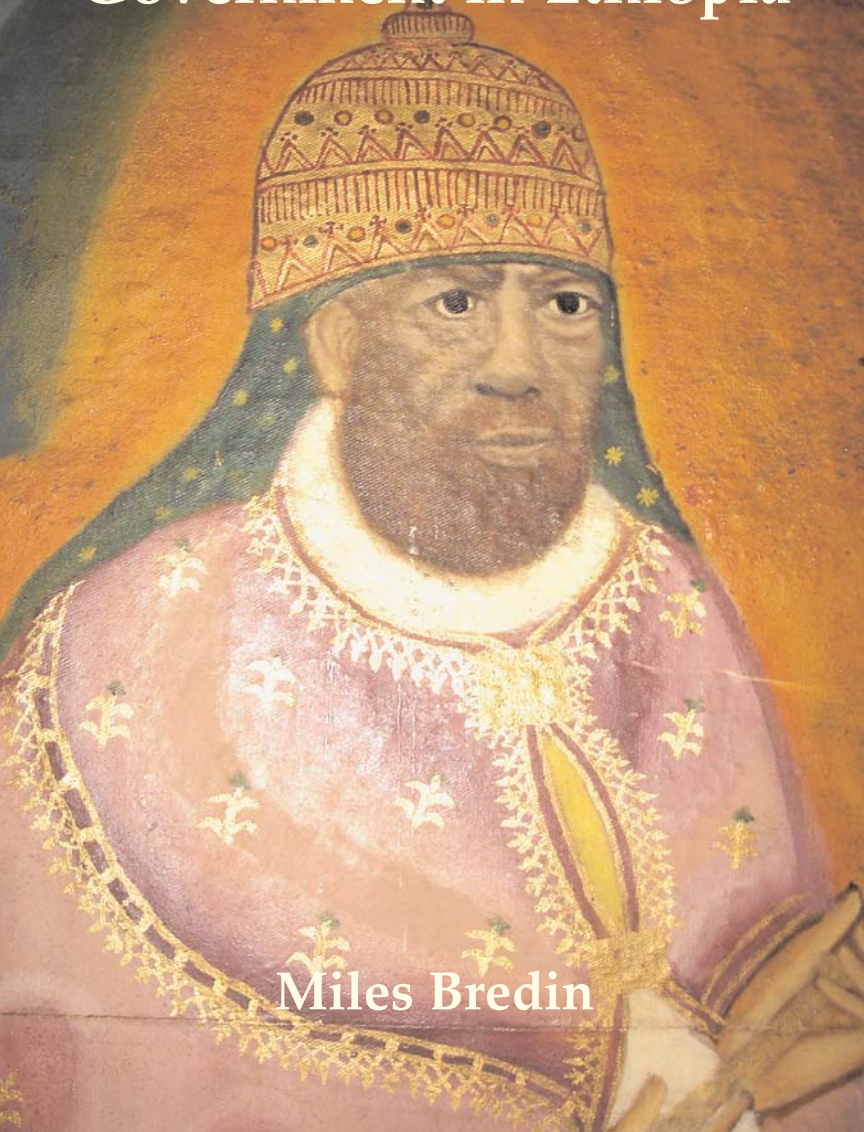


The Roots of Modern Government in Ethiopia



Miles Bredin

Cover Picture: Painting of Menelik II in St Raguel Church, Entoto, Addis Ababa; *Photo Joanna Crichton*

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Introduction

Ethiopia's history has been highly politicised for millennia. From the highlands to the low, from the riverbanks to the deserts, the stories told have been richly embellished by myth and legend. So to attempt to understand the origins of Ethiopian governance one must put aside as many preconceptions as possible. It is, for example, biologically impossible for all the rulers who have claimed such descent to have actually been scions of Mohammed, Makeda¹, Fatima or Solomon. With such noble aspirations must go the concepts of peripheries and cores, border areas and heartlands — be they political, mental or geographical.

One must also decide what territory constitutes the country: many people born within the borders recognised by the United Nations today consider themselves to be living in a colony of Ethiopia rather than Ethiopia itself. For the purposes of this booklet the term “Ethiopia” should be taken to mean the part controlled by the King of Kings at the time under consideration. Thus for most of this history, Gojam is in Ethiopia and Warder, in the Ogaden, is not. The boundaries of Ethiopia have changed even within the last few years, so parts of the country considered outside by some and inside by others will be mentioned below in the same sentence as those considered by others to be at its heart.

Writing about the history of any country is to make some sort of political statement and the history of all nations is to some extent based on legend and personal interpretation: the American West was “won” only a century ago, yet its history is so embellished with legend that it is nigh on impossible to separate truth from myth. What is particularly interesting in the

¹ The Biblical Queen of Sheba's Ethiopian Name

Ethiopian context is the way that the manipulation of legend has been accepted and embraced by all parties — and for so long.

My starting point will be considered particularly irksome by some, as will the fact that I place so much emphasis on the reign of Menelik II in the late 19th century, while all but ignoring his illustrious namesake. By beginning with Aksum in the 1st century AD, I have already acknowledged the fact that Tigray has a longer written history than many other places in modern Ethiopia, yet avoided discussion of the older civilisation centred on Yeha. By my use of the Gregorian rather than the Julian, Islamic or Lunar calendars, I reveal that I am not Ethiopian and that I believe Christianity is important to the history of the nation as a whole. That I fail to start with the alleged union of Solomon and Makeda and the subsequent birth of Menelik I in the 10th century BC will be telling to some; others would wish me now to mention Adulis — Aksum's main port in today's Eritrea — or to point out that the land of Punt in Greater Somalia may well have been more culturally and technologically advanced than Aksum at an earlier date.

The history of the last century is still much disputed. With curtailed access to information and incomplete academic freedom even today, the histories that we have — many of which are of enormous value and indeed show great bravery — are often necessarily self-censoring, or self-aggrandizing or excessively politically biased. With greater academic freedom — often in exile — came a tendency to counter past over-emphases with excessive stress on previously overlooked figures and peoples.

This book seeks to explain a little of what has made Ethiopian governance how it is today and to clarify why the

administration behaves as it does. It hopes to cultivate the largely unexplored middle ground with seeds from all over the region and beyond: its goal is to help communication between the diverse peoples of present-day Ethiopia. The book takes the reader from Aksum up to the establishment of Haile Selassie's government in the mid-twentieth century and focuses particularly on the interlinked roles of religion, land, trade and tribute in the nation's story, on conquest and on the manipulation of legend to bolster particular groups. It concentrates particularly on assisting non-highlanders and foreigners to understand the highland mindset and on explaining why the nation is governed as it is, but it aspires to exclude no one. Teaching the residents of Gondar why the Boran are forced occasionally to reorganise the Gada system or explaining the intricacies of Somali clan structures to the Gurage is no less important a project, but it is not this one.

Many people gave their valuable time when I was researching this booklet and I have read many excellent books, a few of the most useful of which are listed below. Any errors are my own. I thank everyone who spoke to me and particularly those who arranged interviews and assisted in the editing process. The fact that so few of my interviewees wish to be acknowledged is a sad indictment of Ethiopia's political environment today and I hope explains why I have named none.

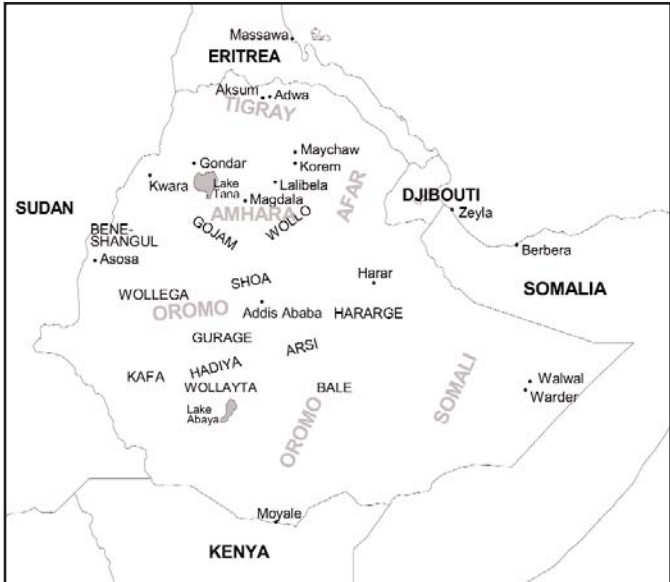
Ten Points to Ponder

The following ten points will be news to some, obvious to others; what links them is that they go against common perceived wisdom. They are inserted here — at the beginning of this booklet – to encourage readers to take this opportunity to discard any preconceptions they bring with them.

1. The Aksumite Kingdom, upon which much highland legend is based, was built on maritime trade, yet modern Ethiopia has no coastline and many highland Christians have traditionally looked down on Muslims for their mercantile activities. They continue to do so today.
2. Tigray and Eritrea – whence the Aksumite Kingdom sprang – are either beyond the cartographic borders or on the “peripheries” of the modern Ethiopian State, while Oromiya embraces the very “heart of the nation”.
3. Many pastoralist groups have sophisticated arbitration systems and rich traditions of democracy, which long predate those of the highlands; some also indulge in ritual war, a trying custom in a close neighbour.
4. The Oromo – not the Amhara as many believe — are among Africa’s most expansionist groups.
5. Europeans associate the town of Korem with Bob Geldof and Band Aid, where charitable Europeans “fed the world”. For many Ethiopians, it will always be the place

where Europeans dropped mustard gas on retreating troops after the battle of Maychaw.

6. Not all highlanders are the same: when predominantly Tigrayan forces took Addis Ababa in May 1991, many Amhara residents of the capital likened it to the Welsh taking London.
7. Not all lowlanders are the same: when Menelik II expanded southwards from Shoa in the late 19th and early 20th century, many of his finest soldiers and commanders were of lowland Oromo descent.
8. All children of Somali origin are required to know more about their history by the age of ten than many highlanders will learn in a lifetime.
9. The pragmatic lineage of Haile Selassie includes the trinity of Oromo, Amhara and Tigrayan. Islam, Christianity and Animism made up his religious roots. He was born near Harar, the tenth child of the Oromo second wife of a Tigrayan/Shoan nobleman. Yet millions believed that he was the semi-divine direct descendant of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba with a God-given right to rule — from Massawa to Moyale, Walwal to Wollega and beyond.
10. Shoa was an Islamic sultanate from the 10th to 14th centuries. Just 40 years before Menelik made Addis Ababa the capital of a vastly expanded Ethiopia, it had not even been within what Theodros considered his “empire”.



All boundaries are approximate and unofficial

Map of Ethiopia showing the international boundaries in 2005, approximate ethnic and geographical areas and major towns mentioned in the text.

History

In the early years of the first millennium, a powerful kingdom arose in Aksum that would dominate the surrounding area for centuries and whose very existence continues to inform the Ethiopian nation state to a remarkable degree. It is known about today because its ruins remain and — unlike many of its neighbours — it communicated with the world beyond its borders. Through the trade on which it was built, Aksum had contact with Europe and Arabia, whose writers mentioned it. A strong nation grew around the town and was paid for by trade in ivory, slaves, civet, incense and, earlier than any of its neighbours, in its own coinage. Merchants from India, Persia, Greece and Rome used Aksum's ports at Adulis and elsewhere, and the kingdom — built on the remains of yet earlier civilisations — became known abroad.

Aksum did not exist in a vacuum but was bordered to the south by other small states whose influence waxed and waned throughout the following centuries; pastoralists occupied the lower ground in the north and east and permitted the State access to the sea. The Beja formed an ever more solid barrier to the north and later the Afar would control the North East. Initially to the west — a frontier that has remained firm into the 21st century — was Meroe, the ancient pyramid-building civilisation of Sudan, which outdoes even Aksum in its longevity.

The King of Aksum was never an emperor — a description that has grown out of western attempts to translate the term *negusa negast*. In common with “duke” or “general” for *ras* and “colonel” for *fit-auraris*, the title *negusa negast* is hard to translate, but “king of kings” is said to come closest. The Aksumite ruler was at times king of just a few kings in his immediate surroundings and at others of many, both in Africa

and even across the Red Sea in Yemen and Arabia. He seldom however, entirely subjugated his fellow kings – some were powerful enough to pay tribute in words alone, other less powerful chieftains paid in goods, livestock and food. Regulation of this tributary system led to a unique land-holding system that would, with religion, come to bind the country together.

In the 330s AD Ezana, King of Aksum, adapted Alexandrian Christianity and made it the official state religion; an act of faith that preceded even that of Rome. Since that time, Ethiopia's Orthodox Christians have followed a religion that – despite countless schisms, outside interference and long periods with no *Abune*,² either Egyptian or Ethiopian — has changed very little in 1,700 years. Other Christian sects have gone through momentous metamorphoses in the same period. Ethiopia's version of Alexandrian Christianity adopted many Animist and Judaic beliefs at its inception — the emphasis on the story of Solomon and Sheba, the importance of the Ark of the Covenant and the holiness of rivers — and has kept with them. Judaism, which has all but disappeared in Ethiopia itself following the flight of the Falashas in the 1980s and 1990s, had come mainly through trade with the Roman Empire and because of persecution elsewhere. Many different Animist beliefs continue to be practised country-wide. Ethiopian Orthodoxy's willingness to absorb rather than dominate these pre-existent creeds was integral to its long-term success.

Geographically isolated, Ethiopian Orthodoxy has remained remarkably unchanged and close to its roots. Highland Christians are often criticised for praying in a language that excludes most of their countrymen, but many of their prayers are in fact in the dead language — Ge'ez – of the Aksumites. Therefore even they are usually excluded. This is

not a unique instance of cultural imperialism or deaf faith: the same system prevailed in the Roman Catholic Church until the 1960s when the Vatican first allowed priests to use the vernacular rather than Latin when celebrating mass.

Aksum and its unique faith continued to flourish until the late 6th century when, simultaneous with the rise of Islam, it lost its regional dominance and all but disappeared. That should have been the last anyone heard of Aksum but instead the town, and its legend, is fundamental to Ethiopia today. There are two main reasons for this — religion and land — to which all else seems related. Aksum's systems for both endured through the centuries, long after the real Aksumite Kingdom had died, allowing the legend to be resurrected — eventually as an Empire — when needs dictated. After many years of peaceful coexistence, the strength of the Aksumite religion eventually proved a counter-weight which strengthened Islam; the Church and Christian state's legal stranglehold on land and the means of production led non-Christians into trade and an enduring control of the economy.

The Church was responsible for keeping the Aksumite legend alive beyond the 6th century. Aksum maintained its position as Orthodoxy's religious capital long after its political power had imploded: the Ethiopian Church has always been inextricably linked with the State, even when the State itself has been hard to define. Influential in this maintenance of the myth were exiled Christian Syrians who came to Ethiopia in the 5th century and, alongside homebred missionaries, converted vast numbers. They pushed far south, building monasteries and spreading their beliefs. Debra Damo in the north and many of the oldest southern monasteries, like those on Lake Abaya, date their foundation from this period of otherwise historical darkness. Their geographic isolation —

Debra Damo a metaphorical island on a mountaintop in Tigray, the lake monasteries on actual islands – allowed them to survive when times were hard but also caused them to fossilise. Many tiny monastic communities continued for centuries with only occasional injections of fresh blood.

Together with religion, Aksum's other main means of maintaining its hold over conquered peoples had been the *rist* land-holding system; this endured until living memory. Often hand in hand with the Church, a dominant king of Aksum, when taking over an area, would demand tribute from its inhabitants. The conquered land became *rist* land; it would officially “belong” to the peasant who lived on it and worked it. The land however, was made subject to *gult* – a form of tribute – that might go direct to the king, the Church, a local notable or a specific monastery. All dues were calculated and recorded in extraordinary detail; the records often kept in the local church thus further intertwining land, state and church. *Ballabbat*, a sort of early civil servant, administered the system. By manipulation of *gult*, the king could take sides in theological debate, show favour to a local ruler or people and command loyalty. When absorbing a territory, he could give *gult*-rights to a monastery in another kingdom, to a favoured general or keep it all to himself for the maintenance of his own armies or household.

The historian Donald Crummey describes *gult* as ‘the device which bound together king, noble and priest in a common relationship to the agricultural producer’ and on that most can agree. The system however, was incredibly complicated on a microscopic scale, with each small piece of land subject to specific dues. Different areas had distinct procedures; in some it was the individual peasant – the *gabbar* — who had to pay tribute or give of his labour, in others it was whoever lived on or administered the land. In the highlands,

where people ploughed and planted crops, a proportion of the harvest was generally paid to those with a “right” to it. This system could be regulated at the mill or by bailiffs, but in less fertile pastoralist areas, *gult* – never entirely popular with those doing the producing — necessarily changed, as there were no crops to divide. Most pastoralist areas were not brought into the system until much later. When they were, it provoked conflict because seemingly under-utilised land, set aside by pastoralists for dry-season grazing, was given to colonists to farm.

Throughout the first millennium, the predominantly pastoralist peoples south and east of the Blue Nile traded products like rhino horn, ivory and livestock; they used and continue to use the eastern ports of Zeyla and Berbera rather than northern Aksumite ports like Adulis (near today’s Massawa). The more western nations below the Blue Nile had contact with Aksum but also with the kingdoms of Sudan and through them, Egypt. The mountains of the highlands made for challenging trade routes and, before it was bridged, the Blue Nile was impassable for months at a time. The pastoralists who lived to the east were able to command the trade routes and wells with very little effort and even the strongest sedentary kings tended to leave them alone, asking little more than a safe passage for their caravans and access to water.

Islam first became influential along the coast where small city-states gradually adopted the religion from Arabic traders. These merchants had managed to harness the power of the monsoon with their lateen-rigged dhows but hard put to tack, they needed to wait until the wind changed before returning home. Their religion then moved up trade routes along which many – mostly traditional religion followers – were converted. In the early years Islam, which traditionally particularly appeals

to nomadic peoples, lived in an atmosphere of mutual respect with Orthodox Christianity. However areas of influence and potential for conflict were nonetheless being created.

Too little is known about the lives of the people who lived south of the highlands because little about them was written down and many oral histories are contradictory. Small kingdoms arose and fell, none – as far as we know — achieving the regional dominance of Aksum. Watering and grazing rights and thus “land” belonged to clans, despite not being permanently settled; indeed in the case of wells it was the people – whose job it was to keep the wells functioning – that could be said to belong to the wells. Islam continued to advance along the eastern trade routes. Many small city-states — Fetegar, Bale, Hadiya, Sharka — were founded in Shoa, Arsi and Harerge that are almost unheard of now due mainly to the fact that the Aksumite legend has recently been in the ascendant. The location of some is not even known but they are believed to have strung out in a sweep westwards from Harar, which is where caravans divided for either Berbera or Zeyla. Concurrently the Agaw, living around modern day Addis Ababa and the Beja in today’s Eritrea, were challenging the might of Aksum. As the Aksumite Kingdom shrank – losing its coastline and main trade to Arab Muslim influence in the 10th and 11th centuries – its cultural dominance endured. Its language, Ge’ez, its architecture and art were all preserved with the remarkable expansion of its religion.

In the 11th century emerged a semi-legendary queen of the Agaw called Gudet. Notably destructive, she left few records of herself or others. She ravaged the last remnants of Aksum and fell back on Wollo where she was succeeded by a dynasty of highly religious kings. The Zagwe dynasty made Roha, now Lalibela, their capital. In destroying Aksum, the Agaw had

been powerless to resist its religion. It was the Zagwes – not the Aksumites they defeated and whose architecture they imitated — who patronised the rock-hewn churches that pepper northern Ethiopia and Eritrea. Profoundly insular and fanatically devout, the Zagwes spent much energy resisting the advance of Islam from the east. The leaders of these Muslim “invaders” who so disturbed the Zagwes often claimed descent from Mohammed, so in 1270 the politician-saint Tecla Haymanout arranged the reintroduction of the Solomonid line to counter the Islamic aristocrats on the Zagwes’ borders. He is credited with persuading the Zagwe King Nakuto Laab to abdicate in favour — or in some way hand over the throne to — Yekuno Amlak, who claimed descent from King Solomon, Makeda and Menelik, the “founders” of Aksum. Tecla Haymanout and Yekuno Amlak ruled with the assistance of an ancient book, the *Kebre Negast*, thought to date from at least the 6th century; it portrays the Kings of Aksum from Menelik onwards. The year 1270 therefore sees not only the start of the Solomonid legend but also the re-scheduling of the State’s continuing debt to the Church.

From this point on church and state were yet more indivisible; their members spoke Amharic among themselves and to each other; flags, armies and horses were blessed; *Tabotat* (representations of the Ark of the Covenant) led troops into battle alongside holy pictures and other relics. As each century went by it became ever more necessary to speak Amharic to get ahead – be the speaker from Tigray, Welleyyta or Wollega. Church and state fought and ruled together, evangelising in the South or trying to maintain peace, and thus trade routes open, with Muslim sultanates to the east. More and more small kingdoms became Christian and loosely joined forces with the Solomonid kings, as the king in power — in

conjunction with the Church — manipulated the legend to command allegiance rather than the more taxing strategy of conquest. Once more Aksum/Orthodoxy was dominant, taking full advantage of the failure of the myriad sultanates to unite. Due to poor communications and the challenging territory that characterises northern Ethiopia, the capital gradually became wherever the king, his court and the *Abune* slept.

In the late 13th century, Ifat – which would become the most powerful of the Islamic sultanates — grew up. It later expanded to include much of modern day Shoa; as one unit rather than as a smattering of city-states. Ifat was not the only Islamic state in the ascendant. From the 12th into the 14th centuries – about which in some periods very little is known – Islam was gaining territory to the south of Roha/Aksum by evangelising and trading with non-Christians. Fault-lines were being created but had not yet cracked open. The Christian kings were preoccupied, fighting Judaic Falashas in the West. They neglected the East and South and indeed encouraged Muslims to control trade within the Christian Kingdom's borders. Crucially however, although there was a dominant dynasty – the Wallasma, claiming descent from the Prophet – the Muslim states competed for trade with each other and were seldom politically united. Thus when a dominant Solomonid king turned his attention south in 1313, he was able to pick off the southern Muslim states one by one. By the time the Islamic states united under Ifat in the 1330s it was too late. In 1402, after decades of war, Sultan Saad ad-Din of Ifat was defeated in battle by the Christian Dawit, but his sons survived to start the Adal Sultanate near Harar and to continue Islam's ever more integrally religious clash with Christian Ethiopia. Their sultanate was however, crushed once more by the long-reigning Zara Yacob. He dominated his neighbours, both settled Muslim

and ever more Islamic pastoralist, and made Ethiopia's first true overtures towards Western Christianity. After two centuries of constant defeat, sedentary Islamic influence had mainly shrunk back to the area around Harar and on the coast, where it was increasingly strong and more militant.

Mahfuz of Harar, who reigned in the late 15th and early 16th centuries, brought a new element to the long struggle with Ethiopia. He saw his role as a religious leader as crucial and he declared a Jihad against the Christians, which garnered him support from across the Muslim world and importantly also from neighbouring sultanates. The Islamic states were about to reap the rewards of union. Leading the armies of Adal with assistance from the expanding Somali and Afar, Mahfuz thrust ever deeper into Ethiopia, which by this time had greatly expanded with no corresponding strengthening of administration. This made it difficult to defend. The Solomonid King, Lebna Dengel, was able, by using good intelligence, to destroy Mahfuz but in his wake came a general whose name still strikes fear in the hearts of Gondarene children today.

Imam Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim al Ghazi fought for Adal but although many claim him as their own, his origins remain obscure. Known as Gagn (the left-handed) he struck repeatedly at the Christian kingdom, its inhabitants and its churches and by 1540 was ruling most of Ethiopia from Gondar region with the help of Somalis, Afar and coastal Muslims. This subjugation informed much later Ethiopian Christian policy east of Shoa but remains remarkably unacknowledged. During this short period Aksum came very close to total annihilation and it was only due to fortuitous foreign intervention that it survived this period of entirely Islamic rule. Gagn had used to his advantage the fact that

Ottoman Islam and Portuguese Christianity were clashing in the Red Sea region, but a tiny Portuguese force eventually caused the death of this great general, poet and preacher. He was shot dead, but only after — with Ottoman assistance — he had defeated the well-armed Portuguese invading party. The Europeans would linger in the highlands for a century, generally failing to convert an already extremely devout population but discovering the source of the Nile, whose location until then had been unknown to Europe, and germinating a distrust of foreigners that lingers today.

Following Gagn's death, the two exhausted armies stumbled back homewards — the Christians to the West and the Muslims to the east. They left a vacuum that was filled by the Oromo in the course of a massive expansion that saw the ethnic grouping multiply its population and lands as it moved ever northwards into the highlands — both Muslim and Christian — from its cradle lands in the far south. By intermarrying and adopting many highland customs — including a sedentary lifestyle — rather than merely conquering and subjugating, the Oromo achieved a greater expansion than almost any other group in Africa. They also fought a great deal, both against and for the crown, using small Somali horses to great effect. Simultaneously Somalis, who had already spread far westwards with Gagn, moved into traditionally Afar but then sparsely-populated areas. The Ottomans took the Red Sea ports, laying claim to the littoral and some of the highlands — a move that was scarcely noticed by both the ever more insular and weakened Solomonid court and the Islamic city-states of the interior to whom it was not a threat.

A succession of Solomonid kings continued to move around the western highlands in a prolonged struggle to maintain their grip on power: the Islamic alliance once more

fragmented into ineffectual city-states. The Christians, although battered, had the Church to preserve some unity; the Muslims – who had combined religious and secular power in one person — were more affected. By the late 18th century, the Solomonids were eventually forced back on Lake Tana and Gondar where they built themselves spectacular castles at the same time as their power leached ever more into the hands of warlords. These regional *rases*, nobles and other leaders manipulated whoever they had put on the throne and indeed killed those who showed too much independence. They fought among themselves for whoever would have control of the puppet on the throne. Known as the *Zemena Mesefant* (Era of the princes, or nobility), this period was typified by ever-weaker kings and almost constant petty warfare.

Commerce was the province of Muslims, who lived in their own separate boroughs in Christian towns and continued to hold economic power despite political discrimination. Now that there was a permanent capital, Gondar's surrounding forests became much degraded. Land was fought over again and again – its men expected to fight and its women to feed the armies. Ottoman control of the Red Sea ports meant there was little trade with the outside world and Oromo incursions in the lowlands led highlanders ever higher. Insular mountain kingdoms, divided by Oromo-occupied valleys, led to the fragmentation of the Solomonid alliance.

Ever more marginal land with no one to till it was expected to feed increasing numbers of soldiers on top of the *gult* rights demanded by the *rases*, crown and church. It became common for highland peasants to fear their own armies more than those they were ostensibly fighting. A deep resentment of imposed rule emerged, which was only kept in check by devotion to the Church, which was of course

unbreakably connected with the State. Previously subdued tributary kingdoms gained more power: Oromo kingdoms – some Animist, others converted to Christianity or Islam – in particular became strong. With little regard for the concept of a Solomonid dynasty and in many cases with only a thin veneer of adopted Christianity (some though had the fanaticism of converts), these rulers increasingly influenced the nominal *negusa negast*. For 100 years in the 18th and 19th centuries the Solomonid Christian dynasty in Gondar was controlled by Muslims from northern Wollo yet was not made to convert: the legend was more useful the way it was. Others controlled southern Wollo and the trade routes to the east – Wollo was thus almost entirely Muslim.

Throughout the 18th and much of the 19th century both the Solomonid kingdom and the Muslim sultanate centred on Harar floundered as former vassal and tributary states of both either grew in overall power – Shoa — or became more autonomous — Gurage. Once at each other's throats, the two polities no longer shared even the same geo-political sphere. If people from either power had wished to visit the other, their first difficulty would have been crossing the buffer nations that now divided them; Adal/Harar and Aksum/Gondar no longer shared a border. The Islamic states have never recovered the glory of the invasion period under Grag; and Gondar continued to decline. While preoccupied with its own survival, the Gondarene monarchy had failed to comprehend what was happening within what it considered to be its own borders, and nations to the south, east and west had become more powerful. Shoa was a fully-fledged autonomous — and now Christian — kingdom with a wide sphere of influence; Kafa had its own international trade and Oromiya had grown so large and powerful that just one small Islamic section of it had been

controlling the throne in Gondar. Lands that had previously been seen as a convenient source of slaves, ivory and plunder were themselves rivalling Gondar's power; Tigray was yet again self-governing. Even the Church, for so long a source of strength and national unity, was rent by internal divisions.

Soon Ethiopia would be forced to confront colonial adventurism – both from its neighbours and from across the sea – and to forge a modern state that could combat the threat of an industrialised world that had grown up since Aksumite rulers had first made contact with Jerusalem, Rome and Alexandria. This external threat prompted a new way of thinking and inspired a man who would manipulate the Ethiopian legend to lay the foundations of today's massively expanded state. Kasa Haylu — an obscure minor nobleman from Kwara, west of Gondar on the Sudanese border – grew from being a celebrated bandit, to general, to King of Kings before losing it all again. In 1855, aware of the power of the Solomonid legend and of the fact that he was not of exalted birth, Kasa Haylu had himself crowned Theodros in line with a famous prophecy. Having defeated all nearby *rases*, he turned his attention to defending the country from foreigners. The traditionally stable Sudanese border – whence he came and had fought many a fierce battle – had long been controlled by the Egyptians. In 1841 Ottoman Massawa too fell to a resurgent Egypt. The Egyptians showed no signs of being satisfied, yet simultaneously Theodros had to subdue increasingly aggressive and autonomous Wollo and Shoa, which had long been largely independent.

Theodros' reign was one of constant military action in many spheres – much of it markedly brutal. He attempted to reform the army, by making its regiments national and loyal to him rather than regional and loyal to *rases* as traditionally they

had been. He was the first king since the Portuguese thrust into north-eastern Africa to have prolonged intercourse with Europe. He tried to introduce weapons manufacture and thus industry to the country; Theodros was the first king to have wholly effective rifles and artillery. He took on the Church — arresting its bishops and trying to claw back much ecclesiastical property from the monasteries; and he tried to cement the borders of the State after centuries of chaos.

Theodros failed in almost every respect and indeed provoked a 30,000 strong British invasion by imprisoning Britain's consul (a contemporary innovation and a markedly dangerous job). He failed because of overweening ambition and an inability to comprehend the overpowering technological and administrative supremacy of Western Europe at that time. What he did understand of Western technology and administration, he desired — *vide* the famously useless cannon he had made and then dragged to Magdala. He was an archetype man before his time. Hated and deserted by most of the population at the end of his life, Theodros' defiant suicide at Magdala in 1868, as the British stormed his castle, has made him a popular hero and with good reason. His attempts at modernisation, though largely a failure in his lifetime, went on to bear spectacular fruit. They motivated Menelik and Haile Selassie who would centralise the State, as Theodros had so earnestly desired, and absorb into Ethiopia immense areas that had always — even in the 15th century — been independent.

Four years after Theodros' death, the Tigrayan Kasa Mercha assumed the mantle of King of Kings, having defeated in battle the interim King Tecla Giorgis. In a deeply significant act, the nobleman from Tigray was anointed Yohannes at Aksum — the first king to be crowned there for centuries. He

had gained the throne with the help of foreign weapons and training (British — in appreciation of his help in the defeat of Theodros), but it would be foreigners too who would be his downfall. Yohannes was able to dominate most regional leaders, but for his entire reign he was forced to play off against each other his two main rivals – Adal of Gojam (later Tecla Haymanout) and Menelik of Shoa — while he fought off incursions from Egypt, then Mahdist Sudan, and towards the end, Italy.

Menelik firmly believed that he, not Yohannes, should have been crowned at Aksum; Theodros had imprisoned him for much of his childhood at Magdala and, free at last, he valued his independence. The young King of Shoa was in open revolt against Yohannes from the start – flirting with all Yohannes’ enemies, from the Oromo Queen Worqitu to complete foreigners like the Italians and British. After much posturing, Yohannes forced Menelik to pay ritual homage at Leche in 1878, but circumstances dictated that, following Menelik’s obeisance, Tigray must forgive Shoa. Too weak to dispose of Menelik entirely, Yohannes would always remain only King of Kings. It was now, under Yohannes, that Ethiopia became almost its present size. The vulnerable King encouraged his rival Menelik to expand southwards in the hopes that the still ambitious King of Shoa would exhaust himself: in vain. Menelik would continue his expansion of the nation until the borders of the country were finally set at the culmination of a series of treaties with the ever more influential Western powers in 1908.

Yohannes repeatedly fought off the Egyptians and then the Mahdists who succeeded them. In 1875 the ancient city-state of Harar – regarded as one of the holiest and most established in the Islamic world – had fallen to Egypt; a misfortune that

after centuries of animosity towards and independence from the Solomonid dynasty would bring it into the Ethiopian State when Menelik claimed it as his own. After generations of international isolation, Ethiopia had found itself surrounded: foreign invaders, not just local rivals, were in Massawa, Sennar and Harar. The relatively innocuous Egypt — regularly beaten in battle by Yohannes and his trusty Ras Alula — that had taken Massawa from the Ottomans had been succeeded by Italy, a well-armed and well-funded European state with expansionist ambitions. In Sudan zealously devout Mahdists, to whom the fanatically Orthodox Yohannes felt a crusading antipathy, had replaced Egyptian troops on Ethiopia's borders.

King Yohannes countered the threat with shrewdness. Together with Menelik, he forced compromise upon the Church, following centuries of schism, and then set about the defence of the nation with bullet and Bible. Yohannes was messianic in his fervour, Menelik more pragmatic, but both converted hundreds of thousands and urged them to defend not only their home areas but Ethiopia itself. Muslim Oromos in tens of thousands were obliged to convert to christianity to demonstrate their allegiance. Even during the fiercest wars against the Islamic city-states, Muslims had been tolerated, if discriminated against, because without them commerce would have ground to a halt. But now, despite 1,400 years of cohabitation in a country famed for its tolerance of Islam, to be both Muslim and an Ethiopian highlander when Islam directly threatened the State was no longer tenable. Many Muslims imitated their leaders in adopting Christian names, the leaders having been told that they would lead no more unless they converted. Mohammed Ali of Wollo, by giving up his faith, went on to become Ras Mikael, then Negus of Tigray and Wollo, and eventually, the father of the Emperor.

Still however, Mahdists and Italians threatened the emerging State and still Yohannes fought them off, but he had run out of that essential ingredient of leadership – luck. In February 1889 he was killed as he had lived – in battle – at Metemma on the Sudanese border. Even in death his luck failed him; his body was captured by the Mahdists and hacked to pieces. Menelik II, one of the luckiest leaders ever to stride the world-stage (and the first Ethiopian to strut and fret upon it), assumed the throne he had always believed was his by both right and might.

Menelik inherited a nation in disarray. His own Shoa was subdued but threatened from the east by burgeoning French, British and Italian interest. Tigray – the home of Yohannes – that Menelik had to make loyal, faced incursion from the north by the Italians, who were at the gates of Asmara, and from the west by the Sudanese, who had just killed Yohannes. The north of Ethiopia was in the grip of famine after having been repeatedly fought over and starved of labourers to till the fields. The nations of the South, so recently absorbed by Menelik himself, were by no means subjugated and required constant attention. It would however be in Menelik's reign that the will to modernise and unify, which had motivated his predecessors, Theodros and Yohannes, would become a reality. The ambitious dreams of Yohannes and Theodros had been forced to give way since they spent most of their reigns fighting to maintain control. Menelik however, after an initial period, had time to do more than fight; he transformed the State, and his successors have only ever managed to modify it. Ethiopian governance has continued to mean centralised rule by a small elite on Menelik's model.

The King of Shoa had many advantages. Firstly, he was born with one in terms of the Ethiopian legend: Menelik could

not only claim Solomonid descent, but he shared a name with the son of Solomon and Makeda. By the time he reached the throne, he was still young and vigorous, yet had closely observed three predecessors. He had fought well and expanded his own kingdom, yet had been in close contact with the outside world since being imprisoned at Magdala with the British consul Cameron in the 1860s. He had a clever, complementary and charming wife in Taitu. And finally, Menelik had no serious rivals: power passed from Tigray to Shoa with hardly a blip (a passage much resented) because Generals Mangesha and Alula had been deserted by their troops following the death of Yohannes. Menelik never needed to form the alliances required of a King of Kings; he dominated all and was Emperor from the outset of his reign.

This showed firstly in his administration policy; Menelik appointed capable loyalists to govern his provinces – as Yohannes had pioneered with Alula. Although the governors he appointed were mainly of noble birth, they were also – generally – the commanders who had won for him the provinces to which they were appointed, rather than hereditary leaders who needed to be mollified. As his reign continued, there was less power for the governors themselves: Menelik used the telegraph and telephone to curb what independence they had and made more and more decisions himself. Addis Ababa — which became the country's capital in 1889 — was the hub of power and the bureaucrats who were increasingly needed to administer the country have congregated there ever since. Menelik thus achieved centralisation – an idea that had inspired but ultimately eluded Theodros and that had been impossible after the Yohannes years – due mainly to the power of Menelik himself. He was lucky to have had the technological advance in communications that made this

possible but to a great extent he made his own luck: nowhere else in Africa was ruled in this manner so early.

From long before his accession, Menelik had been in contact with the European powers: their weapons had fuelled Shoa's expansion during the reign of Yohannes. Menelik communicated with France, Russia and Britain but it was with Italy that he had most contact. The Italians had occupied the coast of Eritrea for some time, but now they threatened Tigray – formerly Yohannes' problem but now part of Menelik's new empire. Thus shortly after the death of Yohannes, Menelik signed a treaty with Italy seeking to halt its advance. It was a consummate piece of European trickery: the Amharic wording of the treaty differed from the Italian. It was four years before the Italian duplicity was fully exposed and another two before war became inevitable, but in 1895 Menelik raised an army and marched north. In doing so, he united the population – even some from the east — against a common enemy.

The Emperor invoked the God of the Orthodox and crusaded to war; he joined up with the mainly Oromo army of his cousin Ras Makonnen and set about the Catholic Italians with the tens of thousands of devout soldiers who had joined him *en route*. He lured the Italians to the major crossroads of Adwa (formerly famous for jurisprudence) and on March 1st annihilated the invaders. In doing so, he guaranteed Ethiopian independence and united the disparate country. He also however, ensured that the Italians would seek revenge and by failing to chase them into the sea, planted the seed of Eritrean independence and fuelled abiding resentment in Tigray.

The Marab River in 1895 had no political or cultural significance and was only a geographical feature. Menelik reached terms with Italy, allowing the Europeans to stay north of the Marab in Eritrea and then played Britain and France off

against each other to cement the borders of what had become his empire; he expanded the country to occupy the space between the three powers – from French Djibouti to British/Mahdist Sudan and down as far south as Lake Turkana and Moyale. The straight lines of many of Ethiopia's borders – in Asosa, Wollega, Borana, Warder and Degehabur — show where Menelik came up against, mainly British, objections. The fact that he left Ethiopia without a coastline illuminates the Emperor's continuing unhealthy trust for the solemn word of European diplomats, who had guaranteed him access to the sea just as earlier they had guaranteed the accuracy of their treaty translation.

Menelik divided troublesome Gojam and Tigray and then put in his appointees to rule them. If his newer provinces put up a fight, rule by the outsiders who had conquered them was imposed: in many cases these were Shoans but even if they were not, they were Amharic speakers as the language of the court, the Church and of the army had for centuries been Amharic. Traditional law was set aside in the nations that had shown resistance and the new centrally imposed judges had to talk through interpreters – an early source of powerful resentment. In more submissive areas or areas that were hard to rule, like the thinly populated but vast Somali region, traditional laws were allowed to remain. This saved money if it worked, but ultimately caused problems as it is impossible for two legal systems to work side by side when one has dominance over the other. The *rist* system, by which land and labour was due to governors, kings, the Church and now the Emperor, was expanded and modified in Menelik's new dominions. Depending again on the degree of acquiescence with which the inhabitants had accepted their subjugation, varying tributes were expected by Addis Ababa. Kafa – which

dared to resist colonisation – had heavy demands made upon it, Beneshangul lighter. Pastoralist regions were taxed in livestock or not at all as it was nigh on impossible to administer the system without occupying the wells, which would have struck at the very heart of pastoralist life and provoked endless war. Land had for centuries proved, together with the Church and trade, to be a great unifier: the system may not have been universally loved, but it was at least understood by all and taken as a natural part of life. With the need for hard cash to fund Menelik's modernisation, *rist* expanded beyond its natural borders in sedentary areas into pastoral land that had always been treated differently. Thus the issue of land soon became almost wholly divisive.

In the South and West, the tributary system became ever more twisted; peasants there were closer to slavery – still then a major industry and threat to conquered peoples within Ethiopia's borders, particularly in the West – than they were in the North. The State, the Church and the garrisons required to administer the new territories sometimes left as little as a quarter of the land to support its residents. This became known as the *neftennya* system in the South where the *neftennya* – the riflemen who manned the garrisons – were given tributary rights and often abused them. A major irritant too was that in the North, holders of *gult* tended to be of a similar ethnic background to the labourers, whereas in the South they were almost invariably foreigners. This bred dislike of the Church, the *neftennya* and the State itself; it fomented future rebellion and led the conquered to convert to Islam as a way of showing dissent.

A new class of person, long present in the North, emerged in the South. The *ballabbat* (usually a local leader who often became Amharised) formed the conduit between the State and

the peasant and was responsible for the collection of tithes and tribute and increasingly, the taxes that were required to run the ever more centralised State. He explained the demands of the State to the peasantry and collected revenue (some of which was due to him). Ever more land came under the plough from the 1890s onwards because taxes and tithes had to be paid (to finance Ethiopia's induction into the world economy) and because the traditionally put-upon plough-users of the North now had to be fed. In the late 19th century the earning potential of coffee growing became apparent, its proceeds used to finance the State rather than feed the citizenry. The long-established food producing northern areas were already failing (*vide* Menelik's simultaneous introduction of the eucalyptus to solve the firewood problem), so the southern areas were needed to feed the rest of the country. This often caused clashes with pastoralists as marginal agricultural areas reserved for seasonal grazing became settled and thus unavailable when – as happened at the beginning of Menelik's reign – there were major droughts and famines.

The Battle of Adwa had united much of Ethiopia even across religious barriers, but *rist* divided it once more. Innovative as Menelik was, he used medieval methods to achieve his modernisation. He and his commanders considered most of those who lived in the western lowlands of what is now Ethiopia as potential slaves rather than citizens; those in the South and East, if not all thought of as slaves, were certainly a source of riches rather than fellow citizens to be enriched. Menelik greatly increased the size of Ethiopia; with railway and telephone he linked it to the outside world and allowed it to trade more efficiently; with conquest and ruthless administration he paid for the construction of Addis Ababa, fed its populace and created a partially European-style state.

Although created to interpret his wishes, he left the country with ministries and Ministers for Foreign Affairs, Justice, Education, Agriculture, War and Finance. In many cases these were mere titles — the Ministry for Education for example had no schools to administer until 1908 and even then there was only one — but by the time Menelik's health began to decline in 1906, Ethiopia was a centralised state under an Emperor, not one run by *rases* and the nobility.

Menelik's long decline — from a severe stroke in 1906 to death in 1913 — almost destroyed the centralised State he had created. Until out-manoeuvred in 1910, his influential and very clever wife Taitu held the reins of power while Menelik ailed, but she was ever more constrained by the regional *rases* whose power Menelik had so nearly removed. Eventually Lij Iyasu — Menelik's grandson and nominated heir — inherited Taitu's power and when Menelik at last died, the throne, but he too ruled under constraint. The State began to decentralise again as power transferred — not to the provinces themselves, but to the provincial lords.

Despite being the son of the master tactician, Mohammed Ali of Wollo, Iyasu failed to retain his grip on power and though ambitious, achieved little. He may have sought friendship with emerging Somali freedom fighters — then battling the British — and has had this used against him by politically influenced historians seeking to legitimise his successors. He was defeated by a faction of the nobility in a palace coup, confirmed by battle. Zewditu, Menelik's daughter, was thrust upon the throne with the backing of the Shoan nobility and of the European powers which, though long influential, had never before been directly involved in the succession. Ras Tafari Makonnen, or Haile Selassie as he became known — the 24-year-old son of Menelik's closest

confidant and a cousin of the ousted Iyasu — was named her heir and acted as regent. Ras Tafari's reign is often looked on as having lasted from this point in 1916 until his overthrow in 1974. In fact, he spent until 1930 manipulating Ethiopian and world opinion to consider him as Ethiopia's leader. Until then, provincial armies behaved pretty much as they had in the *Zemena Mesefant*, with the *rases* — now often also ministers — attempting to influence either the modernist Ras Tafari or the traditionalist Zewditu. The country — set on the path to centralisation and modernity by Menelik — stagnated as the tiny elite fought for power. Little of structural importance to the State happened in this period as Haile Selassie built up a base for his long reign.

Even following Haile Selassie's spectacular coronation there was much work to be done before he could command the same respect as Menelik. The *rases* — having regained much of their influence — did not want to lose it again. They did however, accept a new constitution in 1931, which formally curtailed their power; it in fact gave most power to the Emperor and almost nothing to the peasantry although it appeared to be very modernist and progressive. It was a PR triumph with the West but it produced little practical change in the way Ethiopians lived. There were a few more schools, which produced “the intellectuals” embraced by Haile Selassie with such enthusiasm — as long as they agreed with him. But the new university and the schools tended to strengthen the centralised elite — with notable exceptions — without making it a great deal bigger; few of those educated ever returned to live in their places of origin but stayed close to the seat of power. There were certain reforms made in the land system, which economically benefited the *gult*-lords rather than the peasantry but for another fifteen years, little happened that affected the

lives of ordinary Ethiopians, be they northern peasants, western coffee-growers, southern or eastern pastoralists.

When Haile Selassie first reformed land, it was not because he wanted to make life better for peasants but because he wanted more tax revenue. He abolished the obligation of peasants to provide labour to their *gult*-lords (thus striking at the very heart of the patronage system which tied peasants to the nobility). Simultaneously though he imposed taxes upon peasants for the first time. The reforms imposed the will of the State rather than that of the peasant and gave a legal framework to a despised system, just as apartheid would do at the other end of the continent. Later Haile Selassie actually began to sell “unsettled” land, making the pastoralist/tiller clash ever more acute.

It was to join with and be accepted by the West that these reforms were needed, but again it took the intervention of Italy to strengthen the Ethiopian State. When Italians invaded in 1935, the country rose up against them but the army was not unified under a commander-in-chief of note, as it had been under Menelik. One need only look at photographs of Haile Selassie in uniform to see why Ethiopia fell so quickly; they also show why he returned. He was no general, but he had the assurance and arrogance required to keep the flame of Ethiopian independence alive when faced with overwhelming western indifference. This self-confidence helped him to persuade the British to restore him to his throne in 1941 rather than just absorb the far-off battlefield into the still extant British Empire. Once reinstated, he took full advantage of the modernisation brought about by the Italians. The Patriots’ Resistance Movement — often led by traditional *rases* and church leaders — had kept the Italians busy in the countryside, but simultaneously provincial administration had been entirely reorganised along lines well tested in Eritrea.

Following Menelik's failure to chase the Italians into the sea, Italy had stayed in Eritrea, centralising the State, starting small industries, building the highland capital of Asmara and laying the spectacular roads, cable- and railways for which the Italians are famous. The Eritreans may well have preferred self-rule, nevertheless the Italian side of the river was soon markedly more developed than Menelik's as the Italians slowly worked out how to administer their colony. Italian rule was harsh and corrupt but Eritrea quickly had a much more developed economy than Ethiopia, and Tigrayan speaking citizens of both soon began to think of each other as different.

Having learnt many lessons in Eritrea, in just a few years occupation of Ethiopia, Italy had built roads, introduced mains electricity, taken over land for large-scale agriculture and built factories. Customs duty was now paid to the State, there were no longer regional armies, civil servants were paid in cash rather than kind and the twelve provinces Italy had created answered to Addis Ababa and were not run as personal fiefdoms. Haile Selassie was able to pick up all the centralised power and the resultant revenue to bolster his empire, using as administrators the tiny elite that had been educated. The new centralised army and the emerging towns though became, not unifying factors as one might expect, but major areas of division. In the army, non-Shoans and particularly non-Christians were recruited as cannon fodder but seldom reached executive rank. The same preferential treatment applied in the administration – a fact that soon became apparent to landless artisans and peasants who migrated to the towns. If Haile Selassie needed more cash to paper over the divisions, it was available from America, which found Ethiopia and particularly Eritrea increasingly strategically important and Haile Selassie's modernising rhetoric sufficiently convincing for

them to ignore his obvious faults. This was not only a root of “peripheral” dissatisfaction but also of that from the “heartlands” other than Shoa: by treating some of his citizens as peripheral and others as not, Haile Selassie primed a time-bomb.

Menelik was the first ruler to require hard cash — first for weapons and later for the building of Addis Ababa — but it was not until Haile Selassie that the need became critical. All the tribute and tithes in the world were of little use to an administration that was unable to pay bills run up with European businesses and governments in honey, labour and grain. Haile Selassie needed to tax the populace in cash, something he had attempted before the war and which the Italians arranged for him. The Italian administration eliminated local feudal systems, *gult*, *rist*, church holdings and the like because they were part of a system it could not control: instead everything was centralised. On his return from exile, the Emperor found that all these fundamental structural problems had been pretty well dealt with — furthermore they could be blamed on the Italian occupation if anyone complained. It would have taken him a lifetime to negotiate the centralisation achieved by the occupying Italians in just a few years: a spectacular stroke of luck. He then badly mishandled matters by bolstering his own position rather than allowing just a few crumbs to fall from the imperial table to the benefit of the wider population. Former peasants came to rely upon themselves rather than on their *gult*-lords, who saw no advantage in looking after people whose personal loyalty was no longer required. As was happening in the rest of the world — but in Ethiopia at quite some pace — the traditional structures of nobility and peasants, rulers and ruled, preachers and supplicants were tumbling fast.

From the time of the Second World War onwards, the Ethiopian State became ever more centralised; the way to become rich was by being at the centre in Addis Ababa rather than as before, when wealth was gained by controlling a part of the “edge” that was as far from the court as possible. Traditional regional leaders moved to the “centre” and tried to become ministers, leaving their responsibilities behind and creating an opportunity for peasants in the countryside to realise that some sort of economic and mental independence might be a realistic goal. Enhanced communications created social and ethnic tension — it was increasingly obvious how only the few were favoured. Foreign aid funded the further centralisation of the State. But as at last the elite began to expand, it soon felt it was not receiving its due, and some form of regime change became inevitable. Tensions were smoothed over — first with British and then with substantial American help, both military and financial. There was ever more unrest and by the 1960s and 70s elite urban students were demanding, “land for the tiller”. Patience had run out: the 1974 coup took place with initial popular support, its acknowledged aims the abolition of the divine right of kings and the reform of land.

Conclusion

For nearly 2,000 years the people of the Ethiopian Highlands lived on land that was controlled by an indigenous system unlike any other in the world. They followed a religion that was both inaccessible to others and intimately involved with the State. They were ruled by a king who – the Church told them – ruled by divine right and was the embodiment of God on earth. This unique system changed very little through the centuries – each part perfectly complementing the other to maintain the status quo. There was always a back-up: a bad king would be countered by a strong church and as long as the peasantry didn't realise that there was another mode of living, the land system that required constant fealty to king, church and nobility could continue indefinitely. Even when the State was utterly defeated, as it was by Gudet and Mohammed Gragn, there was an elasticity formed by the Church and the obligations that came with land-use that allowed the whole system to bounce back. It was an alliance, stronger than the sum of its parts.

Because it failed to ally or have a complementary system, the Islamic sphere never managed to hold on to the “Christian highlands”, even when it had conquered them and made them “Muslim”. Today everyone knows about Aksum, yet who now remembers Sharka or Fetegar, both thriving sultanates in their time? Ethiopian Christians who have never been anywhere near it see Aksum as their spiritual home, but Ethiopian Muslims share their spiritual home with Muslims from all over the world. With its emphasis on self-reliance and individual prayer, Islam requires none of the deacons, priests and bishops that so encumber Orthodoxy, thus general, ruler and Imam tended to be one person. This was a triumphant success when that person was of the calibre of Imam Ahmed ibn Ibrahim al

Ghazi (Gragh) but it also meant that when he was defeated, so too was the whole system. When Gragh crushed Gelawdeos, the Church remained constant—to keep the flame alive and in time, up came another ruler to stoke the fire. When one *ras* was defeated, the peasants living on “his” land didn’t think the land became theirs, they believed it passed on to whoever had conquered their *gult*-lord. The people who lived on and worked the land had no say in the matter at all. The peasants were not even pawns, indeed in the South when *rist* was at its most debased, it was Menelik’s pawns – foot-soldiers – who were given the land.

When Haile Selassie tinkered with the system by reforming land – however slightly — and educating the peasantry – however little – his overthrow became inevitable. He disturbed the equilibrium and so soon after Menelik’s expansion of the land system and introduction of modern communications that it had a disproportionate effect. With the sudden universal change of the 20th century, the entire edifice collapsed. The country was briefly conquered by an utterly alien power that immediately changed *rist* and *gult* so that it could earn taxes rather than tribute. Suddenly there was trade that no longer involved caravans, combined with freight charges that had to be paid to the French railway in cash. The legend was fatally flawed by an Emperor who surrendered his divinity by deserting the battlefield and then returned to adopt the system of the colonial conquerors rather than restore the *status quo ante*.

Ethiopians remain nothing if not religious – not to believe in some higher being is deemed highly suspicious by almost all, be they Muslim, Animist or Christian. Most Ethiopians still link church and state but today it is this that alienates Christians from their fellow citizens. Menelik’s peasant army

did not throw down its hoes and march for six months merely because Menelik was a brilliant general. He was also God's anointed representative on earth. Britain's "Your country needs you" was an extremely effective recruiting poster during the First World War; twenty years earlier, "Your God needs you", yet more so in Ethiopia. Only a century after Menelik destroyed the Italians at Adwa and gave all Africans a feeling of pride retained to this day, both slogans would divide Ethiopia rather than unite it.

Afterword

Some of the roots of Ethiopia's governance lie deep in its long history, others in more shallow soil — recent history not covered in this booklet. I have tried here to draw out a few of the strongest intertwining themes. Roots dating back more than 2,000 years are apparent in today's struggles over whether the state, the community or the individual should own land, and in the centralised structures of the political economy. Manipulation of legend remains strong: no longer concentrating just on Solomon and Sheba perhaps, but on the cultural and religious superiority of the highlands and its great history. Conquest and ethnicity still thrive; they were part of the means by which Haile Selassie and Mengistu were removed from power and they remain in people's sense of being "colonised" in many regions today. Strongest of all is the influence of two thousand years of tribute in affecting how citizens relate to the state.

Glossary of Terms

Abune

Pope or Head of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church

Ballabbat

Administrator of the *rist* land-holding system (see below)

Fit-Auraris

Loosely translated as ‘Colonel’

Gabbar

Ethiopian peasant farmer

Gult

A form of tribute that peasants holding *rist* land (see below) had to pay to the King, the Church, a local notable or a specific monastery.

Neftennya

Literally “rifleman”. These were Amhara riflemen in charge of garrisons which administered the land in the South and West of Ethiopia and which had tributary rights. Today the word *neftennya* is often used in the South and West of Ethiopia to refer to Amharas living in those regions.

Negusa Negast

Loosely translated as “King of Kings”

Ras

Loosely translated as ‘General’ or ‘Duke’

Rist

Starting in the Aksumite period and continuing until the Italian occupation, the *rist* land-holding system was one of the main means of maintaining hold over conquered peoples. Peasants had user rights of land on which they lived and worked. This land was subject to *gult* – a form of tribute paid annually to the king, the Church, a local notable or a specific monastery.

Tabotat (singular form *tabot*)

Replica representing the Ark of the Covenant (The written ten commandments received by Moses on Mount Sinai). At least one *tabot* is held in every Ethiopian Orthodox church.

Zemena Mesefant

Literally ‘Era of the Princes’ - The period when Solomonid Kings ruled from Gondar and Lake Tana from 1769 to 1855 (Gregorian Calendar).

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The Roots of Modern Government in Ethiopia

Miles Bredin

This brief history examines Ethiopia's governance from the Axumite period up to the establishment of Emperor Haile Selassie's government in the mid-twentieth century. It focuses particularly on the interlinked roles of religion, land, trade and tribute, on conquest and on legend. It gives fascinating insights into how Ethiopia's history has influenced the modern state.