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# *Social Formation and Political Adaptation in Ethiopia*

by JOHN MARKAKIS*

UP to the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Ethiopia remained essentially what it had been for centuries – a highly isolated, thoroughly traditional, fervently Christian kingdom. During the closing decades of the last century, the kingdom was greatly enlarged through a vast territorial expansion southwards which created the Ethiopian empire as it is today, and established the Christian Ethiopians as the dominant group within the heterogeneous state. The expansion, and the contemporary appearance of European imperialism in the Horn of Africa, helped to break down the historic isolation of this ancient society. In the decades that followed, sporadic attempts to introduce modernisation in Ethiopia had only a superficial impact, and it was only after World War II, following a brief but painful experience with Italian colonialism during 1935–41, that this process commenced in earnest.

Consequently, Ethiopia in the post-war period found itself at a historical moment marked by the convergence of three active social conditions created by living tradition, territorial expansion, and commencing modernisation. Tradition, though no longer unchallenged, is far from moribund. It holds sway among the bulk of the population whose life follows the traditional rhythm, and continues to wield great influence within the ruling class. Though it occurred several decades ago, the great territorial expansion is having a sustained effect and is by no means a closed chapter in the history of Ethiopia. The incorporation of a large number of diverse ethnic groups which now inhabit the larger part of the state and collectively outnumber the empire-builders, has created a complex evolving situation fraught with potential for manifold controversy. Finally, modernisation, though still at an incipient stage, has begun the process of social transformation, and the accompanying stresses and strains are being felt in various sectors of society, including the polity. The purpose of this article is to trace the changes wrought on the Ethiopian social structure during this period, and to examine the related political consequences.

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## SOCIAL FORMATION

The convergence and interaction of these three social conditions generate forces that merge into complex and not always fully discernible patterns. Nevertheless, a crucial feature in the process of social formation has become evident, because the initial stage is dominated by trends that emerged as consequences of the expansion, and are now being clarified and reinforced by the onset of modernisation. These trends are leading rapidly to the stratification of Ethiopian society along class lines, and it is from this familiar perspective that the evolution of the social structure will be viewed here. The concept of class is used in this study as a tool of analysis, not as a philosophical postulate, even though it is perceived in its classical form which integrates privilege, power, and status in a single hierarchy. Its application to an African society that is still largely traditional is admittedly not in accordance with conventional practice. Social scientists generally maintain that classes have not developed among traditional African societies, and cite the kinship system of social organisation, subsistence economies, and communalism of land possession as the inhibiting factors.

The major complicating factor in relation to conceptual clarity in this respect is the intrinsic connection between class status and property ownership as predicated in the classical formulation of the class concept. As is well known, land in traditional African societies is seldom an object of economic value purely and exclusively, nor generally subject to private, indivisible, and permanent ownership arrangements. The question of ownership in that form did not usually arise in the past. What did emerge was the issue of land use, and of the distribution of the agricultural produce among various claimants holding co-existing rights over the land.[1] Until quite recently, this was true of Ethiopian landholding practice as well. It was the distribution of different categories of rights over land among the various social groups, and the resulting appropriation of agricultural surplus by the privileged strata, that regulated their economic relationships, rather than ownership in the western sense. The state itself was a major claimant and distributor of rights over land.

Nevertheless, the pattern of social stratification of traditional Christian Ethiopia – the core of the contemporary society – is not typical of classless societies in sub-Saharan Africa. This pattern struck

[1] See D. Biebuyck, 'Land Holding and Social Organization', and P. J. Bohannan, 'Land Use, Land Tenure and Land Reform', in M. J. Herskovits and M. Harwitz (eds.), *Economic Transition in Africa* (Evanston, 1964), pp. 77–88 and 133–50.

most foreign observers as being akin to feudal. Though not quite accurate, this impression evokes the image of a highly stratified social order, composed of groups with distinct functions, differential status, and unequal power. Status and power in this society are accompanied with commensurate economic privileges.[1] These represent the surplus produced by the peasantry appropriated by the ruling aristocracy and the clergy through a variety of taxes, fees, and services. It should be noted that the traditional economy produced an adequate surplus for the maintenance of a fully developed hierarchy with secular and clerical components. Finally, Ethiopian culture recognises social inequality and defends it with an elaborate ideological rationale.

It is well known that in recent decades the traditional system of landholding in Africa has come under the twin assault of state administrative policies and economic necessity. The former seeks to impose modern legal concepts pertaining to private ownership for purposes of tax rationalisation and agricultural development. Modern forms of ownership also facilitate the transfer of land as an economic commodity, a condition deemed essential to transform subsistence agriculture into a commercial venture. In Ethiopia, though the commercialisation of agriculture is lagging, most of the traditional landholding arrangements have been eliminated through administrative action, and are being rapidly replaced by modern legal rules based on the principle of private ownership. The state has ceased to claim the right to distribute landholding rights, save on a limited portion of state land. Furthermore, the policy of the Ethiopian Government is to encourage the agricultural sector to become increasingly commercial on the basis of private ownership and open market principles.

## THE RURAL SECTOR

In the northern provinces of Ethiopia, small-holders comprise the vast majority, and continue to hold land according to the traditional arrangement that vests primary rights in the kinship group and renders transfer and alienation of land exceedingly difficult. Most of the peasants here work plots of land that are increasingly diminishing in size due to

[1] This pattern is ably described by Donald Levine in *Wax and Gold: tradition and innovation in Ethiopian culture* (Chicago, 1965), and by Allan Hoben, 'Social Stratification in Traditional Amhara Society', in L. Plotnicov and A. Tuden (eds.), *Social Stratification in Africa* (New York, 1970), pp. 187–224. Both scholars eschew the use of class typology, drawing attention to the existence of sturdy vertical lines of integration, an uninterrupted continuum in the structure of the social hierarchy, the absence of cultural differences among the social strata, and other traditional features that minimise social distance between groups.

continued fragmentation. Recent sample surveys reported the size of holdings being operated in two northern provinces, and these show that nearly half are smaller than 0·5 hectare, while two-thirds are smaller than one hectare.[1] These findings may be taken as typical for the northern region.

The policies of the Government are clearly inimical to the preservation of the traditional pattern of land tenure, and mounting pressure is exerted for it to be abandoned.[2] Urbanisation has the same effect, and the ancient tenure arrangements are rapidly dissolving in and around the growing concentrations of population in northern Ethiopia. Large landholders in the north represent the traditional nobility who formerly held temporary rights over land derived from the state; but such rights have been converted to permanent ownership, and these estates are now held in unencumbered freehold. A small landless group, composed largely of religious and ethnic minorities, comprises the tenant class in the northern provinces.

In the newly incorporated southern provinces of Ethiopia, the issue of land ownership has been resolved recently with ominous clarity. As a result of widespread expropriation following their conquest, and continued alienation since then, a very large part of the land in these provinces has passed into the hands of landlords. The issue of ownership was resolved by the Land Tax (Amendment) Proclamation of 1966, as a result of which the state renounced the residual rights it held historically, and enabled landholders here to acquire permanent, personal ownership rights. A large section of the landlord class in this region represents northerners who were granted land in the area during this century, while the rest are indigenous élites that have prospered under Ethiopian rule.

Not surprisingly, a good many landlords are absentees – as is obvious from Table 1. The corollary of large-scale land alienation is the appearance of vast numbers of landless peasants who comprise the tenant class in the new provinces of Ethiopia. The Ministry of Land Reform and Administration estimated the incidence of tenancy in southern Ethiopia

[1] Imperial Ethiopian Government, Ministry of Land Reform and Administration, *Report on Land Tenure Survey of Tigre Province* (Addis Ababa, 1969), and *Report on Land Tenure Survey of Begemdir and Semien Province* (Addis Ababa, 1970). A holding comprises all the land being worked by the members of one household.

[2] While *rist* – the traditional land tenure – is recognised by the Ethiopian civil code, its abolition has been insistently advocated by the Ministry of Land Reform and Administration, the Ministry of Finance, and by U.N., F.A.O., and I.B.R.D. reports, as well as by numerous other agencies concerned with taxation reform and rural development in Ethiopia. The imposition of agricultural income taxation in 1967, requiring individual assessment and registration of holdings, is a major step towards this goal.

TABLE 1

Absentee Landlords in 9 Provinces of Ethiopia[1]

Percentage

| Province | Absentee landlords in holdings being operated | Share of measured land | Share of unmeasured land |
|---|---|---|---|
| Arusi | 27·57 | 27·31 | — |
| Bale | 14·60 | 11·70 | — |
| Gemu Gofa | 9·86 | 41·85 | 7·76 |
| Illubabor | 41·80 | 41·60 | — |
| Kaffa | 17·55 | 33·57 | 14·53 |
| Shoa | 34·49 | 44·58 | 21·32 |
| Sidamo | 24·47 | 42·01 | 5·12 |
| Wallega | 29·10 | 27·60 | — |
| Wollo | 26·42 | 12·62 | 26·88 |

TABLE 2

Land Holdings in 12 Provinces of Ethiopia[2]

Percentage

| Province | Owned | | Rented | | Mixed | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Holdings | Share of cultivated area | Holdings | Share of cultivated area | Holdings | Share of cultivated area |
| Arusi | 48 | 38 | 45 | 50 | 7 | 12 |
| Begemdir | 85 | — | 9 | — | 6 | — |
| Gemu Gofa | 53 | 42 | 43 | 47 | 4 | 4 |
| Gojjam | 80 | — | 13 | — | 7 | — |
| Hararge | 46 | — | 49 | — | 5 | — |
| Illubabor | 25 | — | 73 | — | 2 | — |
| Kaffa | 38 | 53 | 59 | 43 | 3 | 4 |
| Shoa | 33 | 28 | 51 | 55 | 16 | 17 |
| Sidamo | 61 | 64 | 37 | 35 | 2 | 1 |
| Tigre | 75 | 67 | 7 | 7 | 18 | 26 |
| Wallega | 41 | 46 | 54 | 45 | 5 | 9 |
| Wollo | 60 | 61 | 17 | 14 | 23 | 25 |

at 45 per cent,[3] and the extent, as shown in Table 2, is staggering indeed. In seven of the provinces incorporated by the expansion, more than 40 per cent of the operated holdings are rented, and in four of

[1] Source: compiled from the 1968–70 land tenure surveys of the Ministry of Land Reform and Administration. These report that the number of absentee landlords is likely to have been understated by the Chika Shums who provided the information. The share of unmeasured land is not shown in some surveys.

[2] Source: Central Statistical Office, *Report on a Survey for the Province(s)*...as listed in the Table, from July 1966 to November 1968. The share of cultivated area is not shown in some surveys.

[3] Ministry of Land Reform and Administration, 'Justification for Agricultural Tenancy Regulation' – preface to draft legislation (Addis Ababa, 1968), p. 30.

these the figure is over 50 per cent. It should be noted that not all those who rent land are landless; those who have the capacity to cultivate more land than they own, may rent land from others – hence the 'mixed' category in Table 2.

Traditionally, the social structure of most ethnic groups in southern Ethiopia is less stratified and complex than that of the Christian society in the north. Since the expansion, however, a process of gradual internal differentiation has been taking place, tending to change the structure of the former in the image of the latter. The super-imposition of a northerner landlord group, the transformation of the indigenous élite (*balabbats*) into a landowning class, and the concomitant reduction of a large section of the southern peasantry to tenancy are the major changes wrought by this process.

Property ownership in the modern sense, then, is rapidly becoming a basic attribute of class status in rural Ethiopia.[1] Large landowners, small-holders, landless tenants, and agricultural labourers are emerging as distinct socio-economic categories. Social change is also eliminating traditional mechanisms, and eroding the traditional values that minimised social distance and mitigated group antagonism. In southern Ethiopia group distance is maximised by the existing ethnic and cultural differences between the landless and the largest section of the landowner class. Therefore, it becomes appropriate to analyse the social structure of this society in terms of class, on the basis of the evolving pattern of ownership, keeping in mind that land is still the dominant economic value in Ethiopia. Modernisation is promoting a corresponding trend in the urban sector; consequently class analysis accommodates also the new social groups that have appeared here – namely the educated 'class', and a miniscule, as yet amorphous urban proletariat. The latter group has no political significance at present, and its future rôle in this respect is hardly discernible.[2]

[1] The partial exceptions are the small-holders of northern Ethiopia, and the Christian clergy who also continue to hold rights over land according to traditional arrangements.

[2] The size and distribution of this group during 1968–9 was estimated by the former Ministry of Planning and Development as follows: building and construction, 100,000; manufacturing, 60,000; transport and communication, 30,000; electricity, 2,500. Labour organisation was allowed in 1962, and has made slow progress since then; by 1970, the Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions claimed 55,000 members.

## THE URBAN SECTOR

Social scientists are generally uncertain also whether class formation can be detected within the emerging modern sector in Africa, and have revived the élite concept to depict the dominant rôle of new social groups.[1] More recently, however, a growing number of scholars have began to perceive that the modern élites constitute an incipient middle class.[2] In Ethiopia, the modern educated have been absorbed almost entirely into the state administrative sector, and are clearly members of that new class, aptly labelled elsewhere by Frantz Fanon and René Dumont as a 'bourgeoisie of the public service'. The theoretical premise for this categorisation has been widely debated, and there is no need to recount the arguments here. The social group we are considering is very small: if those who have completed their secondary education are included, the order of magnitude will not exceed 100,000.[3]

The major occupation of the educated class in Ethiopia is public service. Practically all those who have had university education are employed by the state or by state-controlled agencies, and the same is true for the great majority of secondary school 'graduates'. Included in the definition of public service here are the police and the military, as well as the teaching profession. Having enjoyed unrestricted access to

[1] For an elaboration of this viewpoint, see P. C. Lloyd, *The New Elites of Tropical Africa* (London, 1966), introduction.

[2] For example, see Richard Sklar, 'Political Science and National Integration', in *The Journal of Modern African Studies* (Cambridge), v, 1, May 1967, pp. 1–11; L. Plotnicov, 'The Modern Elite of Jos, Nigeria', in Plotnicov and Tuden (eds.), *Social Stratification in Africa*, pp. 269–302; and A. W. Southall, 'Stratification in Africa', in L. Plotnicov and A. Tuden (eds.), *Essays in Comparative Social Stratification* (Pittsburgh, 1970), pp. 231–72. Many scholars use class as one analytic concept; see, for example, Richard Cohen, 'Social Stratification in Bornu', in *Social Stratification in Africa*, pp. 225–68. Indeed, various connotations of class appear parenthetically or supplementarily in most studies of social structure in contemporary Africa. P. C. Lloyd himself takes note of 'incipient class conflict' in his *Africa in Social Change* (Baltimore and Harmondsworth, 1967). A contrasting doctrinaire approach is followed by Majhemout Diop, *Histoire des classes sociales dans l'Afrique de l'ouest*, Vol. 1, *Le Mali* (Paris, 1971). 'Committed' studies normally take for granted the appearance of class formation in Africa. See Kwame Nkrumah, *Class Struggle in Africa* (New York, 1970); Giovanni Arrighi and J. S. Saul, 'Socialism and Economic Development in Tropical Africa', in *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vi, 2, August 1968, pp. 141–69; and Samir Amin, 'The Class Struggle in Africa', in *Revolution* (Paris), 1, 9, 1964, pp. 23–45.

[3] Holders of higher qualifications, including university degrees, numbered 7,000–8,000 at most in 1970. The number of secondary school 'graduates' is impossible to calculate precisely; but though this is a much larger group, its inclusion here does not significantly alter the minute proportion of the educated élite in comparison to other social groups. There are many more who have had primary and some secondary education; however, they cannot be considered as belonging to the incipient middle class. Nevertheless, this 'semi-educated' group is also an urban element that aspires to modern middle-class status, and its members are oriented towards the westernised élite as a reference group rather than the traditional nobility.

public employment and, in many respects, preferential treatment, this group has been totally unaffected by competition for status and economic privilege. Both of these have been attained upon graduation through entrance into state service, an entrance similarly effected in automatic fashion. The monthly salary of a university graduate at the start of his career is several times the officially estimated annual income *per capita* in the country.[1]

The nascent middle class is concentrated in Addis Ababa and the few other large towns of Ethiopia. Its members share a style of life that is, if not quite western, quite distinct from that of their traditionally oriented compatriots. Needless to say, modern educated Ethiopians are keenly conscious of their distinctiveness and privileged status. Being a small social group and the product of a narrow institutional process, living congregated in a few urban centres and having in common the same occupation and employer, most members are personally familiar with one another and social intercourse among them is intensive.

All this indicates that although the process of social formation began only recently in Ethiopia, a definite trend has emerged which leads towards class divisions in a society bisected by an urban-rural dichotomy. Class formation in the rural sector is promoted by changing property relationships, the result primarily of political and administrative action, encouraged by the introduction of a commercial pattern in agriculture and other ancillary economic trends. The process of social formation is simplifying a rather elaborate traditional hierarchy through the elimination of intermediary strata and the clarification of distinctions between landowners, small-holders, and landless peasants. Simultaneously, this process is exposing the true relationship between these groups, i.e. the economic nexus.

Thus far, urban class differentiation is being promoted almost entirely by the linked processes of modern education and political recruitment, which confer élite status and privilege on the educated group. From the point of view of class formation, economic activity in the urban sector is still of secondary importance. Enterprise is dominated by the state and foreign elements, while domestic efforts are concentrated in retail and petty trade. Industrial activity is spawning an urban

[1] The starting salary for a university graduate – regardless of professional specialisation, rank, or branch of service – is Eth. $500 per month (= U.S. $217.4). Those who leave secondary school begin with a little less than half that amount. The estimated income *per capita* in Ethiopia in 1970 was Eth. $150 per annum. Relatively few educated Ethiopians work for private enterprise whose management is largely in the hands of expatriates – either recently arrived custodians of foreign investment, or members of the resident Italian and Greek communities.

proletariat at a very leisurely pace. Although property ownership is not a crucial attribute of the incipient middle class, economic factors are not wholly unrelated to its status. Moreover, it appears certain that this class will in time acquire property commensurate with its social and political status.

## THE ETHNIC FACTOR

While class is emerging as a crucial element of social differentiation and political influence throughout Africa, ethnicity remains important in both respects, though in a somewhat diminished and subtly changing rôle that has confounded the prevailing perception of this ancient but durable element of social organisation. As commonly perceived, ethnicity appears to have lost nothing of its original monolithic, impermeable character, or to have suffered any significant modification of its primordial social rôle. Such alleged persistence appears paradoxical in view of the dramatic change in the environment within which ethnicity is now manifested. It also appears to defy the evidence of internal social differentiation, the divergence of social position and interests between strata within each ethnic group, and the concomitant convergence of interests among comparable strata of diverse ethnic origin.

In fact, this convergence – recognised in the recent conception of an emerging African middle class – may produce co-operation or, as is likely in a situation of scarcity, competition. Richard Sklar has drawn attention to the importance of intra-class conflict as a corrolary of the ongoing process of class formation in Africa. He suggests that in a conflict situation of this kind, ethnicity should be viewed as a dependent variable subject to manipulation by class interests, rather than as a primordial political force.[1] Indeed it is evident that this is often the case where ethnicity has been active recently; that is, in the heterogeneous, competitive, insecure urban sector. Such manifestations inevitably take a political form, since power is usually the focus of competition.

With the exception of Eritrea, which was reclaimed after World War II, Ethiopia attained her present form at the dawn of the twentieth century, becoming the only state below the Sahara whose boundaries have been determined by an internally induced natural process of expansion carried out in the classic manner of military conquest. This altered radically the composition of the population, greatly diluting the homogeneity achieved through a centuries long process of integration within the framework of the Christian state. The incorporation of numerous alien ethnic groups among whom Islam and traditional

[1] Sklar, loc. cit.; see also his *Nigerian Political Parties* (Princeton, 1963), passim.

religions hold sway, transformed the Christian Ethiopians of the northern plateau to a minority, albeit dominant. Inevitably, ethnicity constitutes a key element of social differentiation here, as elsewhere in Africa. The determination of the empire-builders to retain dominance within the enlarged state, and the success with which this was rewarded, invested the ethnic factor with immediate and profound political significance. The policy of promoting national integration on the basis of particularistic criteria peculiar to this ethnic group – a narrow approach akin to assimilation – contributes less immediately, though hardly less profoundly, to the politisation of ethnicity in this country.

Although there is no doubt that this factor is capable of assertion independently of others, and that in a given situation it may, by itself, prove decisive, the premise followed here is that in the general course of the political process, the rôle of ethnicity is conditioned by, and usually subordinated to, class considerations. In the process of power distribution in Ethiopia, ethnicity constitutes an intervening variable interacting with class to determine a pattern of allocation which has remained relatively stable for some time; a condition that accounts for the relative stability of the political process, and the relative absence of politically aggressive ethnic manifestations in the modernising sector. The main features of this pattern in Ethiopia are (i) the retention of decisive national power by the ruling class within the northern-based Christian ethnic group, (ii) the preservation of traditional élites in the south at an intermediate position in the provincial ruling structure, and (iii) the recruitment of the modern educated group to an auxiliary position at the centre. While the latter group is ethnically more integrated than the other two, and is gradually becoming more so, it is still largely representative of northern Christianity, and is likely to remain so in the near future.

In the process of allocating as well as utilising power, ethnicity undoubtedly is a factor whose weight serves, more often than not, to bulwark class and factional privilege, rather than comprehensive ethnic goals. This relationship between class and ethnicity must be kept in mind in order to avoid serious distortion. For example, the northern Christian ethnic group is commonly referred to as being dominant in Ethiopia; a fair statement as far as it goes. To include the northern peasant masses in the designation 'dominant' is a gross distortion, however, for they belong to this group in cultural and psychological terms only. Similarly, the use of simple ethnic categories confuses and conceals the real distinction between the landowning traditional élite and the landless masses in southern Ethiopia.

## POLITICAL ADAPTATION

Naturally, the polity did not remain unaffected by the changes wrought in the body of society. A measure of adaptation was required in order to preserve the stability of the political order in the enlarged state, and to maintain political equilibrium in the face of social change. The inclusion into the traditional monarcho-aristocratic structure of authority of what may be called strategic groups representing new entries in the social system, i.e. the traditional southern and the modern élites, is one facet of this adaptation. The promotion of three distinct, yet closely interdependent processes – namely, centralisation of ruling power, modernisation of the instruments of rule, and national integration – is the other facet.

The monumental task of permanently incorporating vast areas and great numbers of alien peoples that confronted Ethiopia at the turn of the century was beyond the capacity of the loosely knit, traditional political structure. The change in the external environment was equally dramatic. The forceful intrusion of modern imperialism into East Africa exposed the political system of Ethiopia in all its quaint simplicity to a mortal challenge from abroad. Rather than attempt direct rule over its new subjects, the Ethiopian régime employed an indirect system that remains largely in effect today. The traditional hierarchies of the southern groups were preserved, often in truncated form, and allowed to retain their authority over their people, while serving the purposes of the state, under the direct supervision of centrally appointed governors invariably chosen from the ranks of the Christian aristocracy. The southern élite were rewarded with titles, land grants, tax exemptions, and various other privileges, while those among them who proved amenable to assimilation by accepting Christianity could hope to integrate socially with the northern aristocracy. The mediation of the *balabbats*, as this group is usually called, helped to stabilise Ethiopian rule in the new provinces, and was the basis upon which an enduring alliance was forged that cuts across ethnic lines, and binds the two groups with shared – albeit unequal – interests in power and privilege.

The incorporation of the modern educated sector into the administrative structure of the state is particularly important, because it conferred élite status on a newly emerging social group, and placed it in a strategic though subordinate position at the very centre of the political system. A manifold political imperative dictated this adaptation, notably the need to centralise power and modernise the instruments of rule. Historically, the effectiveness of imperial rule in Ethiopia was

seriously diminished, often to vanishing point, by the countervailing power of the nobility, and by the paucity of the instruments available to the centre. Entrenched in the countryside and sustained by the fanatical provincialism of the peasantry in northern Ethiopia, benefitting from a thoroughly decentralised governmental structure which entrusted it with military, taxation, and judicial functions, the nobility successfully defended provincial autonomy, and seriously curtailed even the Emperor's power over appointment.

The taming of the nobility was accomplished during the second quarter of this century, in the reign of Haile Selassie I, a highly astute and equally ambitious ruler, who relied heavily on the support and services of the emerging intelligentsia, whose rise he personally promoted and supervised with exacting paternalism. The process of government was centralised primarily by creating appropriate institutions, and making them appendages of the Throne, thus providing the monarch with levers of control his predecessors lacked. Since the institutional forms adopted are modern, this has been a process of centralisation *cum* modernisation from the beginning. At the same time, sectors and processes of society that had never before been the concern of the state were brought under its jurisdiction. Thus, there occurred simultaneously an expansion of the scope of governmental action, and a consolidation of central control over such activities. Centralisation not only served the interests of the monarchy, but since it was accomplished through the partial modernisation of the governmental apparatus, it created the basis of élite status for the educated group.

The Ethiopian régime has not been stimulated into any noticeable effort by the task of national integration. Its accomplishment is viewed simply as the natural derivative of centralisation and modernisation, and such a complacent attitude stems from the conviction that these two processes will advance integration automatically through the forceful promotion of the Amharic language and the gradual spread of Orthodox Christianity. No specific policy designed to promote integration has been formulated by the Government, nor have any of its actions ever been formally identified with that cause. On the contrary, it apprehensively avoids recognition of ethnic divisions, and through stringent censorship prevents any public mention of the subject. Nevertheless, cultural integration is energetically promoted in various ways, with the Amharic language serving as the main catalyst in this process – in fact, no other Ethiopian language is allowed to be taught or printed.[1]

[1] A minor exception, forced by political consideration, allows the printing of Tigrinya and Arabic in a newspaper published by the Ministry of Information in Asmara.

Concerning religion, the Government's policy is ostensibly guided by Haile Selassie's inspired statement, 'religion is personal, the state is for all' – notwithstanding the fact that the Orthodox Church is official and supported by the state. Having adopted an attitude of neglectful toleration towards Islam and traditional religion, neither Church nor state have made a significant effort to propagate the official faith in the new provinces. As in the past on the northern plateau, Christianity is expected to overcome its rivals gradually as a result of its social and economic advantages, and the political pre-eminence of its adherents. Thus, although the state does not seem to pursue a defined policy for national integration, its actions do follow a definite and familiar pattern – that is, the régime appears to follow atavistically the assimilationist inclination of traditional Ethiopian society, retains the same criteria, and relies more or less on the same methods that proved effective in the past.

This mode of adaptation has not upset greatly the existing structure of authority. The major adjustment was a decisive tilt of the traditional balance of power towards the Throne, a shift that weakened the nobility and turned the monarchy into a veritable autocracy. The new élites were incorporated into the existing hierarchy in definitely auxiliary capacities. Their inclusion constitutes renovation rather than reform of the political system. The incorporation of the *balabbats* is a thoroughly traditional expedient, and while the position of the educated class at the centre is more significant, its members nevertheless enjoy more the form than the substance of power. The modernising sector in Ethiopia does not in itself – unlike elsewhere in Africa – constitute a base of political power. Ethiopia has still to face the decisive confrontation between traditional authority and the modern élite. At present, the latter remains very much dependent on the former.

For the time being, and for the purposes of the ruling group, the adaptation that was essentially accomplished by the middle of the century proved quite successful, combining maximum gain with minimum concessions. During that period, a number of progressive trends of historical importance were launched: including the taming of the nobility, the centralisation of the governmental system, the modernisation of the bureaucracy and the army, the development of a school system, the recruitment of the educated group into the administration, and the general encouragement of a modernistic orientation in a profoundly traditional milieu. These are seminal contributions of lasting importance, largely attributable to the guiding genius and courage of the enlightened ruler who became the patron of the incipient progressive forces in his

domain. It is also true that these forces contributed vitally to the consolidation of the embattled Throne's position and, shrewdly managed, to the gradual fashioning of the autocracy. There was, then, consonance between the unvarying political goal, and the social policies pursued by the imperial régime during the second quarter of this century.

In the past two decades, however, the situation has changed significantly. The initial success of the reforms launched earlier, and the elimination of rival centres of power, produced an optimum political situation that, from the point of view of the régime, it is best to disturb as little as possible. Consequently, since then, further adaptation has been strenuously resisted, and official policies have adhered strictly to the principle of minimising political change. Since the early 1950s, the political imperative of power conservation is no longer consonant with policies of rapid social reform; rather, it becomes increasingly less so. Nevertheless, it remains paramount. In this period, the progressive forces initially nurtured by Haile Selassie strive in vain to attain maturity in the stifling atmosphere of authoritarian paternalism. Frustration gradually leads to dissidence, and finally to undisguised hostility against the Government and the ageing Emperor whose ideas and methods of rule have changed little through the decades. In the latter part of his reign, Haile Selassie heads a régime striving to control social change in order to minimise its political consequences, and often succeeding in retarding and distorting the process of social development.

## POLITICAL PROSPECTS

The determined and, until now, successful effort to inhibit political evolution in a period of accelerating social transformation, engenders a basic contradiction, aspects of which abound in Ethiopia. They are obvious even within the context of the adaptation itself, portending ill for its future prospects. The device of associating the southern ethnic groups with the polity through the medium of the *balabbats* is an anachronism. Like traditional élites elsewhere throughout Africa, they are gradually rendered functionless by the steady intrusion of the Government, and the fact that they have no significant influence on general policy. Similarly, the process of social change has a manifold impact on the people, which the *balabbats* are in no position to mediate. Furthermore, their emergence as a section of the landowner class in that region renders them unsuitable to represent the peasant masses.

The position of the educated group is no less anomalous. The administrative and technical rôle it is expected to perform is an important one.

However, Ethiopia is not a technocracy. The political imperative that dominates decision making – a process in which the educated participate only peripherally – imposes narrow limits of the function of this group within the governmental system. This is not to say that educated persons are not influential at the centre of the decision-making process. A group of men belonging to the first generation of modern educated Ethiopians practically monopolised the top positions at the centre during the past three decades. However, their position is that of the patrimonial retainer in the Weberian conception, rather than that of political leadership. Depending solely on the personal favour of the autocrat, the position and influence of these men is an individual rather than a collective asset. Furthermore, their acceptance of traditional norms and submission to traditional criteria, as well as their facile integration into the traditional ruling circle, has deprived them of any rapport with and support from the lower-placed, and increasingly frustrated younger generation of educated Ethiopians. The latter function mostly as administrators and technicians deprived of influence in an environment dominated by the principle of power conservation, and the inevitable sense of frustration is pervasive. In the past, this was alleviated by enviable privilege which is now becoming scarce. Mounting frustration and a diminishing supply of its antidote are turning the intelligentsia into a dissident group, and a major liability of the régime.

The late 1960s witnessed a new phenomenon in Ethiopia – a display of profound alienation among students, led by those at the University, whose propensity for overt political action is without precedent in the long reign of Haile Selassie. Moving beyond the attitude of passive disenchantment, they adopted a posture of open, vociferous defiance, forcing the régime to adopt increasingly harsher measures of repression, and succeeded in provoking a major political crisis. The appearance of a militant mood among the youngest group of educated Ethiopians, and the nature of the challenge they now pose to Haile Selassie, contrast sharply and sadly with the early phase of his rule, when the Emperor was idolised as the patron of modern education and the author of reform.

Failure to adapt to changing social conditions is increasingly limiting the régime's capacity to pursue its avowed goals. Centralisation, its initial and most successful enterprise, appears to have reached a definite limit, while still far from completion. Consolidated during the first half of Haile Selassie's reign, the régime's base of active support – comprising the nobility, the emerging landowner class, and the educated sector – has

not expanded further. On the contrary, there has been growing dissidence among the educated and some ethnic groups. Although this erosion is obvious, no meaningful counter-measures have been taken. No political organisation has been created even for the régime's own support, nor has any ideology been designed to elicit active popular support. The vastly inflated rôle of the Emperor sets a definite limit to the ability of his Government to secure political support. Organisation of any type, or any ideology other than the Solomonic legend, tends to diminish the omnipotence of the Monarch, and consequently cannot be tolerated. Furthermore, the overwhelming concentration of authority in the Crown has a debilitating effect on the administrative apparatus – this was designed to reinforce imperial control, and the efficiency of the institutions of the state was often assessed from that point of view. The ultimately contradictory trends of institutionalisation and aggrandisement of personal power have reached an *impasse*, producing a situation akin to governmental paralysis.

The political limitations of the régime have an obvious adverse effect on the process of development. The social composition of its active support severely limits its options in this field. The landowner class has prevented any meaningful reform in the agricultural sector thus far. By ignoring the vast majority of Ethiopia's people and the bulk of her resources, development plans whirl in a vacuum filled with propaganda and formalism. In lieu of a policy for development, the Government encourages a crude sort of capitalism the results of which have been meagre.

An ominous aspect of the basic contradiction stems from the régime's inability to appreciate the complex reaction stimulated by social change in a setting of ethnic heterogeneity. Although not unknown elsewhere in Africa, this issue is posed here in a different form. Colonialism interrupted the continuity of traditional ethnic hierarchies, and independence brought to power a modern, ethnically heterogeneous élite, which adopted all-inclusive criteria for national integration. Conceptually, at least, this issue has been resolved through a process of consensus forced by circumstances. In Ethiopia, this stage has not yet been reached. Here the boundaries of the modern state have been determined by an internally induced process of expansion. Within these limits a traditional ethnic hierarchy of uninterrupted continuity is promoting national integration through a process akin to assimilation, utilising traditional and ethnocentric criteria. Centrifugal forces thrive in the contradiction of trying to impose traditional monolithic concepts in a situation of social ferment created by the pressures of modernisation.

Such forces have already manifested themselves with disturbing intensity – notably the violent, protracted conflict in Eritrea.

The potential for conflict increases as the contradictions analysed above mature. The emergence of social classes does not necessarily presage struggle on that level. At this early stage of social transformation, the dividing lines between classes are not clearly drawn, nor is the social distance between them very great. The persistence of traditional norms that emphasise kinship, and of social mechanism that promote vertical integration, diminishes social distance and inhibits the growth of class consciousness. The slow progress of commercialisation in the agricultural sector has not yet reached the point where property inequality can be translated into what Max Weber termed the market situation – i.e. the determinant of the class situation.[1]

Nevertheless, interlinked social and economic trends now in motion tend to weaken, if not dissolve, those aspects of tradition that lessened social distance and mitigated group antagonism in the past. The processes of modernisation and economic transformation that have been recently initiated in Ethiopia will soon change the economic position of both landlord and tenant, and will inevitably affect the existing relationship between them. The economic aspect of land will change as subsistence agriculture gradually gives way to a market economy, thereby stimulating increased production by the use of modern methods and machinery, both of which displace manpower. The tendency is to eliminate tenancy as the least economical form of land exploitation, and the tenant is evicted or turned into an agricultural labourer. In either case, the tenuous link between the tenant and the land is irrevocably broken, and the minimum security provided for the landless in the traditional arrangement is lost.[2]

The money economy makes accumulation possible to a degree that was not feasible before; the process of land alienation is now accelerated through economic means, and the landless class is enlarged. Land also acquires value as real estate for residential, industrial, and other purposes. Landlord wealth can increase much faster than before, and as economic differentiation becomes a cumulative process, its social mani-

[1] 'Class, Status, Party', *From Max Weber: essays in sociology*, edited and translated by H. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills (New York, 1946), pp. 181–3.

[2] In a subsistence economy the tenant is seldom evicted, since uncultivated land has little value. In this setting, the tenant, as Karl Marx pointed out, 'is the landowner's representative – the landowner's secret; it is only through him that the landowner has his economic existence'; D. J. Struik (ed.), *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (New York, 1964), p. 123. The provincial land surveys reported by the Central Statistical Office in Addis Ababa show that the average tenant has been on the same land for a considerable length of time.

festations became increasingly more ostensible. Modern facilities and comforts such as health, education, housing, transport, communications, dress, and food become available to those who can afford them. The landlords are favourably placed to take advantage of these; and as they do, they widen the social distance between themselves and less-fortunate groups. The feeling of relative deprivation on the part of the underprivileged will intensify dramatically. Moreover, modernisation undermines the traditional restraints that consecrated the position of the landholder class in the past. Consequently, should current trends continue, the class situation will emerge quite starkly in the future.

These trends also promote continuity in class differentiation, at least in the initial stages of the modernisation process. The landowners, in both the north and the south, tend to congregate in the urban centres and small towns which serve as administrative headquarters. It is in this growing sector of Ethiopia that the newly initiated public services have made their appearance. The countryside is still largely unaffected by them. These facilities are primarily utilised, if not monopolised, by the population of the towns which includes the officials and merchants – and since most of them are landowners as well, while many of the latter are former officials, any distinction between them in this context is irrelevant. The children of this group are enabled to take advantage of the severely limited educational facilities, primarily because they are located in the urban centres and small towns. Furthermore, unlike peasant households, these children do not need to work for their families, which, moreover, can financially maintain them at school from their salaries and rent income. Consequently, it is this young group which will form the core of the new, educated, urban middle class, likely to inherit political power in the near future.

In the case of the southern peasantry, alienation has occurred in its most profound form, as defined by Marx. It involves not only loss of land, but also the fact that the lost land remains in existence as an alien and hostile power confronting them in their position of tenants. This alienation has not yet manifested itself as a dynamic factor in class relationship. As the position of the landless, and those who own uneconomically small units of land, becomes increasingly disadvantageous and precarious, the latent antagonisms between the classes are likely to come to the surface in virulent form. Unless economic development advances at a pace that creates adequate employment opportunities for those who are forced off the land, serious class conflict is likely to arise. In the southern region of Ethiopia this situation is compounded and rendered far more serious by the correlation of

ethnic, cultural, and class differences – a formula fraught with explosive potential.

While it does not now constitute a dominant political force in Ethiopia, the educated class is laying the foundation for such a rôle by gradually taking over control of the apparatus of the state, including its defence and enforcement branches. Its main preoccupation is the public service, and as a result this class is rapidly developing collective vested interests directly related to – indeed subsidised by – the state, two factors which create an imperative necessity for political assertion on its part. Finally, the direction of the modernisation process ensures the continuity and growth of this class, and hence the accumulation and entrenchment of privileges. The urban bias of the educational process effectively excludes the peasantry, and benefits the emerging middle class of the towns, while the children of the wealthy also gain from the superior quality of a few private, foreign-operated secondary schools in the large cities.

The ethnic composition of the educated cannot be assessed with precision. Primary schools are fairly evenly spread throughout the highlands; but they are still rather scarce in the lowland periphery of the plateau, so that the nomadic and pastoral groups are barely represented. Secondary education is scarce everywhere; nevertheless, the northern highland region – including the provinces of Shoa and Eritrea – is better endowed both in quantity and quality of facilities at this level. This imbalance is reflected among university students; according to preliminary surveys, more than 80 per cent of those who entered Haile Selassie I University in the late 1960s belong to the Amhara-Tigre group.[1] The Amhara are heavily represented also in the secondary schools of the southern provinces, because as landlords, officials, military, and clergy they congregate in the towns, where these limited education facilities are to be found. The religious composition of the educated class is overwhelmingly Christian. Muslims have entered the educational process only recently, and are very sparsely represented at its upper levels. Few persons of pagan origin have received much education, and almost all of those who did have been converted to Christianity. Since there is no obvious policy bias operating, it is to be expected that the ethnic composition of the educated class will become

[1] In a survey of the 1966 freshman class in which ethnic affiliation was identified with first language learnt, 55 per cent proved to be Amhara, and 25 per cent Tigre; C. R. Langmuir and J. E. Bowers, 'Language Learning Patterns in Ethiopia', Haile Selassie I University Testing Centre, October 1967, mimeo. A similar survey by Langmuir and Getachew W. Selassie of those who sat for the Ethiopian School-Leaving Certificate in 1968, showed 60 per cent to be Amhara and 22 per cent Tigre. There may be some exaggeration in these figures, stemming from the superior status of Amharinya which induces members of other ethnic groups to claim this as their mother tongue.

slowly more representative of the society as the number of schools increase.

Though not quite effaced, ethnic identities are least prominent and less exclusive within the emerging middle class. Intermarriage across ethnic and provincial lines, though far from extensive, occurs more frequently within this than any other social group. Given the availability of state employment until now, members of the educated élite have not faced economic competition, save on an individual basis. Similarly, educated Ethiopians have not competed for political power. Status and privilege were effortlessly gained through their incorporation into the hierarchy of authority. With the educational system expanding at a much faster rate than the economy, while the state's capacity as a source of employment is nearing the point of exhaustion, unemployment is becoming a problem within the ranks of the educated, particularly secondary school graduates. Intra-class competition in a situation of scarcity seems probable, and it is likely that it will take a political form. Whether competition in the modernising sector will stimulate political mobilisation along traditional lines of differentiation will depend on a number of factors, many of which are beyond our ken.

In summary, Ethiopia's recent historical experience has produced a complex situation characterised by the convergence and interaction of disparate forces, a situation that initially appears to breed contradictions, although only a few definite trends are yet discernible. While delayed in most respects, social evolution follows a path towards class formation which is quite definite and more advanced here, at least in the rural sector, than in most parts of sub-Saharan Africa. Significantly, this trend was initiated, and promoted until now, through political and administrative action, and is expected to continue and acquire momentum propelled by economic competition. The potential socio-political consequences of this type of social stratification are likely to have a volative nature in the southern region of Ethiopia, given the fateful correlation between emerging class and established ethnic lines in that area. The same development has nurtured the urban modernising class as a potential claimant for power, thus setting the stage for the long delayed confrontation between tradition and modernity in that sphere. While ethnicity is hardly a factor in this confrontation at present, it may be stimulated by intra-class competition in the future.

The approaching congruence of class and ethnicity is an ill omen for Ethiopia, unlikely to be exorcised by the régime's propensity for assimilation as the road to national integration, or its haphazard economic policies. A more immediate problem is posed by the total neglect of any realistic preparation for the transfer of power from the shrewd but now aged autocrat. A period of intense political competition is likely to follow the end of his reign, during which some of the elements noted in this article will attain maturity.