The Ethiopian state is at least two thousand years old, tracing its roots to the ancient kingdom of Aksum. That ancient entity gave the country its political culture and its religious identity, in both its Christian and Muslim variations. After a hiatus marked by the contrasting phenomena of political constriction and architectural flourishing, the Aksumite legacy was revived in the thirteenth century through what came to be known as the Solomonic dynasty, which forged an entity that came closest in geographical extent and ethnic composition to the Ethiopia of today. Hence, the constant harking back of Ethiopia’s modern emperors – Tewodros, Yohannes, Menilek – to the glorious years of the medieval emperors, as they came to be known. Haile Sellassie was the last of those Solomonic emperors; he presided over the political order for nearly half a century until his dynasty was finally swept away by the 1974 revolution.

Yet, contemporary Ethiopia is very much a creation of Emperor Menilek (r. 1889-1913), who forged the empire-state with a combination of force and diplomacy. His military campaigns of the last quarter of the nineteenth century until his dynasty was finally over the political order for nearly half a century until his dynasty was finally swept away by the 1974 revolution.

His successor, the teenager prince Iyasyu, had one of the shortest yet eventful reigns in the history of the Ethiopian monarchy, ruling de facto 1911-1916 and de jure 1913-1916. His short reign exhibited the worst and the best features in the quest for national integration that is the central theme of the book under review. He led a nefarious slave-hunting expedition in southwestern Ethiopia that was to remain a permanent blemish on his rule. Yet, when it came to his Somali subjects in the southeast, he demonstrated a degree of sensitivity to local sentiments that has rarely been matched before or since.

It was under Emperor Haile Sellasse (r. 1930-1974) that, somewhat paradoxically, national integration both attained its highest level and was put to its severest test. The educational system and the military proved two unifying institutions. At the same time, the policy of cultural assimilation and political centralization that the regime assiduously followed ultimately bred centrifugal tendencies that shook it to its foundations. Ethno-nationalist rebellions sprouted in Tigray and Bale, while the absorption of federated Eritrea in 1962 triggered a secessionist movement that resulted in Eritrean independence after some three decades of armed struggle.

Viewed within this context, John Markakis’s latest book is a welcome contribution to the ongoing debate on the vexed issue of national integration. Markakis is not new to Ethiopian studies, noted as he is above all for his seminal work on the ancien régime–Ethiopia: Anatomy of a Traditional Polity, published as that regime was entering its terminal stage. What he has offered us now is a comprehensive analysis of the issue of national integration under three regimes: imperial, Darg/military, and EPRDF, separated by the landmark dates of 1974 and 1991. His conclusion, while not so unexpected to the initiated, might sound rather disturbing to the general reader: neither the imperial policy of assimilation nor the Darg’s evocation of class struggle, nor for that matter the ethnic federalism of the EPRDF has managed to resolve the issue of national integration. Or, in the words of the author, ‘At the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the incumbent regime in Addis Ababa is engaged in the same battles that exhausted its predecessors, impoverished the country, and blasted peoples’ hopes for peace, democracy and an escape from dire poverty’ (p. 14).

The crux of the problem, according to Markakis, is the reluctance of what he calls an ‘Abyssinian elite’ to share political power with the peripheral elites to any meaningful extent. While the author relies on the centre-periphery paradigm to underpin his analysis, he refines it further by identifying two peripheries (and hence the subtitle): the highland and the lowland ones. Indeed, the bias of the book is towards the lowland rather than the highland periphery, the author’s fascination with the former beginning in the 1970s, when he first came into contact with Ethiopian pastoralists. This was reinforced by a three-year consultancy work (2005-2008) that he did with the Ethiopian Ministry of Federal Affairs. Data thus gathered was buttressed by interviews he conducted with leaders of the national liberation fronts (NLFs) that have mushroomed in Ethiopia in the past four decades or so.

Markakis writes with greater authority on the lowland periphery, particularly the Somali, than on the highland periphery. His sympathies are also manifestly with the lowland pastoralists, who he claims occupy 52 per cent of the land, even if they constitute only 12 per cent of the population (p. 16). The core and the highland periphery share a similar physical environment, an agrarian economy and a common political system. As a result of daunting climatic and communication barriers,
The lowlands have generally been less integrated into the Ethiopian economy until the 21st century, when their potential for agribusiness has been realized and large swathes of territory, particularly in western Ethiopia, have started being leased out mostly to foreign investors. This development has within it, not only the seeds of economic integration, but also the danger of destroying pastoralist livelihood, quite apart from representing a fundamental shift from the hallowed motto of ‘land to the tiller’ to ‘land to the investor’.

To better understand the hitherto neglected lowland periphery, Markakis has made good use of the following terms: ‘Even if there was probably oppression in the rest of the country, the Emperor looked at us peripheral rulers with some respect. We had good relations with him. He never interfered directly in our internal affairs. I had direct access to his palace or his office’.

This ambivalent relationship gave way to downright confrontation with the coming of the Darg in 1974, precipitating the sultan’s flight to Saudi Arabia and his assumption of the leadership of the Afar Liberation Front (ALF), one of the many ethno-nationalist guerrilla organizations that fought against the Derg from its overthrow in 1991. As an ally of the EPRDF, Ali Mirah and the organization that he headed were given a slice of the political cake and he was rewarded for his position in 1983. There was a resumption of the kind of parallel authority that had prevailed under the imperial regime, with the difference this time, however, that the pro-EPRDF regional ruler was himself an Afar and the imperial representative who was an Amhara and was officiating from the highlands.

What is equally striking is the longevity of Afar traditional rulers. Muhammad Anfare ruled for just over sixty years (1861-1927), a partook of three divergent Ethiopian regimes and his rule lasted even longer (1944-2011), minus the 16 years or so he was in exile (1975-1991). Similarly, the pro-EPRDF regional ruler was himself an Afar and the imperial representative who was an Amhara and was officiating from the highlands.

It is a pity that a work of such importance could not be marred by quite a few historical inaccuracies, errors that could have been easily avoided had the manuscript gained the benefit of a historian’s feedback. These inaccuracies are disturbingly frequent in the first two parts of the book, i.e. the historical background. To begin with the chronological slips, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the Tigrey People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) diễn as far back as 1930. To be absolutely precise, this was the abortive coup of 1937. This was one of the genuine autonomy for the periphery, has it was largely of varying stridency or virulence. Indeed, in the era of NLFs that the 1980s came to be, such fronts sprouted up in the western as in the eastern lowland periphery, notably in the form of the Gambella People’s Liberation Movement and the Beni Shangul Liberation Movement. In the final analysis, however, the real test for the centre was to come in the highland periphery and even more seriously from the Abyssinian core. One has in mind here in particular the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), formerly among a ‘circulation of the elite’, as he dubs it, by arguing that ‘The relationship of the Ethiopian state with its Somali subjects, under ethnic federalism is as volatile as it has been since the making of the empire’ (p. 1297). This is true of the volatility of Somali politics in general. In no small measure, however, it also had to do with the presence, until 1990 at any rate, of a neighbouring state, Somalia, with irredentist ambitions of uniting all the Somali-speaking peoples of the Horn of Africa.

Ultimately, however, it was the combined onslaught of the TPLF and the EPLF that brought about the end of the military regime in 1991. They were the progenitors of the ideology of national liberation. That ideology had its origins in the Ethiopian student movement. It was right to point out that the Ethiopian radicals set about the task of creating a new order armed with an ideology borrowed whole-cloth from abroad, and proceeded single-mindedly to try and turn a pre-modern society into a modern utopia, marred only by concession to time or place’ (p. 180). But, although he does recognize the role of the students as the harbingers of the 1974 revolution, he does not sufficiently recognize the central importance of the ‘national question’ – as it came to be known – assumed in the student movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Far from seeking to maintain ‘centre hegemony’, they had come to question the fundamental tenets of that hegemony. By 1971, both the European and North American wings of the student movement have adopted in their respective congresses the principle of self-determination up to and including secession for all the nationalities of Ethiopia.

It was this principle, first enunciated in the ranks of the student movement, that came to be embodied in the constitutions of the two antagonistic leftist organizations that emerged from that movement: the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and the All Ethiopia Socialist Democratic Party (AESDP, more commonly known by its Amharic acronym, Ma’isin). While the two organizations ultimately came to distance themselves from that principle, TPLF stuck to it with orthodox zeal until it came to be enshrined first in the Transitional Charter of 1991 and then in the 1994 constitution. The essential value of the work under review is its exposure of the fundamental contradiction between principle and practice, rhetoric and reality. The weight of evidence, the author argues, is that ethnic federalism, far from guaranteeing genuine autonomy for the periphery, has tended to preserve ‘the hegemony of the centres and corps of centre and peripheral elites’ (p. 304). Or, as he graphically puts it, ‘the elite in the centre continue to rule; the elite in the periphery continue to administer’ (p. 282).
manufacturing industry (p. 120); only Dire Dawa could probably qualify for this designation. One has also to be careful not to confuse the language spoken with ethnic identity (p. 126); many non-Amhara could end up describing themselves as Amharic-speaking.

It is to be hoped that future editions of the work would rectify these anomalies, for the work otherwise represents an important contribution by a long-standing observer of the Ethiopian scene to the ongoing debate on centre-periphery relations, or, in the hallowed phrase of the Left, the ‘national question’.

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