

# **THE GENESIS AND EVOLUTION OF THE ETHIOPIAN REVOLUTION AND THE *DERG*: A NOTE ON PUBLICATIONS BY PARTICIPANTS IN EVENTS<sup>1</sup>**

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## **I**

In 1974 the Ethiopian government of Emperor Haile-Sellasie was overthrown and replaced by the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC). Also known as the *Derg*, the PMAC adopted socialism, embarked on radical social changes, and retained power for over two decades under its leader, Mengistu Haile-Maryam, eventually was overthrown in 1991. The Ethiopian Revolution and the *Derg* are the topics of several authors, including those publishing close to the events, such as Raul Valdes Vivo, Fred Halliday and Maxine Molyneux, and John Markakis and Nega Ayele, and those writing later, such as Christopher Clapham, Edmond Keller, and Bahru Zewde, to name just a few publishing in English.<sup>2</sup> But other publications, in Amharic and English, remain the focus of a lively academic and public debate in Ethiopia. Most of these writings were

<sup>1</sup>I am grateful to David Henige for giving me the opportunity to publish in *History in Africa*. I thank the current editors for their advice in revising the final submission.

<sup>2</sup>In alphabetical order: Christopher Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia* (Cambridge, 1988); Fred Halliday, and Maxine Molyneux, *The Ethiopian Revolution* (London, 1982); Edmond J. Keller, *Revolutionary Ethiopia: From Empire to People's Republic* (Bloomington/Indianapolis, 1991); John Markakis, and Nega Ayele, *Class and Revolution in Ethiopia* (Nottingham, 1978); Raul Valdes Vivo, *Ethiopia: The Unknown Revolution* (Havana, 1977); Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855-1991* (Addis Ababa, 2002).

produced by participants in events, or, in one case, are transcripts of interviews with participants. Some of the raconteurs were revolutionaries, others were their opponents, and still others were members of the imperial regime. Taken together, these publications shed light on the genesis of the Ethiopian Revolution (the February 1974 movements), the consolidation of *Derg* (in November 1977), and its aftermath. This note examines some of these materials to bring them to the attention of readers of this journal.

## II

Several books were written by (former) revolutionaries. Four prominent authors are Dawit Wolde Giorgis, Kiflu Tadesse, Andargachew Tiruneh and Tefera Hayle-Selasse.

Dawit Wolde Giorgis was one of the original and active participants of the Ethiopian Revolution. He was head of the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission that the Hailie-Selassie regime launched in 1983 and became a member of the *Derg* until 1985, when he disassociated himself from the regime, moved to the United States and published a book entitled, *Red Tears: War, Famine and Revolution in Ethiopia*, in 1989.<sup>3</sup> Wolde Giorgis based his text on his experiences and memories as well as a few private records.<sup>4</sup> He recounts from his memory, for example, the genesis of the famine and the resulting disaster of 1984-1985, a topic to which he dedicates almost one hundred pages. By contrast Wolde Giorgis pays very little attention to the genesis of the Revolution, i.e., political events before 28 June 1974. *Red Tears* places emphasis on the aftermath of the Revolution and the *Derg*'s consolidation of power.

As a senior member of the Marxist-Leninist Party of Ethiopia, Wolde Giorgis is well placed to comment on the Revolution and the *Derg*. The book is particularly informative about Mengistu's rise to power and the elimination of (real and potential) challengers. Wolde

<sup>3</sup>Dawit Wolde Giorgis *Red Tears: War, Famine and Revolution in Ethiopia 1989* (Silver Spring MD/Trenton NJ, 1989) - Chapter 12 provides information on the life of Dawit Wolde Giorgis.

<sup>4</sup>Wolde Giorgis, *Red Tears*, 1-9.

Giorgis' perspective on Mengistu and his colleagues is negative, as one might expect from someone who left the regime. For example, Wolde Giorgis notes that Mengistu offers no chance for others to win arguments with him.<sup>5</sup> One appreciates these details and others, but *Red Tears* might have revealed more about the interior contours of the *Derg*. Wolde Giorgis also might have commented more fully on the genesis of the Ethiopian Revolution.

Another revolutionary who turned against the Revolution is Kiflu Tadesse, who played a central role through his involvement with the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP). Following the defeat of the EPRP, in 1977, Tadesse fled to the United States, where he wrote a number of books on the Ethiopian Revolution. His 1983 publication, *The Generation*, is a history of the EPRP. Part I discusses the formative years, from the late 1960s to 1975, in which Tadesse provides insight into the evolution of this oppositional movement. He is most detailed on the events of 1974. Tadesse adds that the old order was so autocratic and backward that it could not respond effectively to political developments. Part II of *The Generation* focuses on 1975-1980, one of the most turbulent periods of Ethiopian history. It discusses the conflict that unfolded, detailing the dynamic of forces, political alliances, the EPRP program and its collapse, as well as the consolidation of the *Derg*.

Tadesse and Wolde Giorgis provide interesting counter-points. They were key political actors, but from opposite sides of the struggle. The two both write in a narrative style: they seek to assert their authority from being insiders and participants in events. This leads them to draw on memories and to stress personal experiences. In contrast to Wolde Giorgis, however, Tadesse actually consulted a number of materials beyond a personal archive. The materials include scholarly articles, EPRP publications (*Democracia*), correspondence, student journals, newspapers, proclamations, former EPRP members and to some extent books. Nevertheless, Tadesse shares with Wolde Giorgis the same inability to offer a clear exposi-

<sup>5</sup>Wolde Giorgis expressed similar views in an interview with Genet. See Ayele Genet, *Ye Letena Colonel Mengistu Haile-Maryam Tezetaewech (Memories of Lt. Colonel Mengistu Haile-Maryam)* (Addis Ababa, 1994).

tion of the phases of the Revolution. This failing is most evident in the work of Tadesse, as unlike Wolde Giorgis' emphasis on the famine, Tadesse never really explains why the Revolution took place.

Andargachew Tiruneh is another Ethiopian who wrote a history of the Ethiopian revolution. Being a member of the EPRP, Tiruneh was close to the centre of the struggle. His book, *The Ethiopian Revolution (1974-1987): Transformation from an Aristocratic to a Totalitarian Autocracy*<sup>6</sup> differs from the first two in that it takes a long perspective on Ethiopian history by beginning with the ancient kingdom of Aksum and seeks to provide a detailed history of the Ethiopian Revolution itself.

Also in contrast to Wolde Giorgis and Tadesse, Tiruneh depends primarily on written sources and offers few explicit statements based on his own experiences. This research allows Tiruneh to provide a more detailed and comprehensive account of the genesis and the evolution of the Revolution. However, some topics are treated in a vague manner. For instance, Tiruneh does not detail specifically the relationship between the Endalkachew cabinet and the army officers in the arrest of members of Aklilu's cabinet. Information about the personality and character of Endalkachew should have been given in order to discuss whether Endalkachew was a factor in the imprisonment of members of Aklilu's cabinet. Other examples exist, and sometimes the citations are not clearly referenced.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, Tiruneh's works stands as the first comprehensive history of Revolution written by one of its actors.

Another early history of the revolution is the book by Teferah Hayle-Selasse, *The Ethiopian Revolution (1974-1991) – From a Monarchical Autocracy to a Military Oligarchy*. The author served in various positions under both the Monarchy and the Military Government of Ethiopia. Published several years after Tiruneh's book, one would expect Hayle-Selasse to adopt a new perspective, but his

<sup>6</sup>Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution (1974-1987): Transformation from an Aristocratic to a Totalitarian Autocracy* (Cambridge, 1993).

<sup>7</sup>For instance, the references given for footnote 3 on page 2 as well as footnote 89 on page 112 have no relation with the topic of discussion on these pages.

book merely follows Tiruneh's analysis in most instances. Hayle-Selasse, for example, accepts Tiruneh's model and describes the Revolution as occurring in two phases (from February to April, and from April to the end of June). One highlight of Hayle-Selasse's book is its inclusion of information from proclamations and speeches, lists of members of cabinets and commissions, and other contemporaneous details. Some of the information is drawn from state-run newspapers, such as *The Addis Zemen* and *The Ethiopian Herald*. Hayle-Selasse is not critical of the bias associated with an ideologically motivated press, but he uses the information to advantage on some important topics. For example, he provides an interesting discussion of the philosophy of Ethiopia "Tikdem."<sup>8</sup> Hayle-Selasse also uses the information to reveal the competition for power within the *Derg*.

### III

Genet Ayele and Amanuel Abraham recently have contributed works in Amharic of relevance to this discussion. Ayele's book, *Ye Letena Colonel Mengistu Haile-Maryam Tezetawech (Memories of Lt. Colonel Mengistu Haile-Maryam)*, is a compilation of interviews with former government officials, including Colonel Mengistu. The book may be considered a primary source, because it offers information from the mouths of influential actors.<sup>9</sup> Ayele's analysis is illuminating in its psychological approach. It is striking, for example, that throughout the interview, Mengistu said nothing that showed that he was prepared to take any responsibility for the tragedies and crimes that occurred during his rule.

Another detailed analysis comes from Amanuel Abraham, a former minister of the imperial regime. Abraham's book, *Ye Hiywote Tizeta (My Memories)*, provides us with new insights about the intrigues among the officials of the imperial regime, the fall of

<sup>8</sup>Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 135-43.

<sup>9</sup>The author faced serious difficulties in the process of collecting information; these she explains in the introductory part. Note that these books could reach a wide readership, because they were written in Amharic.

Aklilu's cabinet and the arrest of the ministers. The book is in particular important for its analysis of the political realities of the imperial regime and the moment of transition to the new order. Amanuel Abraham himself was released, after nine months of imprisonment, in January 1975. This is the moment he stops his narrative, thus paying no attention to the issue of the evolution of the *Derg*.

#### IV

In Ethiopia discussions of the Revolution are vivid and remain prominent in the mass media. Rarely is there analysis of the background and potential biases of the authors. It is time to recognize a new category of materials: publications of participants. The authors under review here drew on experiences and memories in events to discuss the past. They are limited in the information they provide, but they nonetheless offer insight into the motivations of actors and how groups experienced and conceptualized the Revolution. These insights are helpful in evaluating the place of the Revolution in the historical memory of Ethiopians. Although a huge diversity of memories exist, these publications are significant for the roles played by the authors. The information deepens our understanding of Ethiopian history.

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