

**B**ahru Zewde's masterful, long awaited, and authentic account of the Ethiopian student movement could have been called many things, including 'a long time coming'. This is a remarkable, painstakingly researched, and insightful analysis of the events that led to the revolution that ate itself – a significant feat given the fact that it is about too recent a history, whose consequences are so obviously still being played out in today's Ethiopia.

The sober dedication that meets the reader inside the front cover is stark and chilling. It reads: 'To the youth of Ethiopia who assumed a burden incommensurate with their intellectual resources and their country's political assets – and paid dearly for it'. It lays the backdrop to the Ethiopian Revolution of 1974 but stops short of recounting that history: the deposition of Haile Selassie, the bloody rise of the Darg and Mengistu Haile Mariam and the 'Red Terror' that followed. Bahru skilfully deploys not only his ample arsenal of historical tools and oral history techniques, including successfully experimenting with collecting reminiscences from a retreat of former student activists belonging to different ideological camps, to supplement the vast grey literature at his disposal.

Engaging scholarly publications about the student movement that fall short of these perspectives and in contrast to their sometimes ahistorical approaches, Bahru makes his central point about what he is setting out to do in the introduction:

In short, the student movement, the Ethiopian included, has to be viewed not as a philosophical issue but as a historical phenomenon. As such, it has to be understood within the context of its time, not judged from the vantage point of the present. In the immortal words of the great German historian Ranke, it has to be recorded first and foremost 'the way it exactly happened', and not how it should have been (p. 9).

The determination to be balanced, objective and to understand different perspectives and the paramount objective to recount what actually happened permeates every aspect of this book: there is none of the vitriol that characterises the rather partisan publications that have so far seen the light. The intensity of this particular focus, i.e. the student movement, leaves the reader sometimes wondering, particularly in latter parts of the book, about what is going on in 'other' parts of Ethiopian society, particularly the military. This specific revolutionary furnace gets stoked and the intense focus on one part of Ethiopian society makes one very aware of the paucity of information about what else was going on. The book indeed does provide a very frank take on the development of the Ethiopian student movement and their long journey to tackle two fundamental and core existential issues, land ownership and ethno-nationalism, that dominate and haunt Ethiopian politics to this day.

## An Incommensurate Burden

Gerry Salole

### The Quest for Socialist Utopia: The Ethiopian Student Movement c 1960-1974

by Bahru Zewde

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It must be unusual for a book review to dwell so much on what is not there. So it is perhaps worth stressing that Bahru's credentials to write this book (and potentially its sequel too) are impeccable. Not only is he one of modern Ethiopia's pre-eminent historians but, as the blurb on the back of the book feebly advertises, he was a protagonist in some of the momentous events narrated in the book. He describes himself as 'participant observer'. There is no doubt that this book is thus a labour of love. Therefore, to complain that Bahru stops short of telling the story of what happened once the Revolution got hijacked and that he does not tell us about other aspects of Ethiopian society feels very churlish because this book delivers what its title promises: a detailed analysis of how the Ethiopian student movement developed. This notwithstanding, the book does leave one wanting more and there is so much hinted promise, especially in some rather irreverent and tongue in cheek footnotes, that one yearns for the sequel. I can think of no one better to write it.

The first chapter begins with the global context and Bahru succinctly contextualises the Ethiopian student movement in a global framework. The book was completed in 2011-12. Thus, he aptly weaves in the international context: beginning with the revolt that has become known as the 'Arab Spring', the revolution that was ignited so powerfully by Mohammed Bouazzi setting himself alight in frustration and despair in Tunisia. Bahru offers a *fil rouge* on student movements that connects the social unrest in France in 2010, the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, the global student protests in 1968, the much more recent 'Occupy' movements worldwide, the *studentchestvo* movement that produced the radical revolutionaries in Russia in the 1870s, the 'New Thought' movement in China in 1911, and student protests in France, Indonesia, Iran, and Mexico. In sub-Saharan African countries, he links the students' movements in West Africa and the Maghreb that ultimately formed the initial leadership of the anti-colonial movement.



The second chapter of *Quest* is set firmly on familiar and beloved territory for Bahru, given his previous work on the reformist intellectuals of the early twentieth century (Bahru 2002), and establishes the political backdrop in the post-liberation period immediately after the restoration of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1941 following the end of the Fascist occupation of Ethiopia. Bahru depicts the deliberate cultivation of the personality cult around the Emperor, acknowledges the clear accomplishments of the imperial regime but focuses on the relentless and successful centralisation of the state infrastructure, as well as the increasing investment in education. He links the unmistakable 'post-liberation tremors', the rather tragic demise of critical and intellectual debate, and the inevitable increase of sycophancy and adulation of the Emperor, notably in the education system. The chapter also describes the gradual ascendancy of the United States over the United Kingdom in exercising influence in Ethiopia, the imperial penchant for five-year plans, the creation of the University College of Addis Ababa and its rather painful morphing into the Haile Selassie I University.

Bahru's analysis of the 1960 coup, an event which shook the imperial regime profoundly, portrays a watershed, marking the end of plots and conspiracies and the beginning of open defiance evidenced by the exponentially militant student protests. The account of the attempted coup presented is not much different from the classic account given in so many earlier studies, but Bahru focuses on the way in which the coup leaders' legacy has been woven into the narrative of the Ethiopian student movement, as well as the knee-jerk reaction of the stale regime to the coup, and the sheer inability of the system to adjust to the challenges faced. In this context, too, the chapter addresses the rise of the ethno-nationalist Tigrean insurgency – the Wayane rebellion of 1943. Bahru also addresses the emergence of Oromo ethno-nationalism through the Mecha and Tulema self-help Association set up in 1963 and the Bale uprising of the same year. Pride of place, naturally, is given to the Eritrean armed struggle that began in 1961.

Beginning with Haile Selassie's premonition of the trouble that he was kindling with the opening of the first

institution of higher learning, the third chapter takes the reader through the gradual escalation of discontent. It anchors the early grievances on relatively mundane issues and shows how the political horizons of students gradually changed. The gradual maturation from a patronised and controlled student council, morphing into the ineffectual National Union of Ethiopian Students, laid the groundwork for the inevitable development of more radical unions. He shows how the written and spoken word mattered, and how the adoption of anonymous tracts and pseudonyms permitted increasingly free expression. The hugely important extra-curricular activities, centring on sports, culture and debates, culminated in the poetry readings on the annual College Day, marking the authentic articulation by students of the grievances of the peasantry and the poor. From 1961, when Tamiru Feyissa's poem 'Dehaw Yenagaral' ('the Poor Man Speaks Out') won the poetry competition, departing from the philosophical and existential musings of earlier poems, a distinct change in tone of students speaking truth to power becomes evident. The inability of the system to absorb this *lèse majesté* meant a temporary resort to fake acquiescence and seemingly innocuous and tame cultural extra-curricular activities covering simmering, but palpable resentment.

It is in this context that the students began to develop a consciousness about the plight of the peasantry and the urban poor and the spontaneous development of the idea of community service, with students building schools, teaching adult literacy classes and engaging in other community development projects. This spontaneous student concern led to the Ethiopian University Service (EUS), which was hijacked by the university administration and led, in turn, to friction between students and the authorities as this spontaneous initiative was appropriated. The EUS was morphed from a voluntary activity to a compulsory annual imposition. Bahru also tantalisingly suggests that:

One may even venture to push the story further and see in the EUS a precursor of one of the most ambitious and controversial programmes in rural transformation – the Development through Cooperation Campaign (known in short by its Amharic term, *Zamacha*) that the Darg launched in December 1974, a few months after it deposed Emperor Haile Selassie (p. 95).

Ethiopian student organizations in Europe began with the Association Mutualist des Etudiants Ethiopiens en France in 1920 (a self-help, mutual aid association) and continued with the UK-based Ethiopian Student Society in 1947, which reads like a who's who in the imperial political establishment. The Ethiopian Students Union in Europe (ESUE) was founded in 1958 and continued to hold annual congresses until 1964, when the resolutions took on a decidedly political turn, heralding its growing radicalization. Parallel to this, the Ethiopian Students Association in



North America ushered in powerful radicals who would guide the student association until dislodged by the home-grown radicals who challenged their leadership after 1969.

In chapter four, Bahru depicts the unrelenting radicalisation of the student movement against the backdrop of the anti-colonial wave that was sweeping across Africa and the role of African scholarship students in radicalising their Ethiopian fellow-students, as well as the overwhelming influence of the 1960 coup that reverberated and resonated in the discourse of students and in their increasingly overt publications. Bahru also chronicles the advent of 'the Crocodiles', who made their advent by combining what Bahru calls freemasonic secrecy with the sponsorship of an official student paper. The exact membership of the society has remained a closely guarded secret to this day and so their history and their deeds are shrouded in mystery. The society's aim was the propagation of Marxist ideas among the student population. The fact that the discourse becomes increasingly Marxist from this point on is an indication of their success. They also influenced the slow but relentless contestation between initially sympathetic, then ambivalent, and finally hostile attitudes towards the United States, in conjunction with African-American radicalism and the protests over the American war in Vietnam. The Crocodiles rather tactlessly came out into the open when many of the alleged members of the secret group were elected to the leadership of the student union; they were immediately suspended in May 1965.

The increasing awareness of the plight of the Ethiopian peasant leads inexorably to the dramatic entry of that most powerful slogan in Ethiopian politics: 'Land to the Tiller'. The feudal, stagnant system made the 'land issue' one that would dominate the Ethiopian scene until the Revolution. It is clear that, with the 'Land to the Tiller' demonstrations from 1965 onwards, it became a central theme, something that would be inherited by the regime that was to be ushered in by the revolution. Bahru's description of the events is such that he shows the way in which the overreaction of university authorities and the escalation of grievances was a cumulative process with manifold influences. Taking issue with the thesis by Messay Kebede (2008), Bahru is at pains to show that the student movement was not a 'manufactured movement' driven by a small minority but rather that there were myriad factors that contributed gradually to the radicalisation of the movement. In particular, the very resonance of the issues that the student movement espoused, especially the land question, makes the charge that it was a fabricated movement implausible and unsustainable.

In the fifth chapter, through a careful and detailed account of activities that took place throughout 1969, Bahru describes the climax of the student

movement and describes the overreaction and backlash that resulted. Beginning with the 'Education for All' motto that characterised the 1969 demonstrations, he describes a situation that rapidly escalated into a heated propaganda warfare that was new to Ethiopia. Bahru skilfully shows how the dissatisfaction with the education system and a growing sense of the irrelevance of the syllabus dovetailed with increasing resentment of Indian and American Peace Corps teachers. This chapter in particular demonstrates the considerable work that has been done in reading, analysing and synthesising into a coherent whole, a myriad of contrasting sources (newspaper articles, personal reminiscences, police reports, leaflets, etc.), all woven into a complex narrative. It is also noteworthy that in this chapter, Bahru captures very clearly, a good four years before it happened, a picture of the Emperor isolated, ineffectual, holding on to the past and really unable to respond adequately to a situation that was unprecedented. At the height of the troubles, 92 schools and 76,513 students were affected. In North America and Europe, students also reacted. In Washington, London, Moscow, Paris and Stockholm, embassies were occupied and Ethiopian students, especially those in the United States, began a process of demystifying the myths associated with Haile Selassie that would gain momentum with the 1973 famine. Towards the end of 1969, the student movement also tested successfully the protest method of hijacking an Ethiopian Airlines plane, ushering in a wave of hijacks in subsequent years.

Things reached a point of no return on 29 December 1969 when troops entered the University premises to seize the body of the assassinated President of the Students Union, Tilahun Gizaw, killing three students and wounding sixteen others in the process. The troops prolonged their visit, and not satisfied with their 'neat rescue operation', they went into various buildings on campus beating students and staff indiscriminately.

In chapter six, Bahru focuses on the two questions that would have a prominent place in the student movement in the 70s: The National Question and the Woman Question. The chapter gives the reader a brief survey of Ethiopian history since the ascendancy of Menelik, and ways in which different rulers have grappled with ethnicity. Bahru argues that although this is an ever-present phenomenon, many ethno-nationalist movements have also had other inequality or justice concerns and that not everything can be interpreted through the lens of centralisation and cultural assimilation. He also revisits some of his work on the reformist 'pioneers of change' who also had to grapple with ethnicity. In what is likely to be a contested assertion, he suggests that until the 'national question' suddenly 'burst' onto the national stage in 1969, there was little to suggest that 'Ethiopian students were even remotely considering the kind of radical solution that was to be the norm after 1969'. In November 1969, Walelign Mekonnen's manifesto

'On the Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia' was published in *Struggle* and Bahru sees this as a defining moment in the discourse. In a parallel and completely separate development, the Ethiopian Students Union in North America was tackling the question, albeit from a different perspective. The publication of the papers of its 17th Congress held in Philadelphia in August 1969 signalled a different approach. The resolutions of the congress condemned regionalism and expressed its opposition to all separatist movements. This was countered by a pamphlet entitled 'The National Question ('Regionalism') in Ethiopia', which came out in 1970. This was to have a permanent effect on the student movement in two distinct ways.

First, it introduced strong, aggressive and violent language into the political debate:

Its highly polemical style – which formed a perfect contrast to the modesty, not to say prevarication, of the ESUNA leadership – was to set a pattern that was imitated by both adherents and opponents of its political line and to contribute to the exacerbation of ideological and political differences in the student movement. As I have written elsewhere, the 'verbal violence' that it initiated was to translate itself into the physical violence that killed a generation (p. 206).

Second, the pamphlet introduced the notion of 'self-determination up to and including secession', which became the lynch-pin of how the national question would be dealt with. It assumed, Bahru says, 'almost canonical significance'.

The section on the 'Woman Question' is probably the least satisfying one in this book as it only tells a partial story from the perspective of a male historian who is looking through the literature. Indeed, the section on the woman question appears almost as an afterthought. Bahru describes the marginalisation of women and the fact that crass sexism prevailed throughout the 1960s. In the early 1970s, the World-Wide Ethiopian Woman Study Group was created under the inspiration of Abebech Bekele. Bahru concludes this section with a critique of the 'official' history of the EPRP by saying that female survivors of the bloody confrontation note with bitterness the lack of recognition of the role that women played in the struggle. One can only hope that the publication itself will encourage someone to tell that part of the missing story – ideally someone from the women's movement itself.

In chapter seven, we are veritably in the 'spaghetti of acronyms' part of the book. Given the close similarity between the factions, one regrets the fact that Bahru does not provide a chart that shows the different organisations and their 'fusion' and 'fission' more graphically. Essentially this chapter serves to show how the student movement, in the context of an absolutist state, laid the infrastructure for the incubation of political parties.

To give a flavour of the argument, here is what Bahru posits:

The effort to transform WWUES into the World Wide Federation of Ethiopian Students (WWFES) resulted in the split of ESUE and ushered in a period of the most vitriolic ideological and organisational warfare in the student movement. That warfare was to have lethal consequences when transposed to the home terrain after the 1974 revolution. It was only in retrospect that most people came to realise that these factional bickerings around WWFES were in actual fact the outward manifestations of the vying for hegemony of the two leftist political organisations – *Ma'ison* and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) – that had been formed in clandestine fashion in the meantime (p. 230).

Citing Andargachew Assegid (2000) and KifluTadesse (1993), who have written major accounts of *Ma'ison* and EPRP, respectively, Bahru essentially makes the point that whilst *Ma'ison* saw the revolution as a long-term process, EPRP had a more urgent perspective. However, Bahru's conclusion is: 'In reality, therefore, the divergent stands of the two organisations probably reflected political positioning rather than ideological or political convictions'. Nevertheless, the two organisations aligned themselves on opposite camps in the revolutionary struggle and were 'girding themselves up for the duel that killed them both'. He also tells us the story of the singularly more successful liberation fronts, especially the Eritrean and Tigrayan ones. 'TPLF launched the armed struggle against the Darg regime in February 1975... That armed struggle eventually culminated in 1991 in its seizure of state power, something that had eluded the acrimonious multi-ethnic left (p. 262)'.

The concluding chapter, a recap of the multi-layered, complex story that Bahru has laid out so diligently, is in many ways an appetiser for the book that is yet to be written. He returns to the universality of youth protests, re-emphasises the malaise of the political system the student movement originally opposed and the gradual process of radicalisation, partly due to government overreaction and partly to the tireless efforts of a small group of students. He then returns to the central importance of the emergence of the national question and the subsequent credo of 'self-determination up to and including secession'. The power of this chapter is its promise and the hints of an analysis of the future of Ethiopia. In a few dense pages, he tantalises the reader with profound ironies (the fact, for instance, that the principle of self-determination has been championed by a group coming from the historical core of the Ethiopian polity), the severed relations between the ruling incumbent EPRDF and the Oromo and Ogaden (Somali) Liberation Fronts, and the traumas of the Red Terror. He concludes that the students' penchant for dogmatic belief, rather than seasoned debate and a spirit of compromise, has had an enduring result both in the framing of the National

Question and in their organisational culture. The country has to come to grips with the legacy of the student movement 'if it is to have any hope of redemption'.

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