Book Review

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The History of Ethiopia
Saheed A. Adejumobi
Westport: Greenwood Press. pp. 219 (2007)

The recent book by Adejumobi will no doubt exert a pull on, among others, those social scientists who get interest in the history of Ethiopia and the globalization discourse. The author's focus on the latter is indeed commendable, given the paucity of such an analysis in the account of Ethiopian history. The reviewer of this book has especially found the work interesting, given the fact that he had finished, a little earlier than the publishing of Adejumobi's book, a work on a very similar topic, *viz*, the interaction of the global and the local in the establishment and development of Ethiopia[1]. A number of instances in Ethiopian history raised in the thesis to show the global-local dynamics are profusely mentioned in this book also, except that they are well-elaborated and decidedly expanded in the latter. But a major gap divides the two studies in the conceptualization of the globalization dynamics, which will be detailed later in this review.

The book, divided into seven chapters and a biographic section, covers a plethora of issues in Ethiopian history. These include the early history of Ethiopia along with the myths and legends associated with its existence; extensive cultural, geographic and demographic descriptions about it; its connections with the African and black world and movements; and other

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[1] Semir Yusuf, (2007), "The Ethiopian Nation-Sate and Contending Nationalisms in a Global Era", (MA thesis), Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa

developments during the Solomonic era, down to the current conditions, all seen in the light of global and local forces, from socio-economic and political angles, with a special emphasis on the dilemmas and efforts of building a modern state and nation. The last part of the book has incorporated short biographies of "notable" personalities in Ethiopia's past and present.

Exciting as it might appear, Adejumobi's output should have undergone a lot more reconsideration than it actually seems to have gone through. The serious deficiencies in the work can be examined from four aspects, all of them related to theoretical underpinnings. It would indeed be disturbing to find a book whose most important and unique contributions are intended to be paradigmatic and conceptual, gravely lacking even preliminary discussions thereof. The author contents himself in lavishly using very ambiguous and vastly debated concepts, without even trying to explicitly and coherently charting the paths he is delving into. The result came out to be the obvious: an artistically-authored history of Ethiopia, without any significantly informative or unequivocal paradigmatic contribution in understanding the past and present of the country.

First comes his oft-repeated terminology "modern", along with its derivatives ("modernity", "post modernity", "Afro modernity"…). He tries to graph the uneven drift Ethiopia passed through in search of modernity. He gets satisfaction with the skill the past Ethiopian emperors until Emperor Menelik demonstrated to keep up the politico-cultural integrity of the country. They were wise, he thinks, in balancing the intake of Western modernity and moulding it with the Ethiopian one, the ever-increasing devastating pressure the former posed to the latter notwithstanding. This pressure or challenge, after a long-running repulsive vigor of the Ethiopians, finally managed to gradually permeate the Ethiopian scene, until it caused the debilitating dilemma on the part of the decision-makers. Ever since the later part of Hailesellasie's reign down to the current regime, Ethiopia has been suffering from a crisis of confusion and adulteration, primarily because of the international's (particularly Western) depressing infiltration of the hitherto selectively pervious gates of Ethiopia.

All these discourses are caged in thick concepts. We can witness in the book, for example, the adjective "Afro", as in "Afro modernity" and "Afro Marxism". The author establishes (he is by no means the first, of course) a discursive alliance system, which encases Ethiopian modernity as part of, nay as an enduring psycho-cultural representative of, "African" modernity, and its nationalist corollary, pan-Africanism. Ethiopia has always been the refuge for the hapless, African or/and black in general. The latter have, as a result, responded magnificently when their spatial refuge has been desecrated by the onslaught of European imperialism. Thus, he argues, Afro-modernity, as

particularly manifested in the realization of Ethiopia, has served to fortunately defy the adoption of the overwhelming monotonous modernity of the West by producing and living its own way of life.

These claims can fall victim to appalling criticisms. What is "modernity", to begin with? What are the characteristics of Afro-modernity? Do all Africans belong to a specific jacket of modernity? How is, more importantly, "Ethiopian" modernity related to Afro-modernity? What characteristic features does make this categorization valid? After all, is there a coherent, inherently Ethiopian modernity, which deserves the name? The book under review disparagingly offers very little or no answers to these pressing questions.

Let's complement the arguments developed in the book by encapsulating them in a conceptual framework. The discourse of "modernity" got bloated with the modernization theory around the first and early second half of the twentieth century. Attempting to serve as a grand theory encompassing the social sciences, this paradigm is, risking an abrupt summary, known to have been underpinned by the fundamental assumption that the evolution of modern industrial societies signalled the demise of certain forms of solidarity of a traditional nature and the rise of new forms. These new, "modern" societies are predicated by a bundle of core processes such as nation-state formation, social differentiation, individualization, capitalist development, political modernization and secularization. (Kivisto, 2002). All these and attendant developments will later on inundate the whole world, leading to a homogenized world community.

Modernization's linear and Euro-centric path, among other things, has been discredited from different angles, and its intellectual and policy-related vigor has receded ever since the 1970s. We need not discuss here all the counter-hegemonic paradigms developed to this end. However, two subsequent developments in conceptualizing the modern and modernization need some mentioning in the following lines. The first was the "multiple modernities" paradigm, set in the academic stage as an antithesis to the modernization project, the second being the "varieties of modernity" alternative which emerged very recently, as a critical rejoinder to the *multiple modernities* mentioned above. It is to the former that Adejumobi seems to largely but unacknowledgedly subscribe.

The multiple modernities paradigm (Eisenstadt, 2000; 1998; Spohn, 2003) goes to gainsay the modernization theory at the core. Accusing it of Eurocentrism and teleology, it affirms that each non-Western society has a developmental path of its own, which it does and should follow in its lifetime. What we observe in terms of diversity in different parts of our world today

is not the likeness of the primitive past of the West, but a manifestation of the multiple modernization process of different societies in their own path of development. We do not, therefore, envision a homogenized world, but the proliferation of diversities.

These ideas seem to impress Adejumobi much. He celebrates diversity, instead of congruity; fencing of borders rather than their dissolution. Afromodernity, as mentioned above, through its epitomic, and sometimes vestigial, materialization—i.e., Ethiopian modernity--has for long diversified the otherwise domineering and universalizing tendency of Western modernity. While this argument discloses his theoretical assumptions, however, he does not seem to be quite orthodox about any of its versions. In his book, one can sense, for instance, an odour of soreness with the mushrooming of ethnic nationalisms in Ethiopia since the 1960s, looking at them from an instrumentalist-constructivist (again explicitly unstated) angle. This phenomenon is seen by some Africanists who tend to endorse the multiple modernities approach as non-ephemeral with the advance of global modernity, but rather represents critical aspects of that particular region's experiences of modernity itself (see, for example, Berman, *et. al.,* 2004). While we may not justifiably scold Adejumobi for staying just a "nuanced" advocate of multiple modernities, he may be censured for not arguing in favour of this position of his.

In any case, we need to problematize the theoretical/conceptual framework itself which Adejumobi subscribes to, to the extent that he does, in the light of another approach to understand "modernity". *A la* varieties of modernity, while still believing that diversity does exist in the world, it is yet worth to ask *what we make of it* (Schmidt, 2005). Does it really make sense to speak of the "modernities" of any non-Western country, say those of Ethiopia or Japan, as distinct from that of the West? Aren't there, instead, differences between the two artificial categories just as there are between a group of countries coming from other civilizations or within what we call the "West" itself? The problem with the multiple modernities is that it does not exactly tell us what the divergences consist in, how significant they are and why they might warrant speaking of modernity in the plural, rather than in the singular(*Ibid*).

Since we are not aware of the responses to these inquiries, we can hardly:

> judge whether Japan--or the West or India or whichever region or country one may consider--is *so* unique as to justify…the conceptualization of its institutional and cultural outlook in its own and…even in civilizational terms--so different that something would be missed if Japan were treated as one of several members of a common family of modern societies…. [After all], is

> Japan significantly more different from Spain than Denmark or
> Britain or Greece are (*Ibid:* 81)?

Further, having studied the World Values Report, Inglehart (in *Ibid*: 85) argues that, "economic modernization and cultural modernization tend to go together in coherent syndromes around the world and that the more fundamental differences in worldviews are not among industrialized societies but between pre-industrial and industrial societies". Therefore, we may ask, has Ethiopia anything more similar to its pre-modern form than to its modern contemporaries in other parts of the world?

Moreover, where have the internal diversities gone to justify our claim that Ethiopia enjoyed *one* modernity? Whose modernity (given the ethnic, religious, class, regional…diversities within Ethiopia itself), the modernity based on which culture, are we speaking about? Whether or not we have an answer for this (Adejumobi seems to have one; see below), we will but remain highly biased and exclusive, and therefore render political, rather than academic, the whole literature. It is also from here that the postmodernist would take an issue of Adejumobi's essentialist categorizations, to which we will come towards the end.

These are questions which Adejumobi never tried to address properly or did so far from impartiality. Taking for granted the widely spread common knowledge that Africa is different from the West, he added into the equation the question of modernity, without precisely outlining its basic features. Ethiopia also joined this confrontation as a major player without having got a clear identity of its modernity. This would severely diminish the validity of all that is built upon it.

Let's illustrate this confusion with an example. Adejumobi, on the one hand, claims that Ethiopian modernity is something positive (for example, p.155) just as the fact that it has had one is. On the other hand, he is seen uncomfortable with some of the practices and cultures Ethiopians have been (re)producing in their political life. He seems to be against the centralization of authority [2](p. 51); the role of the Church in inhibiting radical reconstruction of Ethiopian traditions (p. 62); the hierarchical structure of the Ethiopian state (p.108); Ethiopia's culture of extremism (p.153); the fact that Ethiopian

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[2] Adejumobi is of the opinion that "power concentrated in the hands of the state is not truly African" (p. 127). Questions worth-asking include: which region, country, locality, district in Africa? How sure can we be about this? How can he defend the well-known assumption that Ethiopia has had an authoritarian political culture? Above all, won't this contradict with his earlier and later statements about Ethiopia's authoritarian political culture, and the role of religion in it? Why shouldn't this be Ethiopian?

political dialogue and activity is often filled with ...diatribes and vituperations (p. 153); and that many Ethiopian rulers have been absolutist (p. xii).

One would, at this juncture, question: aren't these "problems" Ethiopian? Won't they represent "Ethiopian" modernity? If so, doesn't that contradict with the whole project of immaculating and eulogizing Ethiopian culture and modernity? If not, why not? Which ethos and cultures, then, do constitute "Ethiopian" modernity? Which and whose modernity is referred to, for example, in his stand that "centralization of authority is an anomaly in a society with ...*modernist* aspiration" (p.51)? In whose culture, another instance, does the "ether of modernity" include "individualism, the centrality of reason, government by consent" (pp.61-62)? Or should we take everything seen as politically comfortable as "Ethiopian" and disown every other thing clashing with currently fashionable notions as unEthiopian?

It is befitting to mention, at this juncture, that there can also be other alternatives between Adejumobi's *modernities*, and Schmidt's *modernity*. Accepting in general some of the latter's ideas, one can tend, at the same time, to remain somewhat aloof of some of his modernization-leaned convictions. These include, for instance, the expectation that we are moving towards homogenization, and that some differences in the socio-cultural conditions of developing nations from the developed ones represents the latter's past, waiting to be bridged in time. This looks either too "certainist"or/and too shallow a claim. It is the former because we don't have a strong foundation to stand on and prefer to consider these differences and not those; it is the latter because homogenization and heterogenization are two sides of the same coin in our glob/cal world of today.

This takes me to Adejumobi's understanding of the global-local dynamics. Although, again, forming a major part of his objectives, he does not present a sophisticated analytical framework--not even a proper definition of these two concepts, by the way-- to understand this dynamics. He is content to show the practical aspect of it as witnessed in the interaction of the West, Africa, and Ethiopia, and other important actors as well. Despite some discussions which show how interlaced the global and the local in fact are, his major assumptions are hinged on the belief that the West has been potentially or/and actually antithetical to Ethiopia, while the African public, and the black one in general, have remained to be loyal in their support for the latter. His major, though not entire, thesis lies in the assumption that the global is contradictory with the local, the former represented by the (imperialist?) West, and the latter by the (victimized?) Africans and Ethiopians, in particular.

Consider such impressions of his as "Ethiopia posited an alternative way to modernization for Africans" (pp. 41-2); Ethiopia's "defensive attitude towards external incursions" (p. 42); "clash between the imperial ambitions of Europe and Ethiopia's modernist aspirations" (p. 45); "Ethiopia saved from colonization because of its own unique modernity" (p. 47); "Christianity secured the sovereignty of Ethiopia" (p. 62);the Italian imperial globality against Ethiopian locality (chapter 4) ; and above all, globalization's contribution to the failure of modernity in Ethiopia (p.157) and so on.

These, when taken at their face value, are too simplistic cases to make. The concept of 'glocalization' [as developed, among others, by Robertson (1995)], which, while rejecting the strict bifurcation between 'the local' and 'the global', asserts that identity formation on a global scale involves the 'particularization of universalism' and the 'universalization of particularism'. In our world today, similar processes of localization are taking place universally, and universalizing processes are being played locally. Hence, neither the clear distinction nor the counterpoise between "the local" and "the global" can be tenable. This can, therefore, be best seen as an attempt to transcend the 'homogenization-heterogenization' debate by considering both, at a given time-space, as two aspects of the same movement.

By the same token, a glocalist would find Adejumobi's above-mentioned impression about the global and the local superficial. Each one of the quotations would invoke rather long reactions, which won't be dealt with here. Suffice it to mention, in general, that they neglect how identity (Ethiopian, African, or otherwise) is formed dialogically; that "reverse discourse" (see Appiah, in *Ibid*) entails the reaction to one's enemy (this case, Ethiopia's reaction to foreigners) in the same way and form as the latter's attack; that the notion of the Ethiopian "nation" and modernity are glocal creations, learnt partly from Europe's post-Reformation experiences and the like[3]. In short, such conflictual portrayal of the "global" and the "local" ignores that "Ethiopian" (or "African") identity, modernity, reaction, realism, and so on are all, in a sense, partial by-products of globalization. Puritanist and localist stances are increasingly considered untenable in academic circles, although they may make sense in political ones.

Adejumobi's hard core Ethiopianism will also provoke a reaction among some antagonists of this thesis, whether ethnonationalists or postmodernists. Ethiopia for him is an antique, pure, and unified entity with a glorious independent history of existence. The long/prehistoric, "core"-based, northcentric history

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[3] For a more detailed, albeit sketchy, discussions on all these, see Semir (2007), "The Ethiopian Nation-State and Contending…".

and identity of Ethiopia and Ethiopian culture (the latter represented peculiarly by Christianity, and not least by the "national" dress, *shamma*, and the "national" dish, *injera*! (p. 18)), all palpably painted in the book, will be rebuked for being footed on both ultra-essentialist and extremely one-sided assumptions.

There is, however, nothing new in such a depiction of Ethiopia. It had been the "standard" history and identity of the country until it met its serious nemesis in the 60s. The unfortunate thing about its (crude?) recapitulation now is that its veracity is taken for granted at a time when it can no more be considered as the *only* way of looking at Ethiopia. The different scathing criticisms launched against it should have been argued against before its discursive regeneration sets in. By no means would it be enough to pass over the ethnonationalist histories as re-constructed historiographies of other peoples (p. 108). It was as well essential to show how and why they are so and how "natural" and "real" the Ethiopianist version of history is[4].

The final thematic note would be on the Ethiopian "nation". Although Ethiopia is stretched back into prehistory, no elaboration is given whether it has been so as a "nation" or not. Adejumobi does not even give a clear indication of the term until page p. 161, where Ethiopia is referred to as a "modern nation". He does not, as usual, go into a conceptual discussion of what makes a nation so. In fact, in this case, he does not show the process by which the Ethiopian nation was constructed. But the most intriguing question one would posit is, why is Ethiopia ever pictured as a unified, compact whole if and when it acquired the status of a nation relatively recently?

Finally, some informational errors in the book include the deeming of Kaffa and Sidamo as predominantly Oromo provinces (p. 103); Tigre province as the residing place of the Oromo (p. 111); and Dr. Merera and Prof. Beyene Petros as the leaders of the CUD (p. 146). Moreover, his data on the number of the Oromo is contradictory, rounding them to 45-50 percent at one place (p. 111) and 32% at another (p.140).

Penultimately, Adejumobi was quite right when he said, "narratives of modernity are often canonized in the forms that are culturally and politically

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[4] Adejumobi's stand on the question of "ethnic oppression" in the country is conspicuous primarily because it is contradictory. On the one hand, he believes that the injustice in Ethiopia has been of class and regional in nature and not ethnic (). On the other hand, however, he talks about the "hierarchical...structure of the Ethiopian state... [which] was anchored upon Amhara cultural domination" (p. 108). Specifically, he mentions that the "Oromo had been historically marginalized in cultural, political and economic relations within the Ethiopian empire"(p.111).

exclusive and thus hegemonic" (p. xi). He was trying to attack the partiality and overbearingness of the West, without realizing that the same applies even to him, as a modernist writer himself. However much he tried to distance himself from modernity by advocating a non-Western version, there are things common to all "modernities", things which the post-modernist turn abhors: essentialization, selection, categorization, and domination. Although he wished to transcend the modernist aporia with the help of the above-mentioned quotation, it is highly doubtful whether he succeeded in doing so.

Finally, we should not, however, neglect what has been mentioned earlier: its well-written composition, its comprehensive coverage, and its integrated attempt in terms of reading Ethiopia's past and present from a global perspective. The last biographic part may be found to be interesting for some, although the criteria of the selection (of the "notable" people listed) are left unclear.

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