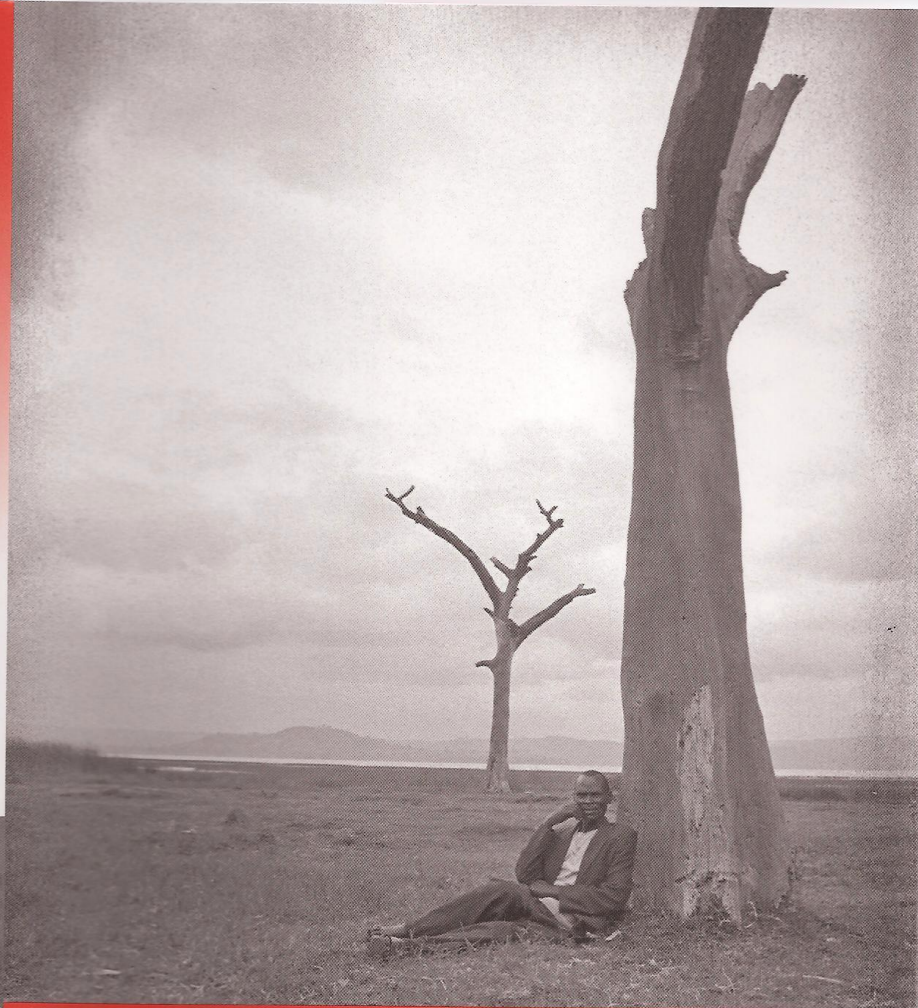


RADICALISM AND CULTURAL



RADICALISM AND
CULTURAL DISLOCATION IN
ETHIOPIA, 1960-1974

Messay Kebede

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"No one concerned with the fate of contemporary Ethiopia and indeed of the nature of modern revolutionary ideologies will want to miss this eye-opening account. Marshaling a trove of little-known data and a circumspect selection of theoretic insights, Messay Kebede offers an instant benchmark in the contemporary history of this troubled nation in his artfully crafted work."

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"In this engaging and necessary book, Messay Kebede boldly argues that Ethiopian intellectuals failed disastrously in their revolutionary métier for lack of originality, creativity, and authenticity. It is a stirring interpretation bound to delight and infuriate, but even those who disagree with its point of view will find much that is informative and illuminating. Extensive in analysis and unsparing in clarity, this is a work of impressive range and depth. It is hard to think of a more significant contribution on this highly controversial subject."

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Kebede



New Book

Messay Kebede

I announce the publication of my new book titled *Radicalism and Cultural Dislocation in Ethiopia, 1960-1974*. Published by the University of Rochester Press, the book starts from the premise of a deceived expectation, from the distressing realization of a promise that seems to have vanished altogether.

Indeed, who can deny that a lot was going for Ethiopia? The country had an ancient and sophisticated civilization led by a landed ruling class that had greatly expanded its resources and foiled colonial incursions while showing a rising appetite for wealth. Yet what many observers had saluted as the Japan of Africa quickly went off the track of sustained modernization; worse yet, the country plunged in the turmoil of a radical revolution in the mid 70s that brought about economic regression and political instability. The setback resulted in massive periodical famines, civil wars, and ethnic conflicts whose apex was the secession of Eritrea.

The book focuses on the prime agent of the revolutionary upheaval that derailed the course of Ethiopia's modernization, namely, the Ethiopian student movement. Most remarkable about the movement was that a great number of Ethiopian students and intellectuals had espoused the most dogmatic version of Marxism-Leninist ideology, with the consequence that they had become a highly polarizing force. And as John Henrik Clarke puts it, "When a people are not too sure about who they are loyal to and what their commitments are, they represent a danger within the cultural mainstream of their society."

The book discusses the reasons why a majority of Ethiopian students and intellectuals adopted the ideology of Marxism-Leninism during the 60s and early 70s with a fanatic fervor. This radicalization of the educated elite is crucial to the understanding of Ethiopia's uninterrupted political crises and economic setbacks since the Revolution of 1974. Students and intellectuals were the leading force in the uprising against the regime of Emperor Haile Selassie. The radicalization of the military junta, known as the Derg—which seized power and ruled the country for 17 years—was also the handiwork of students and intellectuals. Likewise, the ethnonationalist movements that brought down the Derg in 1992 are products of the Ethiopian student movement.

While acknowledging the frustrating impact of Haile Selassie's economic and political failures, the book argues that the radical orientation of students and intellectuals has its roots in the encounter of an uprooting education entirely copied from the West with a cultural legacy prone to messianic escapades. Even as the imported education was undermining the legacy, the Marxist-Leninist ideology emerged both as the most consistent form of Westernization and the most alluring substitute for the messianic longing.

The book is original because it develops a multifarious approach to study the progressive radicalization of Ethiopian students. Notably, arguing that the socioeconomic shortcomings of the imperial regime are not enough to explain the radicalization, it highlights the role of cultural factors. Among the cultural factors, besides emphasizing the alienating impact of Western education that the imperial regime encouraged to the detriment of the traditional culture and the radicalizing elements specific to the traditional culture, the book adds the influence of “the culture of revolution” characteristic of the 60s and early 70s as a result of the global hegemony of Marxism-Leninism.

Another theoretical and methodological originality of the book is that the analysis of the uprooting impact of Western education perfectly articulates with the other radicalizing elements. The book shows that the contrast between Western and traditional societies, as conveyed by the Eurocentric reading of history and the subsequent method of taking the West as a normative reference, activates a revolutionary predisposition. It then elucidates how native and international factors join and strengthen the rupture opened by the educational system.

The major significance of the book is but obvious. In involving cultural factors, the book provides a detailed and concrete assessment of the impact of Western education on traditional cultures. As such, the study has a direct relevance to other African countries in that it puts the finger on the main obstacle holding back their modernization and economic development. Given that Ethiopia has not been colonized, the pernicious radicalization of its educated elite demonstrates that the effect of cultural colonization is more lasting and damaging than direct political colonization. It follows that the issue of African modernization is as much, if not more, about recapturing cultural autonomy as it is about applying the right socioeconomic changes.