

### **The Formation of Ethiopian Intellectuals\***

Assafa Endeshaw PhD

Email: a\_Endeshaw@yahoo.co.uk

#### **ABSTRACT**

Broadly speaking, the history and, indeed, the fate of nations (whether 'new' or 'old') have been inextricably entwined with the formation of intellectuals. Nations that embarked on industrialization ahead of others (who were appropriately called 'latecomers to development') had a fully formed body of intellectuals that understood and championed such a course. The formation of intellectuals is therefore not only a precursor for the kind of development nations choose but also an indicator of whether they have waken up to such a quest in the first place.

The social, political and economic malaise in Africa and Asia has been partly attributed to the problem of formation of intellectuals. On the occasion of the Adwa centenary celebrations in Ethiopia in 1996, a government appointed coordinator referred to the absence of an educated elite at the time. Some have doubted if the same question was resolved even by 1991, let alone before the February 1974 Revolution.

This paper therefore seeks to examine that question in light of the evidence in the last 150 years. It is organized in three sections following the three major periods the author discerns in Ethiopian intellectual history. The first section or period covers the thousands of years before the defeat of the Italian invasion at Adwa in 1896.

The second section deals with the period stretching from 1896 to 1941: the defeat of the second Italian attempt to conquer Ethiopia and the rise of a centralised state which could introduce reforms without any worry that local warlords might object or stand in the way. The final section (relating to the period 1941 to 1975, perhaps beyond) covers the trials and tribulations of the rise of a new educated elite to positions of authority and influence whether in the state or in opposition to it. Subsequent developments are merely extensions or aberrations of the third period and the author would not propose to carve out a fourth one.

*This paper was originally presented by the author at the 15th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, held at Hamburg University, Hamburg, Germany, July 21-25, 2003.*

## **The Formation of Ethiopian Intellectuals**

### **Introduction**

In the history of all societies, a section of the community embarked on interpreting the world around it and formulating a system of beliefs and thought with which to interact with that world. Thus emerged magicians, artists, priests, chroniclers, savants of diverse types— all of which could be termed the ‘intellectuals’ or the ‘intelligentsia’ of their respective ages.

### ***Definition***

There are no generally accepted definitions for either term and the debate on what each term may constitute continues to this day. Thus, Eyerman *et al* point out that “early studies [of intellectuals] had little problem with identification of their objects, whether sociological [in Germany] or political [in France], such easy identification is not possible today...Recent studies have defined intellectuals more or less as they have seen fit—for example, as those with a university degree or those working on specified professions, such as writers, journalists, teachers, and so on...Another, equally ad hoc manner of defining intellectuals cites certain psychological or behavioral characteristics as typical of individuals.”<sup>1</sup>

To Edward Shils, intellectuals are “persons with an unusual sensitivity to the sacred, an uncommon reflectiveness about the nature of their universe and the rules which govern their society...This interior need to penetrate beyond the screen of immediate concrete experience marks the existence of the intellectuals in every society.”<sup>2</sup> According to Alatas, intellectuals are persons who engage “in thinking about ideas and non-material problems using the faculty or reason,”<sup>3</sup> those who “try to see things in a broad perspective in terms of their inter-

relation and totality".<sup>4</sup> He adds, "The object of intellectual activity is always related to the wider context of life and thought, penetrating into fundamental values and commitments."<sup>5</sup> By contrast, he views the 'intelligentsia' as a broader category of people with "higher formal and modern education"<sup>6</sup> but not engaging in "developing their field or trying to find the solution to a specific problem within it."<sup>7</sup>

It serves no purpose to further dwell on identifying the subject of our inquiry since the literature does not convey conceptual unanimity. We therefore use the terms 'intellectuals' and 'intelligentsia' interchangeably in this paper without any attempt to define either. We prefer to view both of them as sections of the society who "formulate and work with ideas".<sup>8</sup>

In the case of Ethiopia, the terms 'intellectuals' and 'intelligentsia' are commonly applied to those who passed through the 'modern' ('Western') educational system established from the first decade of the 20th century.<sup>9</sup> There is an implicit exclusion of the church-educated even after the latter had acquired modern forms of training such as in the Theology College of Addis Ababa University and other seminaries. There has been a puzzling reluctance to consider Islamic scholars and the Arabic educated as having, at least, the same status in the society as that of the church-educated.

In the absence of any serious study of the conceptual anomaly, one might guess that both terms have been deployed to distinguish the non-clerics within the wider spectrum of the educated group in Ethiopia. This is corroborated by the disdain to use indigenous forms of classification to establish hierarchies among those educated in the modern schools. Thus such designations as *memhir*, *aleka*, *lik*, or *deressa*, *sheikh* and the like have been shunned in favour of foreign terminology.<sup>10</sup>

### ***The Formation of Intellectuals***

Broadly speaking, the history and, indeed, the fate of nations (whether ‘new’ or ‘old’) have been inextricably intertwined with the formation of intellectuals. Nations that embarked on industrialization ahead of others (who were appropriately called ‘latecomers to development’) had a fully formed body of intellectuals that understood and championed such a course. The formation of intellectuals is therefore not only a precursor for the kind of development nations choose but also an indicator of whether they have woken up to such a quest in the first place.

The social, political and economic malaise in Africa and Asia has been partly attributed to the problem of formation of post-colonial intellectuals. Shils pointed out that. “Their modern intellectual outlook was acquired through study in universities in the centers of Western civilization or institutions in their own countries founded by foreign missionaries and administrators.”<sup>11</sup> Mazrui has described the formation process in Africa in terms of the abandonment of “the use of [local] proverbs and parables to enunciate one's thoughts” in favour of “quotes from western authors” — increasingly the radical ones.<sup>12</sup> He concluded, “Western education in Africa came with new intellectual horizons, as well as the seeds of intellectual dependency. The new intellectual horizons were a form of liberation, a new capacity to transcend ancestral ways. But there was also the risk of imitation and blind deference, a tendency to adore western civilization and all that it was supposed to stand for.”<sup>13</sup>

Alatas also linked the lack of development of intellectuals in Asia and other developing areas to the colonial experience: “The colonially educated indigenous elites, while retaining cultural and religious continuity with their past, had entirely broken with their intellectual traditions. For those countries with hardly any intellectual traditions, it was more pronounced.”<sup>14</sup> He pointed to the school system, “the books and the syllabus... imported from the West” as “the best indication of the intellectual break”.<sup>15</sup> He saw the assimilation of Western thought not as

food but as a burden.<sup>16</sup>

Alatas expressed his concern that Malaysia should generate its intellectuals to lead their nation “in the thought domain, as 'leaders of thought'” rather than leave it to “those who make it their business to specialise on the politics, economics and sociology of your country” and become “readily available to harness the leadership of thought”.<sup>17</sup> He argued that the “concern for the emergence of a functioning intellectual group should be considered as a development need. It is a vital condition for nation building.”<sup>18</sup>

The function of intellectuals as agents of revolutionary change or, conversely, the bottleneck that their absence creates on social, political and economic progress, has found general acceptance in the literature. Shils contends, “In all societies, even those in which the intellectuals are notable on their conservatism, the diverse paths of creativity as well as an inevitable tendency toward negativism, impel a partial rejection of the prevailing system of cultural values. The very process of elaboration and development [by intellectuals] involves a measure of rejection. The range of rejection of the inherited varies greatly; it can never be complete and all embracing.”<sup>19</sup>

In pre-revolutionary Russia, Alexander Herzen wrote to his son: "Do not search for any solutions in this book. You will not find them. Indeed, the period possesses none. That which has been decided is finished; while the coming revolution is only in its infancy. We do not build, we destroy; we do not proclaim new discoveries but discard old falsehoods...The religion of the revolution, of the great social reformation, is the only religion which I bequeath to you. It has no other paradise or rewards but your sense of right, your own conscience."<sup>20</sup>

On the occasion of the Adwa centenary celebrations in Ethiopia in 1996, a government appointed coordinator referred to the absence of an educated elite at the time. In reality, there was an educated elite. If the coordinator meant to point to the non-existence of an intellectual

elite produced by a modern (“Western”) educational system, then his assertion was plainly tautological. Clearly, the generation that should have shouldered the responsibility the government representative seemed to lament as non-existent could not have emerged under the conditions that Ethiopia found itself on the eve of the Adwa conflict. It is not even certain if the question was answered before the Maichew war (in 1936).

Other writers have doubted if the same question was resolved even by 1991, let alone before the February 1974 Revolution.<sup>21</sup> According to them, long before the post-February 1974 developments, particularly the decomposition among the former radicals,<sup>22</sup> showed up their weaknesses and frailty, the existence and role of the intelligentsia in Ethiopia has been questionable. Continuous erosions of the general conditions in Ethiopian society during the military dictatorship and afterwards have triggered fresh inquiries into the same problem. It seems that the question cannot go away at all.

This paper therefore seeks to examine that question in light of the evidence in the last 150 years. It is organized in three sections following the three major periods the author discerns in Ethiopian intellectual history. The first section or period covers the thousands of years before the defeat of the Italian invasion at Adwa in 1896. Adwa has paramount significance for the jolt it gave to the slumbering kingdom — “forgetful of the world and forgotten by it.” It gave a big push that hastened the process of Ethiopian integration into the world economy and the consequent effort to spur intellectual development in Ethiopia.

The second section deals with the period stretching from 1896 to 1941: the defeat of the second Italian attempt to conquer Ethiopia and the rise of a centralised state which could introduce reforms without any worry that local warlords might object or stand in the way. The final section (relating to the period 1941 to 1975, perhaps beyond) covers the trials and tribulations of the rise of a new educated elite to positions of authority and influence, whether

in support of the state or in opposition to it. Subsequent developments are merely extensions or aberrations of the third period and the author would not propose to carve out a fourth one.

## **1. The Origin of Ethiopian Intellectuals—the Early Period (before Adwa)**

Not much is known about the state of intellectual activity during the pre-Christian era in Ethiopia. The stone inscriptions and tablets as well as other historical evidence uncovered from that era have not led to any reconstruction of its social history. Even the tale of learning and preoccupation with the supernatural after the so-called conversion to Christianity is accompanied by admission of total domination by foreign evangelists (the Nine Saints or Saatu Kidisat from Syria). The schism within the Christian Churches that took place in the fifth century A.D. did not have the same consequence in Ethiopia as it had in Europe.

The first schism probably propelled further schisms among the Christian Churches in Europe and eventually opened the door for secularism in European intellectual development. The same process did not replicate itself in Ethiopia because the Ethiopian Church stood solidly united against the version of interpretation of the Western Churches while unwaveringly siding the Eastern Churches. The fact that the entire Ethiopian Church remained rooted in one particular brand of belief (monophysite) meant that the door was shut against any internal splits because the latter were always viewed as induced by foreign enemies. Thus, the Ethiopian Church's adherence to the Eastern Churches (from the fifth century) did not boost intellectual evolution because every sign of change had the burden of proving that it was not an appendage of foreign interests or inducements. The recent (post 1990s) internal rumbling within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church – the newly born “Tehadsso” versus the traditional Tewahdo schools – is perhaps a belated response to that historical

exigency!

On the other hand, contrary to what could have been expected, the fifth century schism in the Christian Churches as a whole did not prompt the birth of an independent church hierarchy in Ethiopia till 1951. As a result, the intellectual orientation of the Ethiopian clergy was at all times in the shadow of the Egyptian church represented by the Egyptian Abun (Patriarch). The latter presided over the Ethiopian church, though its internal administration was in the hands of Ethiopian clerics.

Still, to all intents and purposes, local customs and practices continued to have sway over the beliefs and thinking of the priesthood while state support for those participating in learning through the church-controlled educational system was virtually non-existent throughout the centuries. Remember that, until 1974, the official salary of an ordinary priest was three Birr per month<sup>23</sup> though they also benefited from the largesse of the nobility and landed gentry.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, priests and deacons as well as the *kolo termari* were billeted to the peasantry to scrounge, beg and make do with whatever food and clothing the “mewodiss” (praise) they could heap on potential benefactors generated for them. The tithe the Church collected was distributed among the top clergy who would often also be landed and thus formed part of the gentry. Since peasant agriculture was subsistent for the most part, the priesthood could only earn meagre income whether they were tilling the land themselves or earned such income or benefit from the peasantry in exchange for services they rendered the latter. Consequently, they languished in continuous misery and had to resort to witchcraft and other activities to survive. Not that witchcraft was a preserve of the priesthood as its other proponents could be lay persons as well as those seeking solutions to life’s many problems.

Church or mosque services were (and still are) full of readings and recitals of the scriptures in front of the public as well as finding appropriate verse and chapters that support



actions of the rulers (or that of the ordinary person for that matter). It also often involved regurgitating the relevant teachings to restrain the public from acting in a reckless manner, warning them of dangers on earth and hell, playing up moral and ethical incentives to promote peace. The *Fetha Nagast*<sup>25</sup> codified these sanctions later. The religious and secular roles and modes of life were thereby defined to a large extent though secular and independent thought continued to be discouraged through penalties or the threat of ostracism. Girma Amare has pointed out that “obedience and complete subservience to authority” were impressed on the church-educated and that “individual initiative and inquiry are considered defects that have to be discouraged at every manifestation by severe chastisement.”<sup>26</sup>

No doubt, the few written works that were generated during that early period had a lot of religious and mystic content because the authors were unable to transcend those views or they were restrained from doing so. In most instances, the conditions of life of the general priesthood never permitted a continuous engagement such as copying manuscripts or translations. The best places for such works were the monasteries where the monks could devote their entire time without bothering where their next meal came from.

Nevertheless, the transition from the religious to the secular, from faith to reason could not really take place among the educated in Ethiopia for centuries. Indeed, the transition to a fully secular educated elite did not take place until well after the introduction of the modern educational system early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the centuries before then, any budding efforts to transcend mysticism and religious obscurantism took religious forms! The occasional conflicts within monophysite Christianity, such as through the famous standoff between the ‘Kebat’ and ‘Kara’ (in Gondar first, then in Shoa and Wollo), were not confined to the nature of Christ but went beyond. Reason or secularism did not, nor could it, yet have any separate existence or form. The internal religious strife was openly laid before the public,

the clergy and the nobility for their decision as to which side upheld the true faith (Tewahdo). The kings (even as late as Tewodros and Yohannes) frequently presided over the public debate. Yet, the public consultation and judgment routinely led to the beheading or death in other ways, including rooting out the tongues of the losers in the debate (and hence deemed heretics) — obviously to prevent them from spreading their views.

Moreover, the Ethiopian Church's perceived fear of being swamped or duped by foreign enemies always remained in the background of the apparent stiff resistance to new interpretations. It also had to do with the dominant state of mind in the general population at the time. As one writer noted, "The opposition was not confined to the clergy, but included members of the imperial family, and above all, the ordinary Abyssinian, who had no interest in, or knowledge of, doctrinal matters, yet whose life, in every phase, was deeply anchored in the national ethos of the monophysite church and the expression it gave to the special character of people and country" <sup>27</sup> Predictably, both sides in the debates expressed allegiance to the Orthodox Church and its teachings, though they sought to express a version of the teachings that would sit comfortably with their interpretations.

Nevertheless, the Ethiopian church and the clergy in general had secular achievements in the areas of science, literature and (Yared's) music. Works on chemistry, astronomy and the like have yet to find serious appraisal. In particular, we need to know why all that was interrupted and never evolved as much as western medicine and science have. One wonders if the fate of Ethiopian science was sealed in the same way as that of Arabic science and progress?<sup>28</sup>

While our knowledge of the internal causes for lack of intellectual progress may not be complete, the evidence on the contribution of foreign pressures on developments in Ethiopia is abundant. The series of encounters with Europeans that the Ethiopian state (through the various

monarchs) had made impressed on the latter the need to push for a secularly trained and skilled manpower. The experience with Ahmed Gragn and the consequent demand for armaments was the most prominent cause for such a push. Monarchs were convinced to go to the extent of importing foreign skilled people. Thus Sahle Sellasie had a taste of the power of foreign armaments in his constant wars around Shoa. This also opened a gaping hole for European colonialists to exploit by playing one king or warlord against another and extract concessions which they would use as a basis for further inroads into the country and its resources. The salt trade, amongst others, was a concession given in return for favours or armaments. The loss of Assab is a well-known example of how foothold was given in return for favours with the disastrous consequences that we all know about today.

Tewodros's search for skills in manufacturing armaments took him on a collision course with the British while at the same time providing Kassa Tirso (later Yohannes IV) an opportunity to exploit Tewodros's quandary by collecting supplies from the British for his confrontation with the Shoa and Gondar monarchs to regain the Ethiopian throne. To be sure, the failure of Tewodros's attempt to introduce modern industrial and other implements and methods lay deep in internal factors. The British Expedition merely put an end to the unrealistic dreams of transition from a society where the artisan was the marginal phenomenon, almost a caste, and agriculture was by far the most dominant form of social production. Furthermore, Tewodros's consternation with the conservatism of the clergy and his ensuing bitter confrontation with them turned into a dangerous exercise as he had never prepared the ground for their transformation into productive and positive factors for the society, as he dreamed they might be.

## **2. The Post-Adwa Period (1896-1941)**

The historic Ethiopian victory at Adwa not only shook the European colonial powers, it also inflicted a mortal wound on the Ethiopian rulers. It sent the message that, without an accelerated push for modernisation (viewed as imitating European institutions),<sup>29</sup> the Italians or other powers could not be stopped. The defeat of the Russian army by the Japanese in 1905 was further proof for the Ethiopian nobility that only modernisation could save them from an inevitable colonial onslaught. Not surprisingly, the political and public policy discourse<sup>30</sup> of the pre-First World War period had a lot of envious references to foreign<sup>31</sup> particularly Japanese experiences.<sup>32</sup>

As regards the developments relevant to our topic, the period saw the beginning of the decline of the system of religious instruction under the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as the main source of manpower for state administration. Although Church schools continued to recruit candidates for the clergy and generated literate functionaries among the retinue of the nobility to aid in the newly discovered path of imitating ‘ferenjotch’ to surpass them and protect the sovereignty of the nation, they started to be supplanted by *ferenji temari* bet. However, the peripheral role of Muslim schools remained unaffected.

Menelik II’s determination to catch up with the ‘West’ included allowing the establishment of European missionary schools side by side with government sponsored public schools (the first being the Menelik II school, established in 1908). The expected role of the educated in the post-Adwa period was to serve as instruments for the implementation of the imperial plans as well as conduits for establishing its legitimacy in the expanded state. In particular, the need for administrative and clerical staff for the newly formed government ministries, diplomatic and other relations with foreign countries prompted speedy measures. The nature of the subjects taught (Amharic and foreign languages, religion, elementary mathematics and general science) reflected the pragmatic purposes earmarked for the new schools. Soon, not

only the new schools began to spread nationwide, the government sponsored a few candidates to go abroad for studies. By the time of the second Italian invasion in 1936, there were about 20 schools throughout the country. A section of the newly educated rose to the occasion and resisted the invasion; the story of their gallantry (Tikur Anbessa) and that of the Yekatit 12 Massacre in Addis Ababa has always been grafted on the memory of the living.

The education provided during the post-Adwa period was more technical in nature and imbued those who entered the new schools with abilities and skills more in tune with the demands of the times: linguistic, clerical, numerical and administrative. There was no call for broad-based policy and thinking to establish formative principles for the emerging intelligentsia. Neither did the schools themselves have any competence to provide such for the students.

The educational curricula were borrowed and had no symbiotic relationship with the reality of the social and politico-economic aspects of the country.<sup>33</sup> The lessons in languages, mathematics and the social and natural sciences assumed that the pupils were just as European (English or French) as were those for whom they were intended when published and prepared. Amanuel Abraham recollected of the period while working as second in power to the Emperor in the Ministry of Education, “Though I was happy with the expansion of modern education, there was practically no education on Ethiopian culture, history or religion.”<sup>34</sup> Numerical calculations in the society were undertaken in Birr and Cents while the class rooms buzzed with Francs, Pounds and Pence or Dollars and Cents.

The type of students recruited in the new schools also reinforced the tendency to provide administrative, linguistic and clerical skills as most of them hailed from the nobility and the landed gentry and would only aspire to learn elements of statecraft to which they were eligible. Until the 1950s, the dominant proportion of students continued to come from those upper echelons of the society with the result that the limitations of the school system and the curricula

never spawned any opposition nor did they attract any attention.

A key factor in the continuous emphasis on the role of education after Menelik's passing away was Ras Tafari's embrace of reforms in the state and the economic sectors. The overture that Tafari made to the small group of intellectuals who championed change and transformation as critical to the educational system may not have represented total commitment by Tafari. Yet, it boosted the spread of educational institutions and the hope of the newly educated that this was a lasting engagement whatever the state of mind and enthusiasm of Tafari may have been towards reform in general and education in particular. Nonetheless, the front Tafari created with the champions of change, while cementing his alliance with the Anglo-French powers in view of his contest for power with Lij Iyasu, was a marriage of convenience while it lasted. Tafari 's (later Haile Sellasie) constant jockeying for power with the regional warlords did not abate till after the end of the Italian occupation (1936-1941) and his return to the throne. The Emperor's alliance with the reformists had by then outlived its rationale as the assistance, first, of the British and. then, of the US and other foreign powers had become the lever with which he could manoeuvre against potential enemies and gain absolute power and dictate the future direction, among others, of education and the rise of a new elite completely subservient to his desires and whims.

### **3. The Period 1941 to 1975**

The brief interlude of the Italian occupation of Ethiopia had underscored, even more than the victory of Adwa, that Ethiopia had to catch up with the Western countries if it sought to remain independent and proud. The humiliation that Ethiopians felt on the flight of the Emperor was aggravated by the incompetence of its nobility to lead the popular resistance. The intellectual

stratum, in particular, had found no solace in the Emperor's flight and, upon his return, faced deliberate attempts to exclude them from influence. Only a few trusted among them became officials etc. The period after 1941 was therefore fraught with the unfinished, internal contest for legitimacy to take power over the post-independence state. Haile Sellasie's alliance with the British and sections of the *banda* to overcome the persistent push of the Patriots for a major share in the affairs of state was bound to have repercussions on all further developments.

The reopening of the schools and the further extension of the educational system never became an issue. Everyone seemed to have agreed that education was paramount for the national development. While serving as an emissary in Delhi, Amanuel Abraham counselled the Emperor thus: "Other than preventing harm that might originate from abroad and afflict the people, it is appropriate to equip [the country] speedily with a tool that will enable it to become self-reliant and self-confident and compete with others. That tool is to spread education and knowledge among your people that your Majesty has long ago recognised. It is only the spread of education that can transform Ethiopia into a genuinely independent country and state in all respects as well as feared and respected among its equals."<sup>35</sup>

Yet, translating the widespread wish into reality was fraught with diverse difficulties. The lack of sufficient human and material resources soon led to an infusion of foreign teachers and educational materials from countries that had helped the Emperor regain power. The British colonies of East Africa supplied textbooks for immediate use in Ethiopian classrooms, unaltered. Except materials for teaching the Amharic language, other subjects did not have indigenous references for a long period of time.

Nevertheless, neither the teachers nor the educational administration as a whole were adequately sensitised about the issues at stake. In as much as the needs of the economy and the society never seemed to have changed beyond the earlier demand for administrative or clerical

skills, the schools continued to produce more and more of the same. Even after the continuing plots to overthrow Haile Sellassie (not just the 1960 coup d'état but others as well) and the yawning gap between Ethiopian education and the other African countries exposed at the May 1961 UN Conference of African States on the Development of Education, hosted in Ethiopia,<sup>36</sup> the government did not conduct any comprehensive review of the orientation or purposes of education. It merely sought to revamp the existing system by increasing overall attendance numbers, setting up a few more technical schools or offering vocational subjects, and injecting some local content. It was thus only in the early 1960s that some semblance of national content found itself in textbooks for primary schools and secondary schools. Yet, the imposition of Amharic as the language of instruction brought fodder to long-standing resentment and opposition at the local levels where Amharic was not the mother tongue.

Moreover, the increase in student enrolment in the schools as well as in higher education began to attract wider sections of the population into the educational system. Children of lower ranking officials, the military and gradually everyone in the state service were drafted in while those from the upper classes began to prefer, first European, then North American, schools and colleges, with or without state support.

The numerical ascendancy of the children of the middle strata in the school system was bound to have repercussions on the curriculum and direction of education. While the school system was designed to produce officials and administrators and therefore every student aspired to the same, the lack of enough openings to absorb everyone in those high positions began to be felt by the more recent secondary school graduates. The expectations of administrative and managerial jobs that had been inculcated in the minds of the school graduates could not prepare them for the prospect of manual labour because it was supposed to be open to those without education and hence remained at the bottom of the list of jobs that anyone could take up for a



living. Vocational training was always looked upon as lowly and fit for those groups. Even teaching was not considered worthwhile and became a fall back for those who could not succeed in other fields.

According to Teshome G. Wagaw, the education system failed to "satisfy the aspirations of the majority of the people and to prepare in any adequate way those passing through its ranks."<sup>37</sup> He also characterised it as "elitist, inflexible, and unresponsive to local needs"; favouring "a few administrative regions and urban centers at the expense of a predominantly illiterate rural population."<sup>38</sup>

The incompatibility of the educational system with the social and economic needs and aspirations of the nation started to stare the government in the face from the moment the University students in Addis Ababa took sides with the 1960 coup makers. The jobless and drop out numbers were fuelling public anger at the waste of the young and the inability for the government to do anything for them. The political fallouts from the sidelining and elimination of the coup makers as well as the highly regarded Patriots together with newly felt needs for space and freedom of expression burst out in the shape of student demonstrations and boycotts that became the centre of public interest throughout the period.

The gaps between the theories and discourses offered for assimilation in the classroom, on the one hand, and the state of Ethiopian society, on the other, that University students felt they were experiencing turned into a whirlpool from which some came out radicalised and intent on radicalising the society. It was not unknown for University students assigned to the one year national service to teach history for high school students, for instance, to devote the whole year to the history of the French Revolution!

The response of the government to student rebellion was either utter disregard or short-term incarceration — both of which helped ignite the smouldering desire for change. The well-

known backwardness of Ethiopian society was too blatant for anyone to hide even by using clever statistics that became part of the government's weaponry. In the face of the general economic decline and the state of paralysis in agriculture, the student movement became the sole champion for any alternative. The former students and radicals of the bygone era in the Haile Sellasie I University Alumni Association had no influence or voice to even begin to pose as a counterweight. The story of how the radical student movement soon ended in party politics and the descent to defeat has been recounted by the author elsewhere<sup>39</sup> and it will not be necessary to repeat that here.

Apart from the general absence of the material or spiritual prerequisites for the emergence of an Ethiopian intelligentsia, the imperial government's stance of ignoring the problems of development and its inability to define the role or options of the educated within it, led to a confrontation that neither side could win. The upshot of the stalemate was the government's attempt to introduce a supposedly realistic programme, known otherwise as the Education Sector Review (ESR) of July 1972. The main aim of the ESR was to retool the existing system by providing skills to more people at lower levels and thereby release them to the local market or productive engagements. However, the purported anti-elitist review was rejected as in fact helping the educated elite already in power or in the upper echelons to entrench itself.

The attempt to forcibly introduce the ESR eventually became one of the immediate causes for the downfall of the imperial regime though, ironically, it has been renamed and put into effect by the current regime of the EPRDF, almost 30 years after the ESR was debunked. Moreover, some of the very people who were on the opposite side of the argument then and later emerged as the EPRDF have since embraced the ESR as the only alternative for educational development in Ethiopia today.

The slant in the curriculum towards producing administrative and clerical manpower has remained entrenched in spite of the pressures of the growing number of unemployed and the rising voice of the student movement for rational policies and alternatives. Rural education schools were always understaffed and lacking in materials resources with the result that those who went through the school system were sufficiently alienated not to go back to farming and mundane productive activities while at the same time not being able to get into urban employment as they did not possess the necessary skills, nor could the jobs open at a rate fast enough to absorb the growing numbers of high school graduates.

The vexatious problems forced, perhaps also became excuses for, the government to extend the begging bowl to foreign countries and institutions to lend their support for education too. The dependence in all forms of activities was evident in the educational sector too. The building of schools and roads in the rural areas as well as the generation of teaching staff were handed over to foreign organisations and the largesse of foreign nations. This became more pronounced when the military took power and attempted to find new foreign sponsors among the east European pro-Soviet states. The yearly exports of the country's best high school graduates to the Soviet bloc countries initiated a new path of dependency and more complex consequences which we cannot address here fully. A new cleavage among the educated along the lines of whether one went to Moscow or the West began to sprout.

Education under the military dictatorship was a continuation of the old policies and practices though, as part of the make-belief that the Dergue sought to create, it despatched senior secondary and university students in one swoop to evangelise the nation in the philosophy of 'Ethiopia Tikdem' and teach them the basic alphabets of reading and development. The celebrated successes of the literacy project could not hide the fact that the same process was used to stamp out rural unrest and to emasculate any influence that the student movement could

have had in the urban areas.

Recent discussions on the role of Ethiopian intellectuals largely focus on the merits of the student movement in the 1960s and 1970s. A sizeable number seek to attribute to that movement the failures of the February 1974 Revolution and the rapacious rule of the military dictatorship for the 17 years. Some even go beyond that period and hold the same movement responsible for the capture of power by the latest regime intent on continuing Dergue-like domination of the political sphere and plunder of the country's resources for the benefit of the groups in power.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The transition from the traditional to the modern society in Ethiopia was mediated more by foreign intervention and the need to forestall foreign rule rather than an urge to meet internal necessities. The smatterings of small groups and sections of the non-ecclesiastically educated that existed for much of the last century in Ethiopia remained isolated from the general populace as much as they were fragmentary and patchy in their conceptions about themselves and their role in the society. The decimation of a large number of young intellectuals, among whom could be counted some of those struggling for a breakthrough in the traditional role of the *debtera* and the opportunistic stance of those who joined officialdom on completion of university education, served to perpetuate the inchoate state of the burgeoning group of intellectuals. The parallel existence of a mode of production which could not transit towards a modern economy and a paralysis that obtained among aspiring intellectuals and prevented coalescing into a coherent stratum with distinct interests allied to the emerging middle classes typify the nature of the underlying problem that some commentators seem not to have appreciated.

As a matter of fact, the debate on the functions or roles of intellectuals in Ethiopia has not taken centre stage in any discourse on Ethiopia. If the indigenes never found themselves to be wanting in anything, it is no wonder that foreign scholars preferred to keep away from that topic. If ever foreign scholars intervened (and did so hysterically and in a patronising fashion), it was in connection with their perceived sense of loss of influence through displacement by other ideologies or mentors. Any leaning towards Marxism was, for instance, vehemently attacked while decay within the ranks of the intelligentsia never attracted any comment. The professed abandonment of any form of radical thinking passed without any question directed at many a former revolutionary.

Surely, the widespread recanting, among former radicals, must arouse in any scholar devoted to Ethiopian studies keen interest to get to the bottom of the trend. The rise of philistinism and all kinds of newly revealed thoughts advocating short-sighted acquiescence to the international status quo are testimony to the deep-rooted flaws in the formation of Ethiopian intellectuals.

- <sup>1</sup> Ron Eyerman, Lennart G. Svensson, and Thomas Söderqvist.(ed), *Intellectuals, universities, and the state in Western modern societies*, Berkeley : University of California Press, 1987, at 2-3.
- <sup>2</sup> Edward Shils, *The Intellectuals and the Powers & Other Essays*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1972, at 3.
- <sup>3</sup> Syed Hussein Alatas, *Intellectuals in Developing Countries*, Frank Cass, London, 1977, at 8.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, at 8-9.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, at 10.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, at 9.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, at 8.
- <sup>8</sup> Eyerman, note 1, above, at 115.
- <sup>9</sup> An example is Bahru Zewde, "The Intellectual and the State in Twentieth Century Ethiopia", *Papers of the 12<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Ethiopian Studies*, 2001, at 483 where he expresses intellectuals to be "those initiated into modern education" as well as "propelled by a sense of missing of changing society."
- <sup>10</sup> Incidentally, terminology used to differentiate the various ranks in the army (such as *Fitawrari*, *Kegnazmatch* etc.) was similarly abandoned when the formal army schools began to produce their graduates.
- <sup>11</sup> Shils, note 2, above, at 85.
- <sup>12</sup> Ali A. Mazrui, *Political Values and the Educated Class in Africa*, Heinmann, 1978, at 64-76.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, at 81.
- <sup>14</sup> Alatas, note 3, above, at 48.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, at 15.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, at 4.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, at 15.
- <sup>19</sup> Shils, note 2, above, at 7.
- <sup>20</sup> Alexander Herzen, "From the Other Shore" in "Selected Philosophical Works", Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1956, at 336-337.
- <sup>21</sup> Messay Kebede, for one, has been on a warpath against the "nihilism" of the educated elite. See, "The Rise of Ethiopian Nihilism and the Plight of Addis Ababa University", available at [http://www.ethiopians.com/news/messay\\_kebede.htm](http://www.ethiopians.com/news/messay_kebede.htm). This article is a continuation of his views expressed in *Survival and Modernization, Ethiopia's Enigmatic Present: A Philosophical Discourse*, Red Sea Press, 1999.
- <sup>22</sup> See Assafa Endeshaw, *Ethiopia: Perspectives for Change and Renewal*, Seng Lee Press Pvt. Ltd., Singapore, 2002, at 39-40.
- <sup>23</sup> This became public knowledge during the demonstrations of the lower ranks of the clergy in 1974.
- <sup>24</sup> This was in the form of "giber" (big feast) at certain intervals in the year that the nobility (from the monarch downwards) organized for the general public and the clergy. More often than not the clergy was given a privileged position at the gibirs; it also served the same group of persons privately during other times and got rewards. See Mahteme Sellasie Woldmesquel,, *Zekra Negar* (Amharic), Addis Ababa: Nestanet Printers, 1942 [E.C.], for details of how the *gibir* was laid at the imperial palace. The horrific scenes of ordinary people being subjected to beatings, even death, while the lucky ones sat in an orderly fashion at the top of the *adarsh*, continued right down to 1974. For a graphic description of the proceedings, see Haddis Alemayehu, *Fikir Eske Mekabir* (Amharic) [Berhanena Selam Printers], 1958 [E.C.].
- <sup>25</sup> Abba Paulos Tzadua (tr.), [Peter L. Strauss ed.] *The Fetha Nagast: The Law of Kings*, The Faculty of Law, HSIU, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 1968.
- <sup>26</sup> See Girma Amare, "Aims and purposes of Church education in Ethiopia" *Ethiopian Journal of Education*, vol X no X, 1967, pp.1-11, at 7.
- <sup>27</sup> Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians: An introduction to country and people*, Oxford University Press : London and New York, 1973, at 74-75.
- <sup>28</sup> David S. Landes, *The wealth and poverty of nations: why some are so rich and some so poor*, New York : W.W. Norton, 1999.
- <sup>29</sup> One often glosses over the fact that Emperor Menelik had his foreign advisors, the Swiss Alfred Ilg among them, who drummed home the point that such was the only way to go. The visits of Ras Makonnen and other nobles (including Ras Tafari) to Europe only reinforced that feeling.
- <sup>30</sup> For the constitutional changes championed by Takle Hawariat, see Endeshaw, note 22, above, at 60-62.
- <sup>31</sup> The writings of, amongst others, Deressa Amenti and Gebrehiwot Baykedagn in the first Ethiopian newspaper *AEMERO*, championed such ideas. Gebrehiwot Baykedagn's work, *Mengist ena YeHizb Astedader* (Addis Ababa, 1953 [EC], published posthumously, encapsulated the debate of the time.
- <sup>32</sup> The seriousness with which the Japanese experience was taken is illustrated by the fact that it had a special treatment by one of the well-known writers and translators, Kebede Micael. See his *Japan Endet Seletencech* (no date).
- <sup>33</sup> Tekeste Negash argues "The greatest shortcoming of the education system in Africa and in Ethiopia in particular is that it is poorly related to and interlinked with the traditions of education which predate the coming of the modern school." See, Tekeste Negash, "The Crisis of Ethiopian Education: some Implications for Nation-Building", Report No.29, Department of Education, Uppsala University, Uppsala. April 1990, at 31.
- <sup>34</sup> Amanuel Abraham, *Yehiwote Tizita*, Addis Ababa University Press, 1992 [EC], at 45
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, at 54.
- <sup>36</sup> See, Country Study & Guide – Ethiopia; at <http://www.lupinfo.com/country-guide-study/ethiopia/ethiopia80.html>
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>39</sup> See A Endeshaw, note 22, above, at 31-40.