



A History of Modern Ethiopia (1855-1991): A Review

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Abstract

The author is a fantastic analyst though as others have noted about him; just to begin the review, the stronger sides of the writer was, he has done extensive research on the subject, consulting both the secondary literature and the contemporary publications and original sources of primary. So, the author tried to discuss and analysed his argument to make clear the misconceptions and vague judgments about the oldest history of Ethiopia in his studies. Moreover, with concert evidences, he has striven to show the realities of Italy as colonizer has done to the peoples of Ethiopia and the Horn, the exploitive systems of Feudalism in Ethiopia, and communal bonding social values and lives, the 1974 Ethiopian first revolution and the Era of Military regime that overthrown in 1991 by the TPLF Junta forces. However, as a critique I also saw imminent shortcoming from his studies and ways of narration and outlooks; may be, he put some of his arguments based on his personal standing or political backgrounds. So I tried to exhibit and discussed in detail here below as a Historian free from any baize or prejudice rather depend on facts and evidences.

Keywords: History, modern Ethiopian history, colonialism, historian, Italy, Ethiopia

Introduction

In the review process, I learned a lot from the book-like the very mysterious imperialists politics in the Horn of Africa, figure state of Ethiopia in particular and Africa in general-that Italy proposed post-World War I to get French and British Somaliland to add to Italian Somaliland. A proposal which would has been a huge step toward a united Somalia. I also learned during this period the British dreamed of Dam on Lake Tana-shades of the contemporary mining project.

More shockingly is the somber politics between Mussolini of Italy, Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia, and the UK in the post 1919 period. Mussolini dropped his opposition to Ethiopia in the League of Nations because he knew that the UK opposed Ethiopia in the long even more. Even worse was in the 1925 there were letters between Mussolini and the British Ambassador to effectively dividing Ethiopia between them-a violation of the League of Nations spirit. But, Italy through hidden its secret plan on Ethiopia, they soften the grounds that Emperor Haile Sellaie I of Ethiopia grand tour to Europe and in the 1920s, on the street of Rome there were chants of "Viva Ras Tafari" when Haile Selassie I visited Italy.

Discussions were made about selling Ethiopia the port of Assab-but, the Ethiopians thought the price was too high. A calculation that though little remembered would have a profound impact on the future of the Horn of Africa. The author mentions the Japanese faction in Ethiopia in the Pre-WWII period but, it was stronger than he suggests. Ethiopian modeled its constitution on Japan's and there were even reportedly some schemes for intermarriage between the two empires.

During World War II Japan sent a shipment of tires to help Italian East African forces under the Duke of Aosta-though they were apparently the wrong size. Not enough attention is also spent on the crimes of Ethiopia's brutal communist

regime which claimed the lives of over a million people and whose perpetrators are living unpunished around the globe.

I also found interesting (the author makes the claim several times) that the Mahdist of Sudan was would into concede some territory to Christian Ethiopia in order to limit European influence.

A thesis that significantly degrades the view of the Mahdi of Mahdist as a proto-Islamist.

Materials and Methods

In this study I have used descriptive research design and qualitative data methods. Because, these types of design and methodology of data gathering is essential to explain the story, events, causes, phenomena, and facts of past deeds. As a source of data, all necessary supportive evidences were employed through using probability sampling methods. Data was obtained via consulting written primary sources and archives. Likewise, secondary data were collected from written materials such as journals, internet, newspapers, published and unpublished materials. Thus, consolidated sources about topics of the study and related issues were reconciled and interpreted by narrative analysis systematic methods.

Results and Discussions

This book is more of a political and economic history of Ethiopia as opposed to a general history but does describe the major events in fairly good detail for an introductory book. In accordance to Bahru, one of Ethiopia's eminent historian, the underlying principle and the inspiration for the preparation of the first edition of his book (1991), a History of Modern Ethiopia (1855-1974), was to provide solution for the jarring scarcity of general history of Ethiopia that could serve specialists and educators alike. Thus, he responded to quench

the quest of historians and educators for comprehensive and preeminent history. Besides the author claims that the urgency was spared by the hurdle prompted by the great take off in Ethiopian historiography.

The original edition of this book is covering the period from 1855 to 1974 but in the second edition he extended it to 1991. This edition, which is the focus of the review, encompasses 74 illustrations re-collected from 33 diverse sources originally gathered by travelers, missionaries and individual researchers. The tenets of these illustrations meander on depicting battle fields, military leaders, war weapons, politicians and few urban centers. These illustrations are supplemented with 8 economic, topographic and political maps.

The book covers 6 chapters with a temporal span extending from 1855 to 1991. It begins with an introduction that elucidates about the geographical location (absolute and relative), the topographic setting, the genesis of the name Ethiopia, the dynastic pedigree, linguistic, ethnic and religious make up and administrative history of the pre-1855 Ethiopia; and culminated with a brief description about the triumphant victory of the ethnic insurgence launched against the regime of Menigstu in May 1991. The first chapter describes two themes: the internal structural chaos fashioned by politicians' egoism of the princes and the process of inner "north-south" link through the long distance trade which was further challenged by external menace. The second chapter narrates about the reaction given by Tewodros II to the internal chaos triggered by the squabbling nobles and the foreign threat. It further elucidates about the resurgence of centralization process and commencement of the creation of modern state of Ethiopia as it was envisioned before the onset of the "era of princes" with wider territorial extensions through first by Tewdros II and continued with a new approach of Yohannis IV and finalized with the ultimate seal of Menilik II's extensive territorial aggrandizement.

In chapter three, Bahru mentioned about colonialist menace and its tragedian culmination at the Battle of Adwa. He also went on elucidating the post-Adwa power equilibrium of the absolutist state and the institutionalization efforts in reaction to the rushing colonialist conspirator treaty. Having this, Bahru tried to describe about "the second Ethio-Italian war" whose concomitant effect made Ethiopia easy prey to the foreign domination of Britain and later the US. The post restoration efforts of reconstruction coupled with popular resentments against the absolutist state of Haile Sellasie I and its legal, military and administrative measures taken to consolidate power and cripple the opposing is vividly expounded as prelude to forthcoming trendy upsurge.

Finally, his (the author) attention was preoccupied by a very analytical description about the popular upsurge of the 1974 and the rise of the military junta which had lost its power to the ethnic insurgent groups in May 1991.

The last portion of the book is backed with brief conclusion (pp. 270-274), glossary and transliteration key (pp. 275-280), and as well a 10 pages of indexes, (pp. 281-300), which depicts places, institutions and series of historical phenomena. Basically it is difficult to point out technical and methodological boo-boos from this eminent historian yet engulfing oneself in deeper intellectual scrutiny enables to have an academic revelation on some errors. In this regard, I (the reviewer) argue against Bahru's periodization which took 1855 as a land mark for the inauguration of the Modern History of Ethiopia. In this regard, the designation is anachronistic for a history of archaic feudal society couldn't be branded as modern merely; because of the rise of a leader

of that society with conception of modernization or westernization.

In fact, a mismatch between the society and the leader can be inferred from the failure of the modernization programs and as well from the final words of Tewdros II. However, modern history has to do with the emergence of capitalist society yet Ethiopia was a feudal state which was later transformed in to Military soldiers' of "socialism" after the popular upsurge of the 1974. In spite of the fact that boundaries demonstrate fluidity and dynamic nature, in all his maps Bahru illustrates Ethiopia and Eritrea as a single political unit even after the secession of the latter. Besides, the approach he pursues in narrating the historical developments of the country is loaded with much of the roads travelled by nationalists, which is most often obsessed with political history. This approach is believed to be didactic, less objective, dominated with the off blend history and politics, glorification of war and cult of state power.

Due to this nationalist historians commonly branded as mere press agents for the politicians, and recruiting officers for the army (Durant, *Pleasure of Philosophy*: 206). Bahru has hardly escaped the latter three criticism vice versa, blend of history and politics, glorification of war and others.

In fact, he had made a profound leap towards synthesizing the Enset culture and Teff culture as single historical platform. He also accredited the existence of mosaic nationalities with multitude of linguistic and cultural manifestation (p. 6). Contrary to this, in his book the lion's share is dedicated in the veneration of kings whom he believed as protagonists of the history of the country. Thus, he gave little attention to the hitherto neglected issue of social history and ethno nationalism by regarding it as a deification of ethnicity. Indeed he wrote around six pages (pp.16-21) description about the "peripheral" states of Kaffa, Janjaro, Jimma, Welayta, Wellega Konso and Gurage. Thus, tensions between those who are condemning state nationalism as years of injustice and the hegemonic-nationalist's perspective of state building is not yet resolved in his historical platform. This pitfall calls for the re-writing of a comprehensive history of the country by decoding the sacred seals and the sacro sanct assumptions for transcending conventional history.

In his concluding remark on the study the Ethiopian student movement, in the *Modern History of Ethiopia*, the historian, Professor Bahru Zewde asks the following poignant questions; «Did the student radicals of the 1960s and 1970s have it all wrong? Do they owe the nation an apology for the warped political path the country has taken in the past four decades? Could Ethiopian history have taken a different path in the 1960s and could the country have thus avoided the tribulations that it has been made to endure since the mid-1970s?»(p.264).

He then goes on to examine the merits and otherwise of the movement and what it left in the way of legacy, as an event that has gone down in history as having decisively and irreversibly shaped and altered the political landscape of the country, in an effort to sift the wheat from the chaff and delineate its enduring legacy.

After a dispassionate appraisal of the ideas and actions that shaped the movement, he (author Bahru) sums up his musings by offering a chillingly realistic picture, albeit one tempered by sympathetic understanding, of what the tumult catalyzed by the firebrands has brought forth. "Many sacrificed their careers and their lives in the quest for what eventually turned out to be a Utopian dream.... Dogmatic belief rather than seasoned debate and a spirit of compromise became the norm.

The country has come to grips with and move beyond [the most important problematic legacy of the framing of the national question and organizational culture] if it is to have any kind of redemption.” (p.280.)

In general way remark this book helped me know some of the basic facts of Ethiopian History. Besides it made me appreciate the vast, rich culture as well as the complex cultural, political and religious interrelations, off course it is not an easy read. But must be read by anyone who wishes to have a solid knowledge base on the general history of Ethiopia thorough and scholarly yet readable would be of more valuable for the non-Amharic reader if it had a more extensive glossary of foreign words.

The Book, over the long history fill the literature on the Ethiopian has undergone metamorphoses in interpretation and emphasis. Earlier studies tend to treat the modern history of our country as a transformative event that brought about a radical socioeconomic and political restructuring of Ethiopian society. Few scholars consider the socio-political history and almost none have the temporal distance to evaluate the nature and impact of the overall issues in a dispassionate manner. Bahru's work is perhaps the first critical assessment written since the dust has settled.

The book aims to fill a lacuna in the literature by analyzing the military, socio and political dimension of the Ethiopian revolution. Prof Baharu also provides a riveting narrative of the origins of the revolution, the creation of contending forces, and the epic battles that defined and shaped with his lively language and to-the-point examples; professor Bahru tells the story well, socio, political, intellectual, geo-politics in smart and succinct way.

Bahru works with a survey of their historical and social context and a glance at some theory. He describes the history of the Ethiopian imperial state, from its origins in the last quarter of the nineteenth century to the Italian invasion and the restoration of Haile Selassie I of 1941; and he outlines the key differences between the highlands (with peasant agriculture dominating) and the lowlands (with pastoralists and nomads), and in the former between an Amharic imperial Centre and northern and southern regions with their own identities (like Eritrean as the extreme case).

Bahru has an obvious interest in the Marxist staples of production relations and ideological frameworks, but takes a broad perspective that ranges over the complexities of social, political, and economic history; he goes over some of the theory on domination and peasant consciousness, but never lets it take over. An epilogue looks at events after the 1974 Revolution, which was led by student activists from the capital and had a radically different basis to the earlier rebellions. Comparing the movements opposing the Mengistu Haile Mariam military dictatorship, Tareke explores vastly socio-political history of our country. Revolution, civil wars, and guerilla warfare wracked Ethiopia during three turbulent decades at the end of the twentieth century.

Conclusion

This book is a pioneering study of the military history, socio-political significance of this crucial Horn of Africa region during that period 1855-1991. Drawing on new archival materials and interviews, Baharu illuminates the conflicts, comparing them to the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution with Russian and France revolutions in terms of regional impact. Writing in vigorous and accessible prose, Baharu brings to life the leading personalities in the domestic political struggles, strategies of the warring parties, international

actors, and key battles. He demonstrates how the brutal dictatorship of Mengistu Haile Mariam lacked imagination in responding to crises and alienated the peasantry by destroying human and material resources. And he (Bahru) describes the delicate balance of persuasion and force with which came to an ideal differences post of 1974.

As a weak side, the book did not vastly tell about in broaden way Urban History of Ethiopia, Cultural history, Heritage Management (Ethiopia registered in UNESCO more than 13 world heritages), Historical Evolution of Dressing style of our country (because Ethiopia is a home of more than 85 ethnic groups those who have different culture, languages and norms), food and Environmental History. To concluding that, the book is so vital for researchers, policy makers and one who wanted to know about historical accounts of our country. Professor Baharu wrote the modern history with language of English and Amharic with vast glossary.

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