies in Europe."[1]

The other important figure is James Bruce, the Scottish traveler, "whose achievements in the field of travel and exploration are comparable to those of Ludolf in the sphere of study and patient scholarship."[2] Then comes August Dillmann, baptized "the re-founder of Abyssinian studies ... the Ludolf of the nineteenth century."[3]

This promotion to the rank of founders of European scholars who, with the exception of Bruce, never even set foot in Ethiopia, perfectly establishes that what is called Ethiopian history and culture is largely a representation of Western scholarship. It suggests that the narratives about Ethiopia emanate from the interpretation through Western canons of information mostly provided by foreign travelers and secondary sources rather than

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being the products of concrete and patient study of and familiarity with Ethiopian life and legacy. Even when Ethiopians provided the information, the prevailing practice has been not to count them among the founders of Ethiopian studies. Such is the case, for instance, of Ludolf's work. Whatever he said about Ethiopian realities, it is known that the Ethiopian monk, Abba Gregory, who was then living in Rome, furnished him with the material. Since the latter spoke neither Latin nor Italian, one can easily figure out how hard and precarious the communication between the two must have been.

Ethiopian scholars themselves admit that they owe their knowledge of Ethiopia to Western scholarship. Taddesse Tamart opens his book on medieval Ethiopia with the following remark:

> More than three hundred years of European scholarship has produced an extensive literature on the languages, history, and cultures of the Ethiopian peoples. Yet Conti Rossini's *Storia d'Etiopia*—written more than forty years ago—still remains a unique contribution in the specific field of the critical study of Ethiopian history.[4]

Another Ethiopian historian, Sergew Hable Sellassie, fully agreeing with Ullendorff, acknowledges: "Ethiopian Studies as a discipline was founded in Europe in the 17th century. The man who started this great task was Job Ludolf (1624-1704)."[5] For him too, the next "important Ethiopicist appeared again in Germany; this was August Dillmann who lived from 1823-1894."[6]

Would it not be strange if American scholars wrote their history on the basis of what the British said about them or French scholars on the basis of what Germans said about the French? For Americans as well as for the French, their history is essentially determined by their own representations, by what they think and say about themselves. They take themselves as subjects, and so resent founding their study on outside constructions whose basic outcome is to change them into objects. Even if their studies are critical and result in the dismissal of many myths and received opinions, they draw their criticism from internal premises, not from the representations of external observers. Not so with Ethiopian scholars: they learn who Ethiopians are and what they want from foreign scholars. What we call Ethiopian studies is Ethiopia viewed from the West taken as a center. Such a perspective offers the view of a periphery with the result that Ethiopians are no longer subjects, but objects, representations of the West. In so being, Ethiopians are but giving up the power of interpretation, that is, the power of construing themselves and the surrounding world in accordance with their priorities and aspirations.

Let there be no misunderstanding: my aim is not to reject the contributions of Western scholars as useless or fake. Be it in regard to

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research, methodology, or theoretical construction, the Western studies of Ethiopia have set the right standard over and above providing the views of a different culture on Ethiopia. Let me go further: such a Western scholarship can even rise to the level of centering Ethiopia by forcefully denouncing the deforming effects of the use of Eurocentric models. I have in mind Donald Levine's *Greater Ethiopia*: his impressive and gratifying version of Ethiopian history and culture directly flows from the commitment to take Ethiopia as a center. Another praiseworthy example is Donald Donham's attempt to connect the southern expansion of Ethiopia to an internal dynamics thanks to the rejection of the concept of "feudalism" as an inappropriate and misleading borrowing from Western history.

What singles out such Western scholars is not only their awareness of the deformities caused by concepts and processes borrowed from Europe, but also the exemplary effort they make to shield their studies of Ethiopia against Eurocentric contaminations. Unfortunately, the results of their study came too late, and so are powerless to undo the habits and consequences derived from the established construction. Needless to say, the attribution of Aksumite civilization to Semitic immigrants from South Arabia is the most salient and pervasive product of the Eurocentric reading of Ethiopian history and culture. So pivotal is the Semitic theme that it commands the organization and meaning of Ethiopian events and culture.

Let it be said at once that the tradition in Ethiopia is not to ascribe Askumite civilization to Semitic immigrants, since according to the *Kibre Negest*, the speaker of Ethiopia's self-proclaimed identity and mission, before the visit of Queen Saba or Mekeda to King Solomon, a great civilization flourished in Ethiopia. The book praises the beauty of "the Queen of the South" and the richness of her native land. Though what is said about her rich native land is rather sketchy, the book specifically refrains from mentioning a South Arabian ancestry, a surprising omission in view of the alleged importance of said ancestry to the Aksumite ruling elite. Nor does the Semitic pigmentation through King Solomon alter the racial composition of Ethiopians. Rather than being evoked to account for a racial modification, it has to do with the promotion of Ethiopia to the rank of the new chosen following the rejection of Christ by the Jews. Some such promotion makes sense only if God's choice really shifted to a different people who nevertheless remained culturally related to Judaism. That Ethiopia adopted Christianity after becoming heir to the culture of Judaism through Menelik—a heritage best symbolized by the appropriation of the Ark of the Covenant—meant that the full conditions leading to the replacement of the Jews were finally met.

The corrupting effect of Eurocentric biases explains why Ethiopian scholars, abandoning the claims of the *Kibre Negest*, endorsed the thesis of the South Arabian origin of Aksumite civilization. In his book, *The Making of Modern Ethiopia*, Teshale Tibebu has conceptualized the disagreement over heritage by his distinction between what he calls "the

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Orientalist Semiticist paradigm" and the "Aksumite paradigm."[7] While the former, predominantly the position of Western Ethiopianists, defends the thesis of the South Arabian origin of Aksumite civilization, the latter is the view that the Ethiopian Church has developed the distinctive feature of which is to relate the story of Queen Saba in Jerusalem with "no Sabaeans crossing to Ethiopia."[8] The irony is that Ethiopian scholars walk away from the "Aksumite paradigm" on suspicion that the story is a myth when the Semitic thesis itself is but a Eurocentric phantasm.

Witness: although the *Kibre Negest* does not refer to a South Arabian origin, Wallis Budge, the translator of the book in English, cannot prevent himself from underlining the need for such a connection. Not only does he firmly contest the Ethiopian identity of the Queen, preferring to say that "her home was ... in the south-west of ARABIA,"[9] but he also points to a deliberate omission on the part of Ethiopians, who deserted their South Arabian connection for the more prestigious filiation of Ethiopian kings to King Solomon and through him to Christ. This surprising stand of the translator of *Kibre Negest* has been recently challenged. On the basis of testimonies of ancient historians and biblical exegetes assigning an African origin to Queen Saba, Ephraim Isaac and Cain Felder have argued that "any assertion that the Queen of Sheba was South Arabian instead of Ethiopian must ... begin from a defensible criticism of some of the most notable historians and biblical scholars of two thousands years ago."[10] Evidently, Budge's reference to South Arabia originates less from the consideration of facts than from the requirement of a preconceived position.

The Ethiopian Anomaly

Historians like very much to underline the unique place of Ethiopia in black Africa. The architectural monuments of Aksum, the existence of an indigenous written script, Christianity, state formation, to name but some of them, constitute the distinctive features of Ethiopia when black Africa is defined by such characteristics as stateless societies, absence of script, paganism, in a word, the attributes of primitiveness. Yet, the most superficial look at Ethiopians readily confirms that their physical characteristics largely tally with the traits normally ascribed to black peoples. Even if it is said that they have a lighter complexion and more regular features than the Negroid type, they are no different from the Somali, the Oromo, the Afar who, classified as Cushitic, are believed to be natives of the region.

In light of the dominant belief that black peoples are incapable of great achievements, the existence of an early and highly advanced civilization constitutes a serious anomaly in the Eurocentric construction of the world. A recalcitrant fact of such magnitude is liable to challenge the very foundation of the belief, all the more so as undeniable documents of the epoch testify that Aksum was not only very advanced, but that it was also

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a power contending for supremacy. About the greatness of Aksum, a recent study says:

> At the height of their power, the kings of Axum ruled an empire that extended from the Upper Nile Valley in the west to Yemen in the East and was considered together with Rome, Persia, and China one of the four great empires that divided ancient Eurasia and Africa between them.[11]

It must be emphasized that the word "anomaly" is taken in the sense of Thomas Kuhn. Indeed, to the extent that Eurocentrism arranges and ranks different sociocultural formations from the perspective of Europe taken as a center, it constitutes an "implicit body of intertwined theoretical and methodological belief that permits selection, evaluation, and criticism."[12] Its apriorism and generality, that is, its paradigmatic role is bound to encounter recalcitrant facts that antagonize "the paradigm-induced expectations."[13] G. W. F. Hegel's construction of the frame of universal history gives a good idea of the paradigmatic role of Eurocentrism. To concoct the concept of universal history, Hegel places all the cultures of the world in the same unilinear time. Through the idea of gradual progression of selected characteristics peculiar to European history and culture, he has no difficulty in showing that the selected items exist in less developed forms in non-European cultures. Hence the idea that the evolution of universal history "assumes successive forms which it successively transcends; and by this very process of transcending its earlier stages, gains an affirmative, and, in fact, a richer and more concrete shape."[14] The idea naturally ranks Europe as the most advanced stage and the driving engine of universal history. Given that such a scheme allows those cultures that exhibit the greatest disparity with Europe to be classified as most primitive, Hegel had no scruple about defining black Africa as "the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night."[15]

Now suppose that somewhere in black Africa a civilization that violates the expectations of the paradigm is found. That civilization becomes a serious anomaly: the paradigm must be either abandoned or altered in such a way that the anomaly is resolved. My contention is that Aksum induced a crisis in the Eurocentric paradigm, but that the choice has been to stick to the old belief by appealing to a deus ex machina. Indeed, in default of rejecting the Eurocentric paradigm, the only way to resolve the riddle was to assume that the civilization found in Ethiopia is the outcome of Semitic settlers who migrated from South Arabia. Speaking of the native inhabitants of Ethiopia, Budge writes: "the Semites found them negro savages, and taught them civilization and culture."16 For Ullendorff, "no student of Ethiopia can afford to neglect the connexion between that country and South Arabia."17 The link is so vital that Abyssinians, that is, those Ethiopians who live in the central and northern

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highlands are distinguished from the rest of the Ethiopian peoples as "the carriers of the historical civilization of Semitized Ethiopia."18 To give substance to the assumption, it is believed that the settlers mixed and intermarried with native peoples, thereby "producing a distinct race that was more white than black."19 That the outcome is a distinct, highly whitened black race, these words of Ullendorff give a good idea:

> Generally speaking, the predominant Ethiopian type reveals fairly close anthropometric affinities to that commonly found among the Arabs of South Arabia, i.e. medium stature, long face, a fairly straight and thin nose—all characteristics not encountered among the neighbouring African peoples. The hair is curly or frizzy, lips are thinner and very much less protruding than is otherwise the case in Africa. The colour of the skin varies a good deal, but is generally rather light, somewhere between olive and light brown.[20]

Still, as suggested earlier, not only are these physical traits no different from the native Agaw peoples, but it also hard to claim that the settlers themselves were not simply absorbed into the local peoples so that the Semitic blood, thus strongly diluted by native characteristics, is anything but significant. After taking great trouble to underline the racial distinctiveness of Abyssinians, Ullendorff himself ends up by confessing that the distinction between Semitic and Cushitic peoples is not dependable, for neither the Semitized peoples nor the Cushitic groups are in any way racially pure; indeed, they have absorbed so much alien blood, partly from each other, partly from negroid groups, and from sources difficult to identify that the term 'race' (vague and all-too-often abused) has little meaning in this connexion.[21]

Then why, one might ask, all the fuss about the Semitic source? The fact that Ullendorff continues to speak of "the amalgam of a relatively thin layer of Semitic settlers from south-west Arabia with the great mass of the existing Cushitic population"[22] leaves no doubt that the Semitic stock is insignificant. One must yield to the facts: the intrusion of the Semitic theme is closely tied with the issue of civilization. Since the appearance of an advanced civilization in Ethiopia is about to refute the Eurocentric construction of the world, this threat to Eurocentrism will be removed only if what native peoples were able to achieve in Ethiopia is ascribed to non-African immigrants.

In effect, the presence of the Semitic influence is invariably traced back to items associated with an advanced civilization. Most important among the borrowed elements is the existence in Ethiopia of a Semitic written language, Ge'ez. Aksumite architecture and state organization are also ascribed to South Arabians: both the obelisks and the territorial organization of Aksumite kingdom are said to be uncharacteristic of black Africa. In religious matters, too, the Aksumites are believed to have

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worshipped South Arabian gods before the adoption of Christianity. The presumption includes the agricultural techniques of Aksum on account of their great resemblance with those of South Arabia.

Contrast these proofs of an advanced civilization with the total absence of great achievements among the indigenous peoples of the Horn. Speaking of the Oromo, Ullendorff says: "the gallas had nothing to contribute to the civilization of Ethiopia; they possessed no material or intellectual culture, and their social organization was at a far lower stage of development than that of the population among whom they settled."[23] A. H. M. Jones and Elizabeth Monroe have no better terms to qualify the Somali: they speak of them as invaders whose purpose was "plunder and destruction and they made no settlements."[24]

In many ways, this debate about the origin of Aksumite civilization recalls the controversy that the Senegalese scholar, Cheikh Anta Diop, generated with his bold affirmation that ancient Egyptian civilization was the work of black people. For this number one denouncer of Eurocentric falsifications, the bias against the black person explains why European scholars, going against a multitude of data testifying to the blackness of ancient Egyptians, chose to whiten the Egyptian people. Before going further, let me clarify my intention: it is not so much to discuss the controversy over the racial identity of ancient Egyptians as to account for Diop's failure to recognize the parity of the Aksumite issue with his thesis of Negro Egypt. True, Diop notes that, in both cases, a whitening explanation has been activated to deny the paternity of great civilizations to black people. As in the case of Aksum, the achievements of ancient Egypt have been attributed to "a hypothetical white Pharaonic race that allegedly imported Egyptian civilization from Asia at the start of the historical period."[25] Equally similar is the attempt to present native peoples as "pseudo-Whites, on the strength of their relatively fine features."[26] Even so, however, Diop does not think that Aksum raises the same issue, namely, the denial of an authentically black civilization. For him, "except for one obelisk and two pedestals of statues, nothing is found. The civilization of Axum, former capital of Ethiopia, is more a word than a reality attested by historical monuments."[27]

When one asks the question why Diop is not as much eager to claim the blackness of Aksum as he is to blacken Egypt, besides the minor status of Aksum compared to Egypt, we find that he has given his consent to the external origin of Aksumite civilization. "On the Negro Ethiopian substratum," he maintains, "a White element was grafted, consisting of emigrants from Western Asia,"[28] This doubt about the authenticity of Aksumite civilization led him to focus on the Egyptian case that he believed to be more representative of blackness. Yet, in light of the current racial composition of Egyptians, the argument of black people achieving a high level of civilization would have gained greater strength by incorporating a case in which the attempt to whiten finds little empirical support.

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The Structure of Alien Rule

With Semitization, there emerges the picture of an alien, racially distinct minority imposing its culture and interests on conquered peoples. Accordingly, the Ethiopian state is nothing but the tool of conquest and subjugation of native peoples considered inferior and rebellious against advanced civilization. As such, its ideology and political organization are fundamentally of colonial nature. In the words of Levine,

> the Ethiopian Empire of the twentieth century consists of a number of previously autonomous and distinct 'African' tribes subordinated under an alien Semitic minority. This view is a natural consequence of beginning Ethiopian history, as scholarly convention has had it, with the supposed Semitic immigrations of the first milliennium B.C.[29]

The picture of a colonizing minority imposing its hegemony on subjugated peoples forcefully pops up when, speaking of the Agaw, the Ethiopian medievalist, Tadesse Tamrat, writes:

> it is most likely that at the time of their earliest contact with the south Arabians the native people were in a primitive stage of material culture, and lived in small isolated clans or groups of clans with no state or political organizations. This must have given the immigrants an excellent opportunity to assert themselves and easily reduce the local population to a position of political vassalage.[30]

To complete the picture, Taddesse underlines the resistance of the conquered; he refers to "the crucial process of the confrontation between the culturally superior, south Arabian or (sabeanized) groups and the natives of the interior,"[31] thereby suggesting that Ethiopian history and expansion are nothing but the progressive conquest of natives peoples by a colonizing elite. This thesis of conquest by Semitic immigrants springs from the heart of Eurocentrism. Besides implying that the native peoples were inferior and backward, it intimates that they would not have accepted so advanced a civilization unless they were forced and subjugated. This justified the use of political and military supremacy to break their stubborn resistance to social and cultural advancement.

The picture of a minority imposing its rule on highly recalcitrant native peoples stands out in a more recent article in which Taddesse discusses the process of integration of the Agaw people. Here too, he speaks of conquests that "must have been the most intensive onslaughts on their institutions and culture by the central state."[32] On the Agaw side, "resistance to annexation by the Christian empire continued unabated,"[33] he says. At the same time, however, Taddesse must admit the untenability

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of a minority rule in a country that claims a protracted existence under most trying conditions unless a parallel process of genuine integration took place. That is why he tempers the initial antagonism, even to extent of conceding: "the Agaw are of crucial importance because they are the very basis on which the whole edifice of Aksumite civilization was constructed."[34] Better still, the incorporation was such that it led to the emergence of the Zagwe dynasty, which precisely distinguished itself by a major contribution, namely, it "transmitted the institutions as well as the cultural and historical traditions of Aksum, almost intact, to later generations."[35] To do so, however, a simple one-way street incorporation is not enough. To turn the Agaw into sustainers and most loyal defenders of Aksumite civilization, one must admit that they have recognized their own contribution in the elaboration of said civilization. So that, their loyalty did not amount to defending an alien culture, but a legacy that was increasingly becoming multicultural, not to say national. Put simply, they were not defending the civilization of their erstwhile masters, but the civilization entrusted to them as the common denominator of integrated native forces.

At any rate, this complete and active loyalty of the Agaw to Aksumite civilization clashes with the view defining them by their fierce resistance. If a deep level of integration has developed, then common sense demands the radical revision of the picture of a minority imposing itself on a majority. This is not to say that events associated with conquest, conflict, and resistance did not occur. No doubt, they must have been frequent, but the crucial difference lies in the propensity to present them, not as the process by which an alien majority imposed its rule, but as part of an ongoing struggle of native forces competing for supremacy in the region. The elimination of the alien ruler indigenize Ethiopian history and culture: instead of the theory of an alien form imposing itself on a raw and rebellious material, it invites the understanding of Ethiopian history in terms of local actors, just as it calls for an investigation into how and why the one actor has successfully expanded by integrating other groups. To account for the success of one local actor is to design a theoretical and methodological approach quite different from the assumption of Semitic conquerors.

Let me insist on the importance of the question, as it bears on the foundation and nature of the Ethiopian state. Since Ethiopians themselves claim that there is continuity between Aksum and modern Ethiopia, the way they conceptualize this continuity impacts on their understanding of Ethiopian expansion and consolidation. If the original state had a structure such that peoples were colonized and assimilated by force, then the conclusion that modern Ethiopia is the product of the same colonial method is easily made. The history of Ethiopia thus appears as the history of a superimposed ruling elite on peoples with whom it had neither ethnic nor cultural affinity. The more recent the incorporation of the peoples, the

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wider the disparity becomes. In other words, the way we understand the origin and the nature of the Aksumite state determines our approach to the study of the history and culture of Ethiopia, including modern Ethiopia. Historians have called this history the expansion southward. How was the expansion realized? Was it merely conquest, subjugation, and assimilation by an alien ideology and elite? Or was it an expansion that achieved both a multiethnic organization and a national ideology? Though the long survival of Ethiopia and the structure defining the emperor as king of kings in conjunction with the existence of strong regionalism favor the second assumption, the Eurocentric model has remained most influential.

Unsurprisingly, aware of the detrimental implications of the idea of superimposition and confrontation, other Ethiopian scholars, although otherwise defending the Semitic thesis, have yet tried to attenuate the conflict between the settlers and the native peoples by alluding to a peaceful settlement. Such is the case of Sergew. After enumerating the contributions of South Arabian immigrants in terms of civilization, he cannot prevent himself from asking: "Is Ethiopian civilization just a copy of that of South Arabia?"[36] The question makes sense in view of the massive contributions usually attributed to the immigrants. Sergew is vigilant enough to understand that the only way by which he can avoid turning Ethiopian civilization into a copy is by challenging the Eurocentric assumption that native Africans are incapable of producing great achievements. Even if lack of systematic research does not allow us to be precise, nonetheless, "before the coming of South Arabian immigrants to Ethiopia, the inhabitants of this country did not lack a civilization,"[37] he says.

In thus positing a prior civilization, Sergew earmarks the possibility of reciprocal exchange between immigrants and native peoples. Since an advanced civilization already existed, the likelihood is that the settlers came not so much as conquerors as peaceful settlers in search of a better life. To quote Sergew,

> the immigrants came here in peace; they did not come here to capture the country by force. They simply migrated to secure a better life by peaceful means. They were obedient to the existing laws and customs of the country. But, because of the higher quality of their culture, they could influence the people, although the influence had its limitations.[38]

This obedience to existing laws and customs prepares, on the other hand, the ground for arguing that Ethiopian culture is a result of Semitic inputs into an indigenous substratum. This synthetic nature is most convincingly illustrated by the development of Ge'ez, which "is not Sabaean in origin, although it reveals a certain amount of Sabaean influence."[39] The historical example that comes close to the role of the Sabaean

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influence in Ethiopia, Sergew suggests, is the influence that Greek culture had on the Romans. Though the Greek influence was not brought to Rome by conquests, its superiority did result in the complete transformation of Roman culture.

In this way, Sergew counters the two major drawbacks of the Semitic thesis. Unlike Taddesse's position, he maintains that, as an outcome of synthesis of internal and external inputs, the Ethiopian culture is an original civilization, and not a copy of South Arabia. Again unlike Taddesse, the Ethiopian state cannot be defined as the rule of an alien minority over peoples belonging to a different sociocultural formation. The colonial structure according to which immigrants coming from outside subjugated native peoples on account of their alleged superiority cannot be applied to the Ethiopian state by any stretch of the imagination.

Now is Sergew successful in countering the damaging effects of the Semitic thesis? The answer is no. For one thing, he concedes to the Eurocentric paradigm the superiority of Semitic civilization, in addition to admitting that the borrowing was extensive as well as fundamental, as it pertained to culture and production techniques. Far from being challenged, the Eurocentric paradigm is reinstated. Africa is not yet recognized in its capacity to generate a higher civilization, and the Ethiopian case is still an anomaly. For another, the thesis of a peaceful settlement seems unlikely. Since the native peoples had admittedly different beliefs and social systems, would they have accepted the new culture without being forced? Moreover, if the immigrants had such an advance culture, the need to organize themselves into a ruling elite to defend their superior life becomes imperative. Clearly, the thesis of a peaceful settlement is a mere dubious assumption to counter some damaging effects of the Semitic thesis when the right approach should have simply been to challenge it.

Assessing the Damages of the Semitic Thesis

As already suggested, the main implication of the Semitic thesis is to enlarge the disparity between the north and the south. It crowns the already existing cultural gap with a racial connotation to the point of construing the southern expansion of Ethiopia as nothing less than a colonial conquest. We know that some Oromo intellectuals have crossed the threshold by defining the expansion as a "dependent colonialism." It is interesting to note that many of their arguments are drawn from the Eurocentric reading of Ethiopia. Referring to the Semitic root of Askumite kingdom, one of them alludes to "the descendants of the Arab immigrants who assimilated with the Africans on the coast."[40]

The contrivance of the colonial interpretation of Menilik's conquest required that a number of conditions be met. Since Ethiopians are

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undeniably black, to counter the hostility against the idea of black colonialism, it was necessary to show that Abyssinians are alien rulers who came as conquerors from a racially and culturally distinct region. Although they mixed with native peoples, they did so by imposing their culture and subjugating them so that the state and social organization preserve intact the original colonial structure. Even though northerners were darkened by intermarriage with black populations, they remain white by their distinct features, and most of all by their superior civilization. As to the objection that Abyssinia, not being a capitalist country, cannot engage in colonial conquest, the answer is that it colonized the south as deputy colonizer acting on behalf of colonial powers.

But what about the antagonism between colonial powers and Ethiopia, including all those events leading to the victory of Adwa when Ethiopians had to fight to preserve their independence? Given the Ethiopian technological backwardness, so the counterargument goes, it is enormously presumptuous to assume that Ethiopia was in a position to withstand colonial powers, let alone militarily defeat them. In reality, since a sharp competition existed between colonial powers, what is registered as Ethiopian victory was the victory of one colonial power over another through the instrumentality of the Ethiopian state. The military and diplomatic support to the Ethiopian state of one colonial power against another created the favorable situation leading to the victory of Adwa, which is therefore explainable only as an outcome of the "indirect battle between the British and the French over control of the region."[41]

Of particular interest here is the reasons why Ethiopia was chosen as a deputy. Without doubt, those reasons by which Ethiopians have been whitened served as criteria for selection. The first is Christianity: on top of distinguishing the ruling elite from other peoples of the Horn, it institutes an ideological solidarity between the Ethiopian ruling elite and the colonial powers, just as it draws a sharp divide between pagan or barbarian peoples and the civilized Abyssinians. Next is the Abyssinian class structure: endowed with a fixed state organization and a colonial ideology, nothing could be more appealing for the designation of a dependent colonizer than the possession of an already tested and well-oiled sociocultural structure of subjugation of native peoples. In the words of Asafa Jalata,

> Christian ideology, geopolitics, and the processes of class differentiation and state formation in Ethiopia proper allowed the Amhara-Tigrayan rulers to seek and establish alliances with the European colonial powers and colonize the Oromo and other peoples in order to exploit their economic and human resources.[42]

Since Abyssinians already appear as a Semitic people surrounded by Muslims and pagans, what else could such an ideological and racial

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disparity suggest but the vocation of Ethiopia to the rank of a natural ally of European colonial rulers? The structure and the ideology of the state guarantee that the Abyssinian rule over despised peoples will be as outright and demeaning as European colonization. These colonizing assets were enough to convince European colonizers of the need to provide the Ethiopian state with modern weapons so as to ensure the final defeat of the Oromo. Doubtless, the seed of the thesis of dependent colonialism springs from the Eurocentric reading of Ethiopian history and culture, which turns Ethiopia into an outpost of European civilizing mission. While in other parts of Africa, the reading intimates, European colonizers did the work themselves, in Ethiopia they found a local agent whose characteristics perfectly fitted in with the colonial project. Direct conquest was no longer necessary.

Another detrimental implication of the Semitic thesis is the total distortion of the causes of the technological retardation of Ethiopia. We know that most Western as well as Ethiopian scholars explain the technological backwardness of Ethiopia by what they call "isolation." Seeing how Aksum was once powerful and at the height of civilization, no other explanation, they argue, comes to mind than a decline caused by isolation. In effect, with the rise and spread of Islam, in particular with the Persian occupation of South Arabia, Aksum found itself in a state of rapid decline:

> its supply of fresh Semitic settlers from South Arabia had been cut off ... The isolation of Abyssinia, which was to last for many centuries, had now begun. Trade and conquest were a thing of the past, and in the face of the great Islamic expansion there was nothing left to the people but to retire within their impregnable mountain fastnesses.[43]

A word of caution: more than the flow of the Semitic blood, conversion to Christianity had endowed Aksum with all what it needed to keep up with progress. Christianity is the chief factor here, given that the Semitic peoples themselves ceased to promote progress as soon as they converted to Islam. While other Semitic peoples declined as a result of accepting Islam, Ethiopia had succeeded in retaining Christianity, alas, in a hostile environment. The decline of a Semitic people who had retained Christianity cannot be explained otherwise than by the combined effect of isolation and hostile environment. When the weight of hostile environment is added to isolation, it accounts for the presence of an arrested civilization. Not only the Christian potential to civilize was not fully carried out, but also the culture itself became ossified and developed negative traits, such as superstitions and xenophobia. This explains why when the Portuguese came to the rescue of the Christian kingdom, the reaction of the Ethiopians was not so much to catch up with the progress of the civilizing world as to shield themselves against all external influence.

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Add to the negative traits the fact that the potential resulting from the combination of Semitic blood with Christianity was stifled by the necessity to focus on survival. Because Ethiopians had to put all their energy to defend themselves against hostile neighbors, they missed the opportunity to pursue technological advances and the refinements of a higher civilization. This is so true that the bulk of Ethiopian history can be described as the struggle of an advanced elite against barbaric peoples, pagan and Muslim, intent on destroying it. That the backwardness of Ethiopia is the result of an environment populated by peoples who resent advanced life is reconfirmed by the fact that no sooner was the Islamic threat removed than "a new threat arose ... which was equally damaging to Christians and Muslims: the great Galla migrations, which were to become the dominant feature during the next three centuries."[44]

This presentation of the Oromo as the new threat against Christian Ethiopia reproduces the colonial paradigm of Christianity versus paganism. It turns the conflict for supremacy between two native systems into the struggle of a white outpost against barbarism. The retarding effect of the Oromo was particularly played out by the devastation of Ethiopia during "the Era of the Princes." The political anarchy created by the incorporation of Oromo into the Ethiopian nobility diverted Ethiopia from taking advantage of the industrial revolution in Europe.

Some such explanation of Ethiopian retardation is deeply Eurocentric. It does not say that Ethiopians did not develop technology because they were pursuing different goals. Still less does it appeal to ecological factors that impacted on the non-technological orientation of Ethiopian thinking. The explanation combines racist and cultural views, as embodied in the Eurocentric beliefs that race and culture account for the disparity between civilizations. Thanks to Christian and Semitic elements Ethiopia had everything to become highly civilized. However, because of isolation and the presence of barbaric peoples, it could not develop its potential. All its energy was exhausted by the fight against hostile forces to preserve its identify. Even when it conquered and assimilated some of these forces, it could not entirely remove the danger of internal revolts.

For the record, the manner Ethiopians perceived themselves is different from these Eurocentric readings. My book, *Survival and Modernization—Ethiopia's Enigmatic Present*, has attempted to show that Ethiopians have defined themselves, not by technological pursuit or the quest for conquest and grandeur, but by the guardianship of Christianity, by their unwavering commitment to what they believed to be the true religion even as other nations shifted to Islam. Far from being the upshot of fatality, isolation was for them a choice, the expression of their assumed mission, which was to stay firmly Christian, including by means of martial prowess, so as to deserve the status of God's new chosen people.

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Challenging the Semitic Thesis

We noted how the Ethiopian historian, Sergew, attempted to attenuate the colonial image of the Ethiopian ruling elite and state by alluding to a peaceful settlement of immigrants that resulted in their amalgamation with the indigenous life. Though commendable the effort was not enough, for it failed short of challenging the Eurocentric paradigm. By challenge, I mean primarily the questioning of the assumption that South Arabia had a superior civilization to Aksum. Its immediate implication is both to baptize Aksum as an authentic and native African civilization and to forward the thesis that, whatever resemblance existed between Aksum and South Arabia, it was the result of a reciprocal exchange, better still, of the exportation of Askumite influence to South Arabia.

Since the linguistic factor has been the most important argument in favor of the idea of Semitic immigrants, the challenge to the Semitic thesis is naturally encouraged by studies suggesting that the Semitic language itself has its origin in the Horn of Africa. For example, on the basis of Grover Hudson's work, Andargachew Tiruneh entertains the possibility that "all the Afro-Asiatic languages have in fact originated from the Ethiopian region. If correct, this would render Ethiopia the source of the Semitic, Cushitic and Sidama languages."[45] For Stuart Munro-Hay too, the notion of Afro-Asiatic languages suggests a reverse process: instead of immigrants from Yemen introducing the Semitic language, "Semiticized Agaw peoples ... have migrated from south-eastern Eritrea possibly as early as 2000BC, bringing their 'proto-Ethiopic' language, ancestor of Ge'ez and the other Ethiopian languages, with them."[46] This linguistic reversal exposes the manner the advances that Ethiopians had achieved natively and exported to other regions came to them metamorphosed as external contributions by the sheer force of Eurocentric bias against black peoples.

The reversal of the Semitic thesis is backed by other factors. Advanced techniques of agricultural production were also said to come from South Arabia. The reality, however, is that "words for 'plough' and other agricultural vocabulary are apparently of Agaw origin in Ethiopian Semitic languages, indicating that the techniques of food-production were not one of the Arabian imports."[47] This is crucial in the view of the importance of the use of plough for the production of surplus, which surplus is necessary to support a non-producing, elitist class. Put otherwise, the use of plough may well be the necessary condition for the rise of a higher civilization involving state formation and "leading eventually to the stratification of society and the creation of social hierarchies that distinguished between people on the basis of their material wealth."[48]

This means that the Ethiopian class system and its corollary, namely, the state, are both native traits and have nothing to do with Sabaean conquest. Before the contact with South Arabia, a class society had already developed in Ethiopia thanks to the surplus afforded by the use of plough.

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This native process of class differentiation destroys the assumption that an alien ruling class, coming from outside, imposed the class system. The latter is a native development and the ruling class was composed of native peoples. Another important implication is that "the Aksumites developed Africa's only indigenous written script, Ge'ez, from which the written form of the languages spoken in modern Ethiopia has evolved."[49] They were able to develop a literate civilization precisely on the basis of the surplus generated by their advanced agricultural techniques. The surplus generated by the oxen-drawn plough was enough to sustain a class of people who, freed of production activity, could devote themselves to military and literary activities.

The upshot of all this is that South Arabia did not have a superior civilization to the native Ethiopians. Such things as state formation, class stratification, advanced agricultural techniques, written language, grandiose architectural designs were already present in Ethiopia, better still, were unknown on the Arabian side of the Red Sea. The obvious conclusion is that the Semitic thesis must be rejected without more ado. To quote Levine,

> [Semitic] groups of immigrants have hitherto been thought of as constituting the core population of northeastern Ethiopia in antiquity and have been credited with introducing into Ethiopia a cultural complex that included Semitic language, the art of writing, architectural technology, the practice of irrigation, and Sabaean religious and political symbolism. Since, however, there is no clear evidence that any of these cultural traits appeared in South Arabia earlier than on the Ethiopian plateau, and since ... Semitic language now appears to have been spoken in Ethiopia as early as 2000 B.C., that conception deserves to be modified.[50]

This does not mean that close contacts and exchanges did not exist between Aksum and South Arabia. On the contrary, the connections must have been quite extensive and frequent to the point of justifying the assumption that, whatever resemblances one finds between Aksum and South Arabia, they are the products, not of South Arabians colonizing the native peoples of Ethiopia, but coming to Ethiopia in search of better opportunities. The assumption makes sense in view of the rise of Aksum to great prosperity and influence. Some such opportunity can attract immigrants from the other side of the Red Sea, who then brought their gods and wherever they settled left their names and inscriptions. It was enough that resemblances were found for the Eurocentric paradigm to rush into interpreting them as the marks of the conquest of Semitic immigrants. Moreover, the assumption that these resemblances are due to Ethiopian influences cannot be discarded when the absence of historical documents attesting to the political and military domination of South Arabians is contrasted with the availability of evidence showing that

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"South Arabia was under actual Ethiopian domination several times during its history."[51]

If we begin the history of Ethiopia with the view that Aksum was a native civilization, a radical change occurs in our approach to Ethiopia's culture and expansion. One such change could, for instance, direct research toward "ancient Ethiopian cultural ties with Egypt and Nubia in the distant antiquity" rather than South Arabia, thereby placing Aksum in the "context of the Nile civilization."[52] To the extent that the approach provides a more plausible context than the hypothesis of Arab tribes coming from Yemen, it bolsters the indigenization of Ethiopian history and culture. The attempt encounters Levine, who has gone a long way toward the dismantling of the Eurocentric reading in favor of an indigenous approach as a result of grasping the connection between the colonial interpretation of the southern expansion and the Semitic thesis. Grant that the Semitic input was anything but important, nay, that most of the advanced traits developed by northern Ethiopians are native, and the way is clear to relating the various ethnic groups of Ethiopia and their defining characteristics to a differentiation process, with the consequence that dispersion invites reunification. As the birthplace of Afro-Asiatic peoples, Ethiopia was originally defined by the coexistence of multiple but incompatible tendencies. While the northern part developed such characteristics as classes, state organization, written language, the southern part, the detached Cushitic component, developed an egalitarian and collectivist system, best symbolized by the Gada system of the Oromo. The two systems coexisted, interspersed with epochs of open conflict but also of movements toward reunification. So that, the question of knowing whether the southern expansion, Menelik's conquest, "was basically *a subjugation of alien peoples or an ingathering of peoples with deep historical affinities*"[53] can be answered with reasonable justification as a reunification of two component parts that went separately as a result of a divergent evolution. So presented, the question is no more the Semitic versus the Cushitic, since both are part of the same original unity, but the provision of a sociopolitical system able to integrate the two tendencies in such a way that they complement each other and hence produce a new and richer Ethiopianism.

I hasten to add that this integration is different from what is usually called "unity in diversity" and praised as the virtue of ethnic federalism. It goes much further, since it calls for of the reunion of detached parts resulting, not in the preservation of the previous ethnic identities, but in their sublimation into a new and more accomplished national personality. The direction toward this reunification does not depend on any biological, ecological, or historical determinism, but on the Ethiopian actors themselves, on how high they rise above petty interests and insularity and open themselves to a historical calling.

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To sum up, taking as a pertinent example the Semitic thesis, this study has unraveled the Eurocentric reading of Ethiopia and analyzed its detrimental effects. It has also pointed to the availability of new conceptions and possibilities when the Eurocentric reading is discarded. A similar study could have been made as regards the characterization of the Ethiopian system as feudalism. Here too the same deceiving extrapolation is at work with similar detrimental theoretical and practical consequences. One irresistible question crops up: given the leading role of the educated elite in the eruption of the revolution of 1974 and its disastrous outcomes, including the growing ethnicization of Ethiopian politics, is it not possible to relate such detrimental results to the Eurocentric reading of Ethiopian history and culture? If yes, it would mean that the careful study of the causes and outcomes of the revolution should delve into the deep effects of Western education on the Ethiopian educated elite. This, in turn, would mean putting the figure on the basic cause of the derailment of the Ethiopian mind, which derailment is forcefully attested by the failure to modernize a country endowed with great potentials.

Notes

[1] Edward Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 9.

[2] Ibid., p. 12.

[3] Ibid., p. 20.

[4] Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 1.

[5] Sergew Hable sellassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270* (Addis Ababa: United Printers, 1972), p. 7.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Teshale Tibebu, *The Making of Modern Ethiopia 1896-1974* (Lawrenceville, N.J.: The Red Sea Press, Inc.), p. xvii.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Sir E. Wallis Budge, *The Queen of Sheba and her Only Son Menyelek* (London: Kegan Paul, 2001), p. xlii.

[10] Ephraim Isaac and Cain Felder, "Reflections on the Origins of the Ethiopian Civilization," *Proceedings of the Eighth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, ed. Taddese Beyene (Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies, 1988), vol. 1, p. 79.

[11] Stanley Burstein, *Ancient African civilizations: Kush and Axum* (Princeton, N.J.: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1998), p. 14.

[12] Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 16-17.

[13] Ibid., pp. 52-53.

[14] Georg W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956), p. 63.

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[15] Ibid., p. 91.
[16] Budge, *The Queen of Sheba and her Only Son Menyelek*, p. x.
[17] Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians*, p.21.
[18] Ibid., p. 32.
[19] William R. Scott, *The Sons of Sheba's Race* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), .p. 194.
[20] Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians*, pp. 33-34.
[21] Ibid., p. 33.
[22] Ibid., p. 51.
[23] Ibid., p. 76.
[24] A. H. M. Jones and Elizabeth Monroe, *A History of Abyssinia* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 8.
[25] Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1974), p. 43.
[26] Ibid., p. 50.
[27] Ibid., p. 156.
[28] Ibid., p. 50.
[29] Donald N. Levine, *Greater Ethiopia* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 26.
[30] Tadesse Tamarat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, p. 8.
[31] Ibid., p. 13.
[32] Tadesse Tamrat, "Process of Ethnic Interaction and Integration in Ethiopian History: The Case of the Agaw," *Journal of African History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 29=1(1988), p. 6.
[33] Ibid., p. 12.
[34] Ibid., p. 7.
[35] Ibid., p. 18.
[36] Sergew, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270*, p. 31.
[37] Ibid., p. 33.
[38] Ibid., p. 33.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Asafa Jalata, *Oromia & Ethiopia: State Formation and Ethnonational Conflict, 1868-1992* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1993), p. 31.
[41] Bonnie K. Holcomb and Sisai Ibssa, *The Invention of Ethiopia* (Trenton, N.J.: The Red Sea Press, 1990), p. 7.
[42] Asafa, *Oromia & Ethiopia*, p. 1.
[43] Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians*, p. 57.
[44] Ibid., p. 75.
[45] Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution 1974-1987* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 1.
[46] Stuart Munro-Hay, *Aksum: An African Civilization of Late Antiquity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), p. 62.
[47] Ibid., p. 62.
[48] John Reader, *Africa: A Biography of the Continent* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1997), p. 221.
[49] Ibid., p. 220.
[50] Levine, *Greater Ethiopia*, p. 31.
[51] Ephraim Isaac and Cain Felder, *Proceedings of the Eighth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, p. 80.
[52] Ibid., p. 72.
[53] Levine, *Greater Ethiopia*, p. 26.

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