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Ethiopia, Revolution, and the Question of Nationalities: the Case of the Afar

by KASSIM SHEHIM*

OF all the serious problems facing the present rulers of Ethiopia none has proved to be more elusive or challenging than the question of nationalities.[1] Since the 1974 revolution there has been a proliferation of liberation movements calling for either regional autonomy or outright secession from Ethiopia. Although the Somalis and the Eritreans have long sought to break away from Ethiopia and have waged an armed struggle for many years, the Afar, Oromo, and Tigrean movements are recent developments which manifested themselves openly after the overthrow of Haile Sellassie. Their discontent with the weakened central Government, which they saw as insensitive to their needs, had long been brewing, and now threatens the viability of Africa's oldest state.

Ethiopia has many different languages, socio-economic orientations, and religions, aptly described by the Italian scholar, Carlo Conti Rossini, as *Un Museo di Popoli*. Some nationalities felt that they were left out from the economic and social benefits of the state. In fact, many ethnic groups saw themselves as victims not only of economic imbalance and political inequality, but also of cultural and ethnic discrimination. Consequently, the Oromo, for example, rose up in arms in order to gain a fairer share of government services, while the Somalis and the Eritreans demanded outright secession from Ethiopia.

The question of nationalities must be addressed satisfactorily, and the purpose of this article is to examine the relationship of one of these national groups, the Afar, with the highland-centred régime in Addis Ababa both before and after the 1974 revolution.

* Department of History, Bowie State College, Maryland.

[1] According to the Ethiopian Government a group of people may qualify as a nation if it has (1) a common territory, (2) a common language, (3) a common psychological make-up manifested in a common culture, and (4) an historically constituted, stable community formed on the basis of an advanced economic life. The Afar seem to fit this definition of a national group.

MENELIK'S EXPANSION AND THE AFAR

The Afar occupy the northern part of the great rift valley which runs through the Eastern Horn of Africa, and hence, despite their political dispersion in Ethiopia, where they live in the Provinces of Harar, Shoa, Wallo, Tigray, and Eritrea, and in Djibouti, where they predominate in three of that Republic's five Districts, they form a geographic entity that is accurately known as the Afar triangle. This distinctively shaped region is of considerable strategic and commercial importance to the Ethiopian Government, not least because of its Red Sea coast, a fact which did not go unnoticed by those who held power in the land-locked highlands.

Menelik, as ruler of the Amhara kingdom of Shoa and vassal to Emperor Yohannis IV, embarked on a policy of extending his influence into neighbouring regions.[1] From 1882 to 1886 he sent eight expeditions against the Oromo of Arsi,[2] and although they bravely resisted his forces they were eventually defeated. Menelik next directed his military attention to Harar, a Muslim state which had been briefly occupied from 1875 to 1887 by the Egyptians, and after their withdrawal he defeated Sultan Mohammed Ibn Abu Ash-Shakur.[3]

Menelik's success in Harar brought him into direct contact with the inhabitants of the eastern lowlands, and the Afar soon came under his sphere of influence, followed by the kingdoms of Kaffa and Jimma which were reduced to political vassalage. Between 1890 and 1906, either through diplomacy, infiltration, or coercion, Menelik succeeded in incorporating many peripheral regions and peoples into his highland-centred Empire, thereby creating the present political boundaries of Ethiopia, with the exception of Eritrea which was added by the Union of 1962. However, although Menelik extended his Shoan-based power and authority in this systematic fashion during the late nineteenth century, it is erroneous to believe that most of the inhabitants in the

[1] For the general history of Menelik's period, see Harold G. Marcus, *The Life and Times of Menelik II: Ethiopia, 1844–1933* (Oxford, 1975); and Kofi Darkwah, *Shewa, Menelik and the Ethiopian Empire, 1813–1889* (London, 1975).

[2] For an account of Menelik's conquest, see Harold G. Marcus, 'Imperialism and Expansionism in Ethiopia from 1865 to 1900', in L. H. Gann and Peter Duignan (eds.), *Colonialism in Africa, 1870–1960*, Vol. I, *The History and Politics of Colonialism, 1870–1914* (Cambridge, 1969), pp. 420–61. See also Harold G. Marcus, 'Motives, Methods and Some Results of Territorial Expansion in Ethiopia During the Reign of Menelik II', in 'Proceedings of the Third International Conference in Ethiopian Studies', Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Haile Selassie I University, Addis Ababa, 1969.

[3] See Richard Caulk, 'The Conquest of Harar', in *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* (Addis Ababa), IX, 2, 1971, pp. 1–20.

peripheral regions had 'lived independent and self-sufficient lives'. It is not difficult to discern the cultural similarities of the various peoples of present-day Ethiopia, and their contact with one another over the years.[1]

Menelik took several steps to control the newly incorporated territories, and these changed the nature of their relationships with his Amhara-dominated régime. He appointed his military generals as governors of the Provinces, and also, below them, district administrators who were, in turn, responsible for the creation of *shums*, the lowest division in this new administrative hierarchy, consisting usually of a big village or a group of small settlements in the same vicinity. In addition, Menelik strengthened his imperial authority by the establishment of *ketemas*, or 'garrison towns', wherein were housed the soldiers who were responsible for maintaining law and order in the surrounding areas, as well as other agents of the Crown, mostly Amhara/Tigre Christians from the north. These administrators levied taxes, collected tributes, and imposed Amhara culture, language, and Christianity on the indigenous peoples, but did not initiate any programmes which could have helped to incorporate them into the Ethiopian state system on an equal basis. A number of those conquered, particularly the Oromo, who wanted to ingratiate themselves with their new rulers, gave themselves Amhara names. They remained in the service of the Crown as *balabbats*, semi-formal officials of the central régime's local administration.

The first secondary school was founded by Menelik in Addis Ababa in 1908, primarily in order to produce more knowledgeable administrators, and similar educational facilities were built in Harar and Dire Dawa. A majority of the earliest students were the children of Ethiopia's ruling class, including two future Emperors, Lij Yasu and Haile Sellassie. Hence these schools helped to perpetuate the authority of the traditional élites who, besides their hereditary status, now acquired the advantage of formal education. More significantly, they offered the Amhara a privileged advantage over other groups which had no access to similar facilities, notably by giving a new dignity to Amharignya, and by starting the process of its creation as the national language of Ethiopia. Not surprisingly, as the myth of Amhara cultural superiority and the Amharisation of the country advanced, there were growing criticisms from those other 'nations' that had been effectively incorporated into the state system. 'The Oromo keenly felt this discrimination,

[1] Donald N. Levine, *Greater Ethiopia: the evolution of a multiethnic society* (Chicago and London, 1974), p. 21.

which many believed reduced their language "to a mark of illiteracy and shame", and ruthlessly violated "their traditional faith or their Islamic religion".'[1]

HAILE SELLASSIE'S INTERNAL POLICIES

This process of Amharisation was continued by Haile Sellassie, who was crowned Emperor of Ethiopia in November 1930. He consolidated his authority at the expense of some of the most powerful members of the Ethiopian nobility, and initiated several programmes of reform before being forced to flee in face of the Italian invasion in 1936. Local governments were organised, more roads, schools, and other public works were built, and the national language got a boost when newspapers began to be published in Amharignya. The most important accomplishment of this period, however, was the creation of a two-chamber legislature, with a Senate whose members were appointed by the Emperor, and a House of Deputies selected by the nobility and the local chiefs.[2] The purpose of this constitution was two-fold: to enhance the image of Haile Sellassie abroad as a person anxious to modernise his country and, at the same time, to help curb the arbitrary power of the nobles and to strengthen the Emperor's grip on the country.[3]

The second phase of reform began with Haile Sellassie's return from exile in England after the defeat of the Italians in May 1941, and continued as part and parcel of a systematic attempt to assert his power in the country. More schools were established and young Ethiopians were sent abroad to receive higher education. The boundaries of the Provinces were redrawn and their governments were reorganised. Administrators at all levels of the state became the employees of the Ministry of the Interior. Taxes were collected by salaried civil servants and sent directly to the Treasury in Addis Ababa.

These policies certainly weakened the traditional power of the nobility, but the establishment of a standing army directly under the Emperor's control had an even greater impact, because it reduced the importance and the use of regional forces and their commanders. At first Haile Sellassie turned to the British to help train his new army, and later, in 1953, signed an agreement with the Americans whereby they would build Kagnew base near Asmara, as an important link in their

[1] Harold G. Marcus, *Ethiopia, Great Britain and the United States, 1941–1974* (Berkeley, 1983), p. 99. See also Oromo Liberation Front, 'Oromia Shall Be Free', West Berlin, 1978, pp. 2–3.

[2] See James C. N. Paul and Christopher Clapham, *Ethiopia's Constitutional Development*, Vols. I and II (Addis Ababa, 1967).

[3] John Markakis and Ato Asmelash Beyene, 'Representative Institutions in Ethiopia', in *The Journal of Modern African Studies* (Cambridge), 5, 2, September 1967, pp. 199–202.

western global communications network, in return for economic aid and three U.S.-trained and equipped divisions of 6,000 men each.[1] Continued assistance on this scale soon transformed Ethiopia into a formidable military power in sub-Saharan Africa.

Agricultural Expansion and Its Impact on the Afar

Although Haile Sellassie founded more modern schools, dispatched young Ethiopians abroad, granted a written constitution, established the first parliament, created the basis for a modern professional army, and constructed several industries, the basic features of the Ethiopian economy did not undergo much change. Although some attempts were made to improve agriculture, they proved inadequate, and the mode of production stayed feudal. Ethiopia remained one of the poorest countries in the world, with an income *per capita* of barely $100, with a rural population that was almost entirely illiterate, and with few if any health and educational facilities outside the major cities. These aspects of Ethiopian society were obscured by the Emperor's prestige, and were deliberately hidden by the régime. The revolution of 1974 revealed the true situation, and this came as a surprise to many people abroad.

The university students who frequently demonstrated against the régime in Addis Ababa blamed the political system for Ethiopia's appalling poverty.[2] But there were, of course, other important reasons for the backwardness of the economy, notably the failure to utilise properly many rich and fertile lands, not least because the complex Amhara system of tenure inhibited or prevented agricultural improvement in the peripheral regions after Menelik's conquest.[3]

Haile Sellassie realised that the commercialisation of agriculture would promote economic growth and increase state revenue, and therefore enlisted the help of foreign capital and technical assistance. Ethiopians with the financial ability and the technical know-how were

[1] United States Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, 'Hearing Before the Sub-Committee on U.S. Security Agreement and Commitment Abroad', 91st Congress, Part 8, Washington, D.C., 1 June 1970, p. 1882.

[2] See Legesse Lemma, 'The Ethiopian Student Movement, 1960–1974: a challenge to the monarchy and imperialism in Ethiopia', in *Northeast African Studies* (East Lansing), 1, 2, 1979, pp. 31–46; and Peter Koehn and L. D. Hayes, 'Student Politics in Traditional Monarchies', in *Journal of Asian and African Studies* (Leiden), XIII, 1–2, 1978, pp. 32–47.

[3] For detailed discussions of land tenure in Ethiopia, see Allan Hoben, *Land Tenure among the Amhara of Ethiopia: the dynamics of cognatic descent* (Chicago and London, 1973); Addis Hiwet, *Ethiopia: from autocracy to revolution* (London, 1975); John M. Cohen and Dov Weintraub, *Land and Peasants in Imperial Ethiopia: the social background to a revolution* (Assen, The Netherlands, 1975); and John Markakis and Nega Ayele, *Class and Revolution in Ethiopia* (Nottingham, 1978).

also encouraged to pursue agricultural ventures, many of which were established on the lands of the Afar, the Somalis, and the Oromo of south-eastern Ethiopia. Because these nomads could not establish titles based on imperial grant, or show proof that they had paid land taxes,[1] the régime felt free to dole out their pastures for agricultural development, even although their cattle had been grazed there for centuries.

Some of the largest commercial projects were established in Afarland, including the Tendaho Plantation Share Company which was run by a British company, Mitchell Cotts, in the Sultanate of Awsa. After the Awash Valley Authority had been created in 1962 in order to plan the agricultural development of this fertile river basin, large areas were acquired by members of the imperial family, including a vast tract of pastoral land by Princess Tegegne Worq, a daughter of the Emperor. The Crown Prince Asfa Wosen had rich agricultural land in Awsa given to him as a 'gift' by the Afar.[2]

The encroachment by foreign investors and the land claims by the royal family, as well as the farms owned by the highland Ethiopians and their workers in the Awash valley, had a negative impact on the social structures of the Afar. Their grazing lands were reduced by the establishment of agricultural plantations, and those displaced had little or no alternative except either to encroach on neighbouring territories, where they became engaged in internecine wars, and/or to become increasingly dependent on a régime in Addis Ababa which showed little interest in their welfare. The urban centres which emerged in the vicinity of the plantations changed the outlook and the expectations of the Afar. They were now introduced to modern medicine and to a number of commodities with which they were not familiar but to which they later had no access. The major shortcoming of these agricultural concessions, however, was their failure to contribute either to the overall development of the Awash valley or to the social and economic betterment of the pastoralists who lived there.[3] The indigenous people were neither consulted about projects on their land, nor were they educated enough to know how to challenge their lack of participation in decision-making. The very few Afar who were employed by the plantations worked mostly as night watchmen or labourers.

The Afar unsuccessfully petitioned the Emperor for many years about

[1] John M. Cohen, 'Ethiopia After Haile Selassie', in *African Affairs* (London), 72, 289, October 1973, p. 373.

[2] Persons close to Ali Mirah told me that Asfa Wosen was given the agricultural land in Awsa by two *makaban* (chiefs) without the knowledge of the Sultan.

[3] John W. Harbeson, 'Territorial and Development Politics in the Horn of Africa: the Afar of the Awash valley', in *African Affairs*, 77, 309, October 1978, p. 490.

their plight, helped by their principal advocate, Ali Mirah Hanfare (1941–73), the 13th Sultan of Awsa, whose authority was revered throughout the Afar triangle. His power and prestige was recognised by the Ethiopian Government, and on many occasions the Sultan led Afar spokesmen to the Emperor's court to voice their grievances. Ali Mirah saw the possibility that foreign concessions might endanger his own semi-independent status unless their growth was checked, and therefore decided to compete against them by becoming directly involved in agriculture. He started several projects and encouraged his relatives to follow suit, with the result that they soon controlled a large percentage of cultivated land in Awsa. Indeed, the Sultan's own holdings were estimated at nearly 20,000 hectares.[1]

At the same time, Ali Mirah limited the further expansion of the Tendaho Plantation by farming lands around its existing boundaries, and by tacitly encouraging Afar herdsmen to unleash their cattle onto this 'alien' concession. These pressures began to pay off, and in the early 1970s the Government introduced pilot schemes to settle some of the pastoralists. However, no significant improvements were forthcoming because the Afar were not adequately prepared for their transition to sedentary life.[2]

REBELLION

If the Afar situation was deplorable, the position of the Oromo in the south was even worse. Both Menelik and Haile Sellassie allocated parcels of land to Shoan Amhara aristocrats, and to those in the service of the Crown, as well as to the Church in the form of endowments. Since most of the owners of the fertile land were now northerners, apart from the few indigenous inhabitants who had collaborated with the Government, the southern farmers were reduced to tenancy. As a result of the concentration of land in the hands of a few, the peasant masses in the south had little access to their basic means of livelihood, and their accumulated resentments led to occasional insurrections. These were either local or sometimes regional, but in general were ephemeral in character because the peasants lacked education and organisational skills.

The most vehement vocal opponents of Haile Sellassie's policies were those university students who saw the political system as an impediment

[1] Ibid. p. 484.

[2] See Teferra-Worq Beshah and John W. Harbeson, 'Afar Pastoralists in Transition and the Ethiopian Revolution', in *Journal of African Studies* (Berkeley), 5, 3, Fall 1978, pp. 249–67.

to Ethiopia's progress.[1] They also challenged the policy of giving paramountcy to the Amhara culture and the Christian religion, and they urged the Government to recognise the rights of non-Amhara groups in Ethiopia, who resented, for example, that Ethiopia was always represented at international cultural festivals from the Amhara-Tigre Christian perspective. The sentiment of many national groups regarding the Amhara supremacy was captured in an article during November 1969 by Wallelign Makonnan, a fourth-year political science student at Haile Sellassie I University, who argued that 'Ethiopia is not a nation, that there are oppressed and oppressor nationalities, and that secession is the right, in principle, of an oppressed nation.'[2] This student paper was immediately banned by the Government in the belief that it might excite some national groups and thus lead to insurrection.

Meanwhile, the régime in Addis Ababa continued to be challenged by the Eritrean Liberation Front which had been formed in 1960. The roots of this dispute can be traced back to the nineteenth century, when the colony of Eritrea was created and so named by the Italians. Thereafter, from the time of the Fascist defeat in World War II, Eritrea was under British administration while a search was made for a constitutional solution that would prove satisfactory to the various parties concerned. Eventually, in 1950, the U.N. General Assembly recommended that Eritrea should 'constitute an autonomous unit federated with Ethiopia under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian Crown',[3] and the Federation was consummated on 15 September 1952.

The United Nations had hoped that such a solution would meet the aspirations of the Ethiopian Government and, at the same time, grant some degree of autonomy to the Eritreans. However, such hopes were gradually dashed as the Emperor strengthened his grip over the ex-Italian colony, finally persuading the Eritrean Assembly in November 1962 to vote 'unanimously' to change Eritrea's status with Ethiopia from a Federation to that of a Province.[4] But this Union was increasingly resented by many Eritreans, who then unleashed what has become the longest continuing armed struggle in Africa.[5]

[1] See Lemma, loc. cit. and Koehn and Hayes, loc. cit.

[2] *Struggle* (Addis Ababa), 17 November 1969.

[3] Final Report of the United Nations Commissioner in Eritrea, 7th Session, Supplement No. 15(a), Washington, D.C., 1952, pp. 75–6.

[4] Muhammed Omar Akito, an Afar, who was a representative from Assab in the Eritrean General Assembly, refused to cast his vote (as did one other member, also) in favour of the Union with Ethiopia. Personal interview, Assab, 1980.

[5] See, for instance, G. K. N. Trevaski, *Eritrea: a colony in transition, 1941–1952* (Westport, Conn., 1975); Richard F. Sherman, *Eritrea: the unfinished revolution* (New York, 1980); and Erlich Haggai, *The Struggle over Eritrea, 1962–1978: war and revolution in the Horn of Africa* (Stanford, 1983).

The Somalis in the Ogaden also challenged Emperor Haile Sellassie, encouraged by the régime in Mogadishu which vigorously articulated the people's aspiration for unification within one state, and pleaded its case in various international forums. The neighbouring Governments of Kenya and Ethiopia interpreted this as a challenge to their territorial integrity and were not prepared to comply. They feared that acquiescence to Somalia's request for unification could threaten their continued existence and stimulate demands by other ethnic groups. The dispute was further complicated by the Somalis, who wandered across international boundaries in pursuit of pasture, precipitating hostility and occasional bloodshed.

During early January 1961 there were charges and counter-charges between Somalia and Ethiopia regarding border incidents in which many lives were lost. A major conflict took place in 1964, when the two countries resorted to using heavy weapons, tanks, and airplanes. This direct confrontation was ended when the Organisation of African Unity, at its Foreign Ministers' Conference in Dar-es-Salaam, proposed an immediate cease-fire, which was readily accepted by both régimes, and they also agreed to withdraw their troops six miles from the border. It is in these disputes that the Western Somali Liberation Front has its roots. This guerrilla movement in the Ogaden received increased support from the Somali Government after Siad Barre took power in 1969. He then began openly to court the Front and the cause of 'Greater Somalia'.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE DERGUE

It must be made clear that the downfall of Haile Sellassie was precipitated not by the armed struggles of the Somalis and the Eritreans, but primarily by the economic hardships of the early 1970s and the severe famine that hit the rural areas, claiming thousands of lives. Although the demands of the soldiers were met, to some extent, when they asked for better economic and social benefits, the situation did not improve considerably since other groups began to demand even greater concessions because of increasing dissatisfaction with their living conditions. Students took to the streets of Addis Ababa and focused angry attention on various problems plaguing the country, particularly the attempt by the Government to hide the famine, and its subsequent failure to take remedial action. The creation of this climate of discontent helped to politicise and antagonise the public, and this resulted in the collapse in February 1974 of the Cabinet, headed by the Prime

Minister, Aklilu Habte Wolde, who was replaced by Endelkachew Makonnan, an Amhara of aristocratic background.[1]

The new Prime Minister promised some changes, including land reforms, which met with wide-spread cynicism, but failed to address the basic socio-economic problems. Instead, he was content with cosmetic measures, such as increasing the salaries of the armed forces. Between February and May 1974 there were continuous riots in the cities by various groups, fomented and abetted by the students, especially in Addis Ababa, and they remained implacable enemies of the monarchy. Taxi drivers challenged the rise in the price of petrol, civil servants demanded better social benefits, and thousands of Muslims demonstrated for equal rights as full citizens of Ethiopia.

At least half the population are Muslims, and yet, before the revolution, they did not have a single official holiday. They were forbidden to build mosques in certain parts of the country, and were unable to attain important political offices or high status in Ethiopian society, despite relevant qualifications. In the military, no Muslim ever attained the rank of general, and in provincial appointments, generally in predominantly Muslim areas, they would be deputies or advisers to Christian officials. 'The traditional definition of the Ethiopian nationality', according to John Markakis, 'excluded non-Christians from participation in the affairs of the state, barred them from appointment to office, and in most cases, deprived them of the right to own land'.[2]

While demonstrations were becoming daily events in urban centres, the armed forces coalesced into a political group called the Armed Forces Co-ordinating Committee, which later transformed itself into a ruling clique, better known as the *Dergue*, which gradually took over the affairs of the state. The Prime Minister was arrested in August, as well as other high-ranking officials, followed by the Emperor on 12 September 1974, when the *Dergue* assumed power directly under the chairmanship of General Aman Andom.

At the outset of the revolution, the *Dergue* did not have a clear policy except to destroy the old order, and the members soon found that it was easier to seize power than to run the affairs of the state. The first problem with which they were confronted was Eritrea. Aman Andom, an Eritrean, did not believe in a forced solution, but a radical group within the *Dergue* wanted to reinforce its military position in Eritrea when they saw that the situation there was deteriorating. Hence, they asked Aman, as the chairman of the *Dergue*, to sign an order for more

[1] See Marina and David Ottaway, *Ethiopia: empire in revolution* (New York, 1978).
[2] John Markakis, *Ethiopia: anatomy of a traditional polity* (Oxford, 1974), p. 66.

soldiers to be sent to Eritrea. When he refused and resigned, an act interpreted by some members of the *Dergue* as dangerous to the survival of the group, Aman was murdered while resisting arrest in his home. Other executions were authorised on the evening of the same day, 23 November 1974, including 59 officials of the former régime, the aristocracy, and the nobility of Ethiopia.[1] This signalled the ascendancy of the militant radicals who, less than a month later, proclaimed that Ethiopia would follow a socialist path. Banks and insurance companies were nationalised, and on 4 March 1975, a far-reaching land reform programme was announced.[2]

The success of the revolution and the wide range of reforms introduced by the *Dergue* inflated the expectations of the various national groups who wanted to force changes in their relationship with the régime in Addis Ababa, and they demanded their right to become self-governing. This was, in part, a reaction to the weakening of the centralised power of the state, and to the hope that the *Dergue* would establish fundamentally different relations with the Provinces outside the core of the Amhara heartland of Ethiopia. The Afar, Tigray, and Oromo capitalised on the new opportunity, and rose up in arms against the central Government.

THE RELATIONS OF THE AFAR WITH THE HIGHLAND-CENTRED GOVERNMENTS

The Afar and the highland rulers of Ethiopia had been on good terms for many years, since the latter were cautious not to antagonise the lowland pastoralists. Actually, their cordial relationships could be explained in terms of Owen Lattimore's thesis of 'frontier feudalism', whereby either (i) a settled territory conquered by a tribal chief is then transformed as the newcomers settle down as rulers, or (ii) a settled dynasty incorporates tribesmen into the bureaucracy as subordinates, albeit still privileged and fairly autonomous as 'wardens of the marches'.[3]

However, although the highland monarchs of Ethiopia attempted continuously to incorporate the Afar into their state system, the motive was not simply the desire of the settled rulers to protect their borders

[1] *The Ethiopian Herald* (Addis Ababa), 26 November 1974, p. 1.

[2] 'The Public Ownership of Rural Lands', in *Negarit Gazeta* (Addis Ababa), Proclamation No. 31 of 1975.

[3] See Owen Lattimore, *Studies in Frontier History: collected papers, 1928–1958* (London, 1962), who argues that the nomadic Turkish-Mogol chiefs either sold their allegiance to the Chinese Emperors as border guardians in return for titles and land investiture, or conquered territory along imperial frontiers in their own names.

against possible foreign invasion. In the case of the régime centred in Addis Ababa, the primary motive was economic rather than political.[1] The saline lakes of the sub-sea-level Afar depression had for centuries supplied the highlands of Ethiopia with salt, a very important commodity not only for human consumption, but also for agriculture and cattle – indeed, it had been used as a currency in Ethiopia for many centuries.

The expansion of the Empire spearheaded by Menelik had made the acquisition of Afarland important, especially as the need to lessen dependence on neighbouring countries for access to the sea became increasingly obvious as Ethiopia acquired modern technology. As soon as Menelik had concluded an agreement in 1894 with the French to build a railway which would connect the French colony of Djibouti with Addis Ababa, it became obvious that the Emperor would do all he could to infiltrate the Afar triangle. The opportunity manifested itself when succession problems plagued the Sultanate of Awsa, the most powerful of the Afar,[2] and from this time onwards the highland-centred régime began directly to influence the choice of that key ruler.

The domination of Ethiopia over Afarland progressively increased under Haile Sellassie, in part due to the introduction of motor vehicles after World War I which enabled the Emperor to tighten his control over formerly inaccessible peripheral regions by quickly dispatching soldiers to any troubled spots with ease. Haile Sellassie was also able to influence the politics of Awsa by helping Ali Mirah to accede to power,[3] and by later bestowing on him the coveted honorary title of *Bitwadded*, 'Beloved of the Emperor'. As a result, the two established and maintained amicable relationships that benefited the Afar who, for example, for many years, were the only national group in the country, besides the Amhara and the Somali, to broadcast from Radio Ethiopia in their own language. In return, Ali Mirah secured the safety of the important highway which traversed Afarland and linked the port of Assab with the plateau. Furthermore, the Sultan of Awsa prevented the Eritreans from operating on lands which fell directly under his jurisdiction. This relationship of mutual helpfulness ended with the emergence of the *Dergue*.

[1] Stephen Pastner, 'Lords of the Desert Border: frontier feudalism in southern Baluchistan and eastern Ethiopia', in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (London), 10, 1970, pp. 100–3.

[2] Some scholars contend that Menelik invaded the Afar country when the Sultan of Awsa concluded an agreement with the Italians; see, for example, J. Spencer Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia* (London, 1952), p. 172, and I. M. Lewis, *The Peoples of the Horn of Africa* (London, 1955), p. 157. But according to Afar oral history, Menelik invaded as a result of a succession dispute, after one faction had enlisted his help; see Kassim Shehim, 'The Influence of Islam on the Afar', Ph.D. dissertation, University of Washington, Seattle, 1982.

[3] Shehim, op. cit. p. 109.

Like other wealthy lords who had been imprisoned by the new military rulers, Ali Mirah was a capitalist who controlled thousands of hectares. The *Dergue* declined, however, at least in the early stages of the revolution, to provoke a premature clash with this influential Sultan, and so waited for over a year before deciding to explain to him the land reform programmes and their implications for the Afar. Consequently, the *Dergue* asked the Sultan to come to Addis Ababa, but as many former aristocrats and government officials close to the Emperor had already been apprehended and later executed, Ali Mirah interpreted this invitation as a ploy to have him arrested, and so he fled the country in June 1975.

The Politics of the Afar

The Afar rose up in rebellion after the departure of Ali Mirah, burned the Tendaho Plantation, and killed many non-Afar. They closed the highway that linked the Red Sea with the rest of the country, and as soon as the trade from the port of Assab stopped, there were shortages of imported goods as well as a halt in exports. This marked the beginning of petrol rationing in Ethiopia. Indeed, the impact of the Afar rebellion was felt in many parts of the country. The military reacted very harshly and began what became known as 'the Afar genocide'. Iysaita, the capital of the Awsa Sultanate, was devastated, and many innocent Afar who were not involved in the rebellion were indiscriminately murdered. At the same time, the *Dergue* enlisted the help of the children of the Sultan whom Ali Mirah had replaced, and who were living in exile in Addis Ababa, to go to Awsa and calm the situation there.

The Afar, after their initial rebellion, changed tactics and resorted to guerrilla warfare. Their leaders, like those of other national groups, had been watching the ongoing Ethiopian revolution with keen interest. They wanted to be prepared for the inevitable changes which were obvious to any casual observer of the political scene, and they had begun to organise themselves in order to secure a prominent place within the new Ethiopia. Hanfare Ali Mirah, the son of the Sultan, in collaboration with his father, had secretly sent a number of students to Somalia for training in guerrilla warfare, and by the time the Sultan fled Ethiopia, the Afar Liberation Front had already been formed and was ready to fight the *Dergue*.

THE DERGUE'S POLITICAL SOLUTION

By 1976, the *Dergue* was being attacked increasingly, not only by the Afar, but also by the Eritreans, who had waged war against Ethiopia for many years. Many towns in Eritrea were taken over by guerrillas. Asmara, the capital city, was besieged for many months, and it seemed as if the Eritreans would finally win their independence. Other liberation fronts also increased their campaigns against the military rulers in Addis Ababa, who were themselves plagued by internal divisions.

The *Dergue* finally responded to the disgruntled opposition movements by announcing a National Democratic Revolution Programme in April 1976, designed to recognise the rights of ethnic groups who had suffered under the Haile Sellassie régime, and hopefully to solve the 'national question' once and for all.

> The right to self-determination of all nationalities will be recognised and fully respected. No nationality will dominate another one since the history, culture, language and religion of each nationality will have equal recognition in accordance with the spirit of socialism. The unity of Ethiopia's nationalities will be based on their common struggle against feudalism, imperialism, bureaucratic capitalism and all reactionary forces. This united struggle is based on the desire to construct a new life and a new society based on equality, brotherhood and mutual respect. Nationalities on border areas and those scattered over various regions have been subjected to special subjugation for a long time. Special attention will be made [*sic*] to raise the political, economic and cultural life of these nationalities. All necessary steps to equalise these nationalities with the other nationalities of Ethiopia will be undertaken. Given Ethiopia's existing situation, the problems of nationalities can be resolved if each nationality is accorded full right to self-government. This means that each nationality will have regional autonomy to decide on matters concerning its internal affairs. Within its environs, it has the right to determine the contents of its political, economic and social life, use its own language and elect its own leaders and administrators to head its internal organs. This right of self-government of nationalities will be implemented in accordance with all democratic procedures and principles...[1]

This declaration was given a mixed reception by the various national groups. The Eritreans dismissed it as nothing more than 'window dressing'.[2] However, among some Afar, the programme struck a favourable response. Indeed, it split the Afar Liberation Front into two groups: while most of the leaders doubted the seriousness of the proposals and

[1] *The National Democratic Revolution Programme* (Addis Ababa, April 1976).

[2] Patrick Gilkes, 'Centralism and the Ethiopian PMAC', in I. M. Lewis (ed.), *Nationalism and Self Determination in the Horn of Africa* (London, 1983), p. 197.

their implementation, some of the youth accepted them at face value and saw some hope, consequently breaking away to establish what became known as the Afar National Liberation Movement. They returned to Ethiopia and began to work with the *Dergue* for the creation of an 'autonomous Afar state within the borders of a Free Union of Ethiopian Nations'.[1]

This marked the beginning of the current divisions among the Afar who, heretofore, had been fighting the Ethiopian régime as a cohesive group. The A.N.L.M. began to support the *Dergue* in the hope that the widespread aspirations for an Afar state within Ethiopia could now be attained peacefully. The A.L.F., on the other hand, continued its struggle, albeit with less vigour since the loss of some of its members.

The policy of the A.N.L.M. bears some resemblance to the plans which had been advocated earlier by the Afar elders who had periodically petitioned Haile Sellassie, and who had tried to interest him in the creation of an Afar state which, they had argued, would be to the advantage of the peoples of both Afar and Ethiopia as a whole. One of the benefits would be a more equal and just distribution of social services and education among the ethnic groups that made up the Empire. In addition, the creation of such a state would serve as a pole of attraction for the Afar of Djibouti, who would seriously consider joining the Ethiopian Empire as an alternative to absorption into a Greater Somalia, and would also aid in the pacification of the Province of Eritrea by detaching the Afar areas and thus assuring access to the Red Sea port of Assab. The moving spirit behind these propositions was the late Yassin Muhamouda. However, the Emperor obviously feared that they would create a 'Frankenstein' within the Empire, and so turned a deaf ear to all such arguments.

Most of the goals outlined by the Afar before the 1974 revolution seem to have been seriously considered by the current régime. In April 1977, the *Dergue* called an Afar congress at Gewane to discuss the whole question of a separate region within the Ethiopian state. Those who attended called for the immediate creation of a region to incorporate all the Afar areas of Eritrea, Tigray, Wallo, and Harrarge. In May 1978, Assab, the southern part of Eritrea which is also part of Afarland, became a separate administrative region, while Awsa was upgraded from a District to a Province. These two areas are seen by the A.N.L.M. as the core of an Afar region, which should also include Gewane (from

[1] Kassim Shehim and James Searing, 'Djibouti and the Question of Afar Nationalism', in *African Affairs*, 79, 315, April 1980, p. 224.

Harrarge), Afambo, Dubti, and Bati (from Wallo), Tiyo (from Eritrea), and Shihet and Berhale (from Tigray).[1]

Since the Gewane congress, the administrators of Afarland at the district level have been mainly young members of the A.N.L.M. So also is the newly promoted governor of Assab, Muhammed Ahmed Shehim, while Habib Yayo, the son of a former Sultan, is in charge of Awsa. The installation of the Afar in such important positions has helped the Government to maintain peace and order, and has secured, to some extent, the safety of the road from Assab to Addis Ababa, along which moves most of Ethiopia's import/export trade. Because of the collaboration of the A.N.L.M. with the *Dergue*, the A.L.F.'s military activity became ineffective, and the Front as a whole has become increasingly weak.

Because the Afar and the Kunama people are two of the ethnic groups that form part of Eritrea, the Ethiopian Government has seriously considered granting them some kind of regional autonomy in order to diffuse the crisis there. The Afar occupy a stretch of land which extends from Massawa to Assab, and this forms part of the south-eastern lowlands of Eritrea, while the Kunama are located in the south-west, and unlike the Afar, do not extend beyond the borders of Eritrea. They have shown little interest in the struggle for independence, and in general have thrown their weight on the side of the Ethiopian Government.

The position of the Afar in Eritrea is more complex. Some have played an important rôle in Eritrea's struggle for independence but, by and large, the majority remain committed to an autonomous Afar state. This can be seen from the composition of the A.N.L.M. leadership, many of whom come from the Eritrean region. There is no doubt that the *Dergue* would like to succeed in pacifying the Afar because then Ethiopia's access to Assab would not be threatened. Afarland includes not only the Red Sea coast, but also the Awash valley with its agricultural potential.

Although the appeasement of the Afar, therefore, makes good economic and political sense, for a while there were few signs of the *Dergue* making real progress towards helping them attain their goal of regional autonomy. None the less, the A.N.L.M. members were assured that Afar aspirations for regional autonomy would be addressed by the Workers Party of Ethiopia, formally created on 12 September 1984 to mark the tenth anniversary of the Ethiopian Revolution, with Mengistu

[1] *Africa Confidential* (London), 20 May 1981, p. 2.

Haile Mariam as its Secretary-General. It is based on the Soviet model, with a Central Committee of 136 members, and a ruling Politburo of 11 members. Somewhat surprisingly there are no Afar in either of these two key bodies, which consist mostly of Amhara nationals.[1] The actual number of party members is not yet known with certainty, but rough estimates have put the initial figure at 30,000.[2]

The Central Committee is still debating the new draft constitution which will presumably cover the question of autonomy in detail. Meanwhile, the Afar are responding with a wait-and-see attitude, and are hoping that their aspirations for an autonomous state will not only be considered by the Workers Party, but hopefully will materialise promptly.

CONCLUSION

It was announced in March 1983 that Ashagre Yigletu would head an Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities, designed to explore ways of creating a People's Republic that would enable various ethnic groups to have appropriate relationships within the Ethiopian state. But the Eritreans, who pose the greatest danger to the régime in Addis Ababa, have shown no willingness to compromise on outright independence. The Somalis are also unwilling to settle for less than self-determination, with the eventual hope of joining a Greater Somalia. Other national groups are calling for an autonomous state within a free and democratic Ethiopia. Their intention is not to break away from Ethiopia, but only to be rightfully recognised, to have their traditions maintained, and to get a fair share in development. Most of these nationalities argue that only through self-determination will they be able to secure their peoples welfare, and also, only as autonomous groups will they be able to contribute effectively to the ideals of the Ethiopian state.

The granting of autonomy to the Afar and the Kunama, as has been announced, could serve as an example to other ethnic groups and help to convince them that the régime in Addis Ababa is serious about the nationality question. Indeed, the fact that the *Dergue* had developed the National Democratic Revolutionary Programme is commendable. It has raised the hopes, expectations, and aspirations of many national

[1] Personal communication, 2 October 1984.

[2] *New York Times*, 11 September 1984, p. 4, and *Christian Science Monitor* (Boston), 13 September 1984, p. 1.

groups within Ethiopia who have patiently awaited a change in their relationship with the Amhara heartland. However, it remains to be seen whether the proposals will be implemented. What is certain is that the failure to find a successful solution to the question of nationalities will lead to perpetual conflict, with dire consequences to the Ethiopian state.