



# Did Ethiopia Survive Coloniality?

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## Abstract

Ethiopia is unique in that it has never been colonised by European powers; a unique status facilitated by the Ethiopian patriotic forces' defeat of the Italian army at the Battle of Adowa in 1896. Ethiopia also has a long history of voluntarily pushing modernisation in the context of development, the main aim of which is transforming Ethiopia from a feudal, 'traditional' society to a 'modern' society. Unlike other previously-colonised African countries, Ethiopia has taken charge of its own developmental trajectory. Ironically, however, like other African countries, Ethiopia still struggles with developmental challenges. This historical, interpretive and conceptual study, executed in thematic terms, explores this phenomenon. Theoretically, the study is predicated on a decolonial epistemic perspective, articulating the application of modernization to development as its units of analysis. The findings indicate that epistemic decolonization, is needed to prevent the invasion of the cognitive empire by the modernist influences of civilisation and development..

**Keywords:** Modernization, Development, Coloniality, Decoloniality

## Introduction

Ethiopia prides itself on never having been colonised. This study explored the dynamics of modernisation history in the context of development and focused on the analysis of challenges of development. The country has a long history of voluntarily pushing for modernisation and development, driven by the desire to change Ethiopia from a feudal, traditional society to a modern society. Emperor Menelik, in particular, is credited for modernising Ethiopia. The success of Ethiopian patriotic forces in defeating the invading colonial Italian army at the Battle of Adowa, in 1896, constituted an important element of national pride, producing a problematic idea of an African country that was in charge of its development trajectory, as compared to other African societies that languished under direct colonial administration. Ironically, despite this history of surviving direct colonialism, like other African countries, Ethiopia is still struggling with challenges of development. This is the main reason why a critical analysis of the challenges of development faced by modern Ethiopia is not only important, but timely and relevant for the broader debates surrounding the contemporary concept of modernity/coloniality.

Even though Ethiopia was never colonised, it found itself having to push to catch-up by introducing modern systems of administration, so as to harness modern technology, to defend its independence from both internal and external powers, and to deploy her rich human and material resources in an effectively centralised manner. In the process, however, issues of modernisation and development, framing political stability, were confronted by both traditional and modern intellectual elites. The concept of Westernisation inevitably provided views and theories conceptualising the quest for modernization and development. The process has been significantly influenced by a theorization of colonial consciousness that violates knowledge, history, culture, and traditional values.

As such, the study commences by scrutinising the conceptual debates on modernization in terms of development in modern Ethiopia, asking, 'How did Ethiopia break away from feudal to modern society?', 'Who championed this modernisation?', 'What are the challenges of voluntarily pushing for modernization?', and, 'Was Ethiopian modernisation different from that of colonised other African countries?'. The scope of the study covered the retro from Emperor Tewodros to the government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. Thematic analysis was employed, and a detailed literature review and interviews with experts, complemented

by context analyses and the use of relevant official documents, facilitated the overall reinterpretation and critique. There are serious historicization and theoretical critiques on modernization in the context of development that neglect Ethiopian context in its cultural, historical, epistemic, and sociological dimensions. As such, this became the main justification for an interpretive, historical, and theoretical study, which is better executed in decolonial terms.

## **Eurocentric colonial interpretations of Ethiopian history**

The history of Ethiopia as a political entity stretches back to ancient times (Geda & Berhanu 1960). Historically, Ethiopian identity has delineated from different perspectives: the Aksumite perspective, which presents an understanding of Ethiopia as an African Christian society; the Orientalist Semitic perspective, highlighting Ethiopia as Abyssinia; the Pan-Africanist, Garveyism and diasporic perspective, presenting Ethiopia as a symbol of African political freedom; and the Rastafarian perspective, featuring Ethiopia as the home of the Lion of Juda. Importantly, the study's main focus is not on these perspectives, but on the colonial interpretations of Ethiopian history, which reveal and elucidate the influence and magnitude of independence on the modernisation process. A significant aspect of the interpretation is the fact that, throughout the period of European colonisation in Africa, Ethiopia was never colonised. This reality powered a philosophical interpretation of an Ethiopian perspective, embracing a legacy of self-esteem and safeguarding their independence, with the required martyr's spirit, from the brutal Europeans colonial invasion, presenting an image of '(*Tafera ena tekebra yenorech hager*)', a revered nation.

Alternative perspectives of Ethiopian history contain expressive elements that corroborate the ways in which the purposeful historicization and displacement of places and names by European colonial powers battered and disfigured African history at large. Western Ethiopianist scholars predominantly defend the idea of the South Arabian origin of Aksumite Civilisation. However, general inquiries relating to issues of Ethiopian history date back to the period of Emperor Ezana, in the 4th Century. While the most significant inquiries into Ethiopian history begun almost a century after Hiob Ludolf's publications of Geez grammar, in 1661, and the publication of a history of Ethiopia, in 1681 (Yimam, 2009), one of the earliest

studies in Ge'ez<sup>1</sup> was printed in 1513, by Johannes Potken of Cologne. One should note, however, that, the ancient Greeks described Ethiopian as people living in the mountains, grouping them with the Nubians of the current northern and central Sudan. Historic texts pertaining to the Nubian kingdom of Kush could then, therefore, be interpreted as applicable in the Ethiopian context (Kirwan 1972).

In the Amharic version of the Bible, which is eight hundred years older than the King James Version, Ethiopia is mentioned forty-two times in the Old Testament. In the English version, however, 'Ethiopia' is replaced by either 'Sudan', 'Cush' or 'Sabian'. This interpretation includes, unjustly, the Ethiopian philosophic evocation in Psalms 68:31, which says: 'Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God'. The verse has core values associated with the codes of Ethiopian knowledge system. Moreover, it is a root of the philosophy of Ethiopianism, an assertion that Africa would soon be saved from the darkness, which is interpreted as a promise to African renaissance (Moses 1975). For instance, the book of *Kebre Negest*<sup>2</sup> (the glory of the king) is one of the most important textual repositories, containing critical comprehensions which refer to this Bible verse., forming the basis of Ethiopian national and religious feelings, perhaps which has the truest and most genuine expression of Abyssinian Christianity, which embodies metaphysical, epistemological and axiological concepts (Woldeyes 2017). However, the colonial historicization and displacement of places and names has negative implication on the history, place, wisdom and traditional thoughts and cultural values of Ethiopia, as well as Africa.

The other interpretation considered by the study is the European perspective of Ethiopian studies, as a research paradigm that has its scope on Ge'ez, history and culture, in the formative periods where German, French and later, Italian philologists took the precedent. The Italian presence increased following their colonial mission in the Horn of Africa, which led to close contacts particularly with the non-Semitic ethnolinguistic communities whose languages and cultures had been rather less known, compared to those in the Semitic north (Yimam 2009). Some early Italian scholars (Carlo Conti Rossini, Martino Mario Moreno, Lanfranco Ricci and Paolo

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1 Ge'ez is an ancient Ethiopian language that has philosophical and religious sacred connections. Spoken and written Ge'ez was in use for scholarly endeavours, from the thirteenth through the seventeenth centuries of Ethiopian literatures (Scelta & Quezzaire-Belle 2001).

2 In the fourteenth century, scribes from modern East African nation of Ethiopia recorded the national narrative in the holy text of the *Kəbrä Nəgäst* (The Glory of the Kings). Written in ancient scholarly language Ge'ez (Ethiopic), that articulates Ethiopian myths of origin.

Marrassini) researched and interpreted the East African History comprehensively, however, a group of European researchers in Ethiopian studies later argued that Ethiopia has a very long history, and very complicated cultural and linguistic articulations, and that inclusiveness is particularly true for Ethiopia (Lusini 2017).

The Eurocentric conception of Ethiopian studies have either purposefully manipulated the historical civilisation or refuted history and values through their dogmatic and canonised interpretations. For instance, Woolbert (1935) argues that the isolation of Ethiopia from the rest of the Christian world (Europe) has naturally led to the extensive barbarisation of beliefs and tradition. However, despite such colonial interpretation of history, Ethiopia is the primal home of human beings, the ancient Ethiopian civilisation and the recent archaeological findings precedes, chronologically, all ancient civilisations, especially those of the Pharaohnic and Greco-Roman civilisations (Bekerie 2007). Moreover, Ethiopia is utterly and geographically rooted in the soils of Africa, its rich, diverse and original history constructs a tangible place or centre, not only in the self-expression and self-naming of the Ethiopian people, but also in sustaining the African contribution to the world in the midst of colonial history (Bekerie 2007).

Ethiopia is one of the very few places that historically antique polity have managed to protract an unbroken chain of historical civilisation, free of foreign corruption unlike Egypt, Mesopotamia, India and others that were later infested by colonial destructive forces (Tibebu 1995). As such, Ethiopia has been engaged relentlessly in a struggle against Western scholars' Eurocentric interpretations of history. Ethiopia has interpreted its history based on wisdom, not power, and the originality lies in the deployment of its philosophy, because wisdom takes the references of ancient, and seemingly transcends time, knowledge and even culture. As Woldeyes (2017:45) puts it, the connotation of wisdom represents God's ethical principles; it serves as a distinguishing criterion for truth, providing validity, significance and applicability of knowledge. Therefore, the study delves into the Eurocentric interpretations of modern Ethiopian history in terms of decolonization and draws on freedom of thinking, knowing and interpreting of history.

## **Struggle against territorial colonialism**

The Ethiopian struggle against the territorial colonialism of Europe has been markedly different from that of other African countries. The centralised, ancient,

historical state of Ethiopian dynamism has gradually been destroyed, a fostering the emergence of local lords, princes and kings, united in fierce rivalry for power hegemony. During this period, the Machiavellian theory of the survival of the fittest surpassed feudal politics. The powerful Emperor Tewodros II, however, presented the vision of a unified and modern Ethiopia. He ruled (1855-1868) a united Ethiopia through warfare; he had intended to construct a modern form of government based on respect for law and order, but violence founded the order of the law (Marcus 2002). Nevertheless, he succeeded in establishing some form of a central state and collected tributes from the Northern parts of Ethiopia.

Through the tenure of Tewodros, Ethiopia faced complex and continued problems. Internally, there were social and political protests from different local chiefs and princess. Externally, there were growing pressures with recurrent assaults from colonial enemies. The emperor envisioned building firearms, which required capacity and access to imported weapons. As Ethiopia was surrounded by foreign aggressors, importation of weaponries through the North required approval from the Ottoman government, who controlled the port city of Massawa (Grant 2007). Hence, in 1861, in consideration of these challenges, the emperor determined to conciliate the internal strife and transform the country into a modern state through the enactment of a gallant foreign policy to gain technological assistance from Western countries (Clapham 2006), as opposed to manufacturing arms locally. As a token of good faith, relating to the long-standing Christian alliance between Ethiopia and the British government, the emperor requested expertise support from the British and other European colonial powers. Nonetheless, his hope was turned to exasperation and disappointment, and, to get their attention, he detained some European missionaries and British diplomats as hostages.

His reaction triggered conflict with the British government, who sent an expeditionary force in 1868. They surrounded his mountain fortress at Maqdala, but the Emperor refused negotiation or surrender, choosing to take his own life on 10th of April 1868 (Grant 2007). His dream of a unitary government and modernisation was, however, not exterminated by the hostile British diplomatic response. After his death, Emperor Yohannes IV claimed power, but his inability to deal with the reviving feudalism was regarded as his main frailty (Ullendorff & Demoz 1969). Yohannes was much less progressive than Tewodros; he did not support Tewodros' idea of making Ethiopia a centralised national state, but, simultaneously, was certainly not prepared to accept a divided Ethiopia (Clapham 2002). He wrote to Queen Victoria and to Earl

Granville, the British Foreign Secretary, requesting the return of the Kebra Nagast, which was looted by the British army. His letter described the book as the law of Ethiopia, containing the names of the Shums (chiefs), churches and provinces, and asserted its importance, stating, 'I pray you will find out who has got this book, and will send back to me, in my country my people will not obey my orders without this book' (Ullendorff & Demoz 1969).

His statement suggests that, while power successions were not without issue, the entrenched culture of historical consciousness allowed Ethiopian emperors to retain the power lineage. When Tewodros died, some princes, including Menelik, became completely independent (Gemtessa 2014). Although firm rivals, Yohannes reconciled the contestation with Menelik by acknowledging Menelik as a crowned king of Showa. In a significant and politically-strategic settlement, Yohannes was established as the supreme ruler of Ethiopia, entitled to tributes and military support whenever necessary (Giorgis 2010).

However, during Yohannes's reign (1871-1889), Ethiopia, for the first time, experienced the full pressure of colonial politics and foreign aggression (Caulk 1971). His empire became unstable, and soon after, in the battle with the Mahdist, Yohannes was killed. Following his death, King Menelik was crowned as Menelik II, the King of Kings of Ethiopia. While under house arrest, on the orders of his father-in-law, Tewodros, Menelik grew to understand Tewodros' attraction to foreign technology and the effects of disunity upon the empire (Reid 2001). Hence, Menelik earnestly focused on national unity and military strength to maintain sustained sovereignty. He was also conscious of Tewodros reliance on the Western colonial support and its aftermath. He therefore considered them dangerous, potential foes, and decided that the procurement of modern weaponry was his top strategic priority. Menelik's expansive policy for the formation of a unitary government was started at this critical moment. In addition to building national military capacity, the expansion to the south and the east were continued. This expansion is, however, controversially interpreted from various political dimensions, including that the major objective of establishing new provinces was to increase tributes and ostracise the policy of scramble for Africa by European colonisers.

The Italians were sympathetic to Menelik during Emperor Yohannes' reign, and were, in fact, a dangerous threat to Yohannes. The emperor successfully managed to persuade and unite the Ethiopian people, despite their ethnic, class, age and gender differences, to participate in defending their independence as patriots. He

was able to mobilise huge forces in his Ketet Army to fight against the colonial invasion. The Italians attempt of assault was eventually concluded by the triumph of Ethiopian patriots at the Battle of Adwa in 1896. After the victory of Adwa, Menelik defended Ethiopian independence on his strategic foreign policy. One of the diplomatic complexities he encountered was the tripartite agreement between the three (France, British, Italy) colonial powers, signed in 1906 to safeguard their contending interests over the Nile and the geopolitical strategy in the horn of Africa. This was a major colonial coercion on Ethiopian independence. The agreement was especially significant in East Africa, particularly in Ethiopia. The parties had two major concerns:

- (a) they did not trust each other, and feared that the other might take advantage of any opportunity to obtain full control of Ethiopia; and
- (b) they feared that the power succession in Ethiopia might favour one over the others, as the emperor was seriously ill.

The pretext of the pact was to maintain understanding and to support the possible candidates for power succession in Ethiopia. However, the main objective was to protect their common interest in the execution of general colonial policy in favour of trade in their respective spheres, and, if necessary, to impose their colonial ambitions without any rivalries or differences of opinions among them (Marcus 1964). The French Government outlined the four major aspects of the pact: recognition of Ethiopian independence; demarcation of Ethiopian borders; account of zones of influence; and solution of the railway issue (Marcus 1964). However, although they shared colonial interests, each had particularised urges. Because of their interests in the Nile Basin, Great Britain and Egypt's desire was maintaining native rule in the country, in which they could meddle (Arsano 2011). Menelik's decision on such political dilemma protected the rights of Ethiopia to stand for the principle of equitable use of the Nile water today. While the issue of the Nile is, historically, the most important foreign policy concern between Ethiopia and Egypt, it remains a colonial legacy entrenched in East African politics, influencing the central feature of geopolitics and causing political turmoil in the region. The Italian interests in Eritrea and Somaliland, on the other hand, was focused on the disposition of Ethiopian territory in case of fragmentation, a strong ambition left behind as a ticking time bomb in Ethiopia. Because of their avaricious interest, the three colonial powers



could not come to agreement.

Though Great Britain and the French seemingly aim to maintain the integrity of the Ethiopian empire, the Italians were primarily interested in absorbing as much of Ethiopia as possible, following the disintegration of Ethiopia after Menilek's death. The history of the Ethiopian struggle for continued independence and its survival of colonial conquest is full of the unrelieved struggle against territorial colonialism, manifested through isolation, imposition of colonial agreements and recurrent invasions.

When Prince Ras Tafari Makonnen was crowned Emperor Haile Selassie in 1930, he consolidated the creation of modern Ethiopia with a centralised state system, expanded civil society, and continued advancing unity through the development of a modern national army and a Pan-Ethiopian economy with a modern governmental structure. After 40 years, in 1935, the Italians had attempted restore their colonial interests in the course of competition with France and Britain through their strategy of the scramble for East Africa and by launching a war in defiance of the subsequent occupation (Marder 1970). Hence, Ethiopians took part in a multidimensional, patriotic war of resistance to swill down the colonial invaders from their land. The Italian colonial drive, between 1936-1941, once again failed, due to a lack of organisation, hopeless colonial personnel and high costs. The patriots, and the resentments of the Ethiopian farmers, were the greatest impediment to their annexation of East Africa (Sbacchi 1979). However, the five-year occupation ravaged traditional Ethiopia. For over a hundred years, struggling to preserve the independence, the four emperors (Tewodros, Yohannes, Minilek, Haile Selassie) were tenaciously engaged in a similar vision of creating a unified independent and modern Ethiopia state, and were able to enhance the ideas of fidelity and national identity of the dispersed and diverse population.

## **The three unique historical aspects of Ethiopia**

The three unique historical aspects of Ethiopia are: never having been colonised, voluntarily pushing modernization, and the transformation from feudal traditional society to modern society.

### **Never having been a colonised nation**

Ethiopia is said to have avoided the territorial colonialism of Europe. The victory of Adwa as a colonial resistance has four critical values, nationally and globally:

- (a) For the first time, non-white people of Africa defeated the European colonial powers. Ethiopians successfully united to defend their country under the leadership of one king of kings. The victory confirmed the preservation of independence from Italian colonisation. The psychological aspects of this victory have created a spirited national patriotism, regarded as a historical legacy;
- (b) Locally, the post-Adwa period has dual political reflections. On the one hand, it reflects the perpetuation of independence from Italian colonisation; and on the other, it reflects the confirmation of Italy's control over the part of the country that Italy had named Eritrea in 1890, which had political ramifications throughout the twentieth century (Negash 1997). The Eritreans who joined Minelik's army and fought in the battle of Adwa felt betrayed by Minilek when Eritrea was abandoned to the Italian colonisers (Reid 2001). However, there is an argument that Ethiopian politics under Menelik's administration should be examined in the context of European hegemony and the partition of Africa by colonisers. Thus, the argument questions whether Menelik entrusted the Italians with, or purposefully abandoned, Eritrea, and which would be of more theoretical relevance (Araia 2006). Even though, currently, the Ethio-Eritrean 'no war no peace' situation has been amicably settled and the people are in the process of healing, the stain of colonial history remains open for controversial interpretations and political discourse;
- (c) It had also implications on Ethiopian foreign relations and diplomatic status. The country had disappeared from both the British and the French

maps in the years before the battle of Adwa (Allain 2006). Ancient Ethiopia had evolved for 40 years, placing herself on the map of modern Africa (Adejumobi 2007). Following the victory of Adwa, in recognition of the Ethiopian independence, many European countries opened diplomatic missions in Addis Ababa; and

- (d) Furthermore, the victory of Adwa has global significance and symbolic value, becoming a source of inspiration for colonised Africans, diasporas and Afro-Americans. For instance, in 1892, some Bantu Christian leaders liberated themselves from the authority of European missions and formed an independent Black South African denomination called the Ethiopian church (Levine 2007). Moreover, the image of independent Ethiopia offers encouragement and strength to the leaders and freedom fighters of Africa. Jomo Kenyatta, who articulated the Ethiopian patriotic response to the Italian invasion, writes: 'Ethiopia, with her emperor leading, relies on her soldiers, her courage, her traditions. There will be no concession; Ethiopia will fight, as she always has fought, to preserve her independence against this invasion of Imperialism' (Levine 2007). Furthermore, he formed a group with J. B. Danquah of the Gold Coast, Mohammed Said of Somaliland, George Padmore of Jamaica, and others, to provide leadership for the African liberation movement called the International African Friends of Abyssinia (Levine 2007).

### **Voluntarily pushing modernisation**

The second unique historical aspect of Ethiopia is voluntarily pushing modernisation. Ethiopia's developmental trajectory can be seen as a series of endeavours at modernising. As the sole indigenous African country to avoid colonisation, Ethiopia is seen as being in charge of its modernisation and development agenda. For most African countries, modernisation and development are considered a product of colonialism. Zewde (2002) argues that the creation of modern Ethiopia is an emerging socio-political order.

The coronation of Emperor Tewodros II in 1855 marked the prelude of modern Ethiopian history. Modernization in Ethiopia can be periodised into three phases of forty-year epochs: from Tewodros coronation to the Battle of Adwa (1855-1896); from the Battle of Adwa to the Italian occupation (1896-1936); and from the Italian

occupation to the 1974 Revolution. Across the period of 1855-1960s, the common agenda to all emperors (Tewodros II, Yohannes IV, Minilek II, Haile Selassie) were unification, modernisation, centralisation and power consolidation. Yet, considering the colonial power in the neighbouring countries and their repeated threats, the modernization agenda was mainly focused on preservation of the independence. Historians (see Marcus 2002; Zewde 1984; Pankhurst 1955) assert that, during the 1850s and 1860s, Tewodros was the leading figure posed to end the divisive politics of the '*Zemene Mesafint*' (the Era of the Princes), and that he attempted to unite Ethiopia under a strong central government. His unification policy was interconnected with another equally critical issue, modernisation. Moreover, Tewodros endeavoured to end slavery and the slave trade, polygamy, and robbery, and introduce land and religious reforms. In particular, he attempted to introduce European technology so as to put Ethiopia on an equal footing with European powers (see Rubenson 1976; Crumme 1969).

The emperor, however, faced fierce hostility from internal strife, princes, church authorities and clerics, and external threats dogged his vision of modernization. Because of taxation enactment and his prevailing concern with the creation of a well organised, highly-disciplined and better armed national army, powerful internal opponents from every corners of the country reacted against him. (see Zewde 2002; Beyene, Pankhurst & Bekele 1990). Their collective reaction prompted the emperor to make a determined effort to mobilise forces. Therefore, his modernisation projects prioritised armed forces competence over other issues. His aims to acclimatise western technology and gain skilled technicians from Europe were neglected (see Zewde 2002; Crumme 1974). Hence, he failed on both projects – the military campaigns to create a national army, and the projects to raise necessary finances to build a centralised modern administration (Appleyard & Pankhurst 1987).

Thus, the modernisation dream of adapting western technology was shattered by resistance from his own countrymen and by the absence of technical support from the British government (Ayele 2016). This, however, does not mean that his reign was insignificant. While many of his intentions failed to materialise, certain elements of modern Ethiopia can be attributed to him. He is known as a reformer and moderniser, he revived the idea of a united empire under one strong, supreme ruler, and he is credited as starting the struggle for Ethiopia's diplomatic recognition (Crumme 1969). Despite failing to ensure diplomatic relations with the Europeans, or successfully instigate his efforts of modernisation, all subsequent successors

continued his vision for recognition of Ethiopian independence until Ethiopia was positioned the conventional diplomatic relations (Ayele 2016).

The modernization agenda was, however, not receiving the same attention by his successor, Emperor Yohannes IV (1871-1889). Following the death of Yohannes, Minilek was crowned King of Kings, and he pursued the modernization project as a major agenda more aggressively. This time, Ethiopia defined clear national borders, and governors, directly accountable to Minilek, were appointed to administer different regions. He was assigned modern bureaucracy and established centralised form of government. In recognition of the importance of modern infrastructure, public service institutions were introduced, and work on the Franco-Ethiopian railroad was started (1897-1917), although this was only completed following his death. He also ordered the construction of several roads and bridges, including the bridge over the Abbay (Blue Nile) and tar roads from Addis Ababa to various locations. Between 1897 and 1908, telephone, telegraph and electricity lines were introduced. The use of money in commercial transaction was also introduced, with the first Menelik coins (Grish) issued in 1894, in Paris, and the second issued in 1897 (Araia 2006). In 1905, the first national bank (Bank of Abyssinia under the auspices of Egyptian administration) was established. Modern education (the first Minilek School in 1907), health services (the Menelik modern hospital first run by the Russian Red Cross), and the Postal service had also begun, with Ethiopia becoming a member of the Universal Postal Union.

The achievements of Menelik's modernisation project were certainly technical, but the process was disregarded as indigenous knowledge. The Centralised form of government followed Westernised ways of institutionalisation. The emperor laid the foundations for a relatively uniform system of economic life, uniform tax laws, regulation of trade and tariffs and tight control of customs. Nonetheless, the implication of modernisation to the broad masses laid a heavy burden on the subject peasantry. As a result, modernisation entrenched feudalism in a more centralised way. The majority of the country's population were peasants, and they were subjected to all forms of exploitation and oppression. The feudal land tenure system was imposed upon them, and they were reduced to tenancy and serfdom (Araia 2006).

In the history of western civilisation, modernization is a product of scientific and technological progress, of industrial revolution, and of the sweeping economic and social change brought about by capitalism. However, Ethiopia doesn't have a history of modernization in the same sense in western tradition. Emperor Tewodros was

a pioneer for voluntarily pushing modernisation, but his initiatives were ruined by the British colonial power – Emperor Minilek continued the modernization agenda and Emperor Haile Selassie advanced it and adopted Western education systems and institutional bureaucracy to consolidate Ethiopian independence and his own power. From that time onwards, Ethiopia entered a state of emulation, dependency and self-ignorance, a period referred to as showing how modernization resulted in Ethiopia staring to consume what it has not produced. This emulation of modernization creates ‘native colonialism’ in Ethiopia (Woldeyes 2017), divulging a direct relationship between the concept of modernization and metaphysical colonial influence. Western modernization debilitates voluntarily pushing modernization through epistemic colonialism, instead motivated the country to surrender its history of freedom for western epistemology invasion, which ignores the epistemology of others.

### **The Transformation from feudal traditional society to modern society**

The third aspect is how Ethiopia broke away from feudalism and came into modernization. Ethiopia has a long history of voluntarily pushing modernisation and development. The modernisation drive had to do with changing Ethiopia from a feudal traditional society to a modern society. The Ethiopian governors were deeply hierarchical and embedded within an intense awareness of power relations (Clapham 2006). The rulers of Ethiopia desired and comprehended the modernization which had empowered the European states (Giorgis 2010). Nonetheless, during this time, the political construction and consciousness of feudalism in Ethiopia was mainly typified by the culture of strong regional conservative traditional nobility, and the unity of state and church. Even so, in the 1850s, when Emperor Tewodros started the power struggle for centralisation as a result of the critical challenges of incorporation, much was reliant on the willingness or reluctance of the powerful traditional nobilities. Also, the social construction under feudalism was based on a strict stratification of classes with its own traditional economic and political functions (Woolbert 1935). The basis for the social organisation was principally patriotic, with the positions of nobility bestowed on the men who lead the farmers-army in time of war and become governors in time of peace. The rest became peasants, tenants, shepherds, and servants for the ruling class.

The history of the Ethiopian feudal political power was constructed in the pivotal themes of centralisation and unification. Emperor Minilek emerged as an

exceptional emperor, demonstrating traditional political wisdom to handle internal and external political matters successfully. As a result, he consolidated the political power and established a strong centralised government. His southern conquests adopted administrative policies, and the conquered lands were distributed among patriots called Neftegnas (men with rifles). He also recognised the importance of Balabats (local chiefs) from the conquered peoples and appointed them to top positions (Araia 2006). For instance, Jimma's internal autonomy continued, and he appointed Muslims for highest offices wherever former principalities and sultanates existed (Araia 2006). Yet, the transformation from feudal traditional society to modern society fully attained its consolidation under the absolutist rule of Emperor Haile Selassie one hundred years later (Zewde 1984).

Internally, struggle against the heavy feudal tradition of conservative nobility continued during the time of Emperor Haile Selassie (Ras Teferi). However, the hereditary regional overlords had been brought in, and had either been forced to accept close supervision from the central government or been replaced by imperial nominees (Woolbert 1935). In so doing, he achieved the concentration of the supreme and absolute power in modern Ethiopia. Externally, his government was concluded by placing the country in the then international political system. In a major diplomatic move, in August 1923, he applied for Ethiopian membership in the League of Nations. Ironically, Britain, as the only major power opposed to the Ethiopian candidacy, claimed that Ethiopia was not yet sufficiently westernised (Marcus 1964). However, the international law of the twentieth century in which non-European States were permitted to join the international relations is based on the rule of civilisation and influenced by European colonial powers (Allain 2006). As such, Ethiopian admission to the League of Nations was allowed by the criteria of abolition of slavery and the slave trade on its territory.

Post 1941, Ethiopia, as the sole indigenous African state that avoided colonisation, was able to craft its own development agenda and was markedly transformed to a system of advanced feudalism which was represented by a modern society and a unitary government with absolutism, that was a self-justifying philosophy rather than a transformation for social and economic development. The pressure of westernisation and European standards of civilisation transformed the Ethiopian feudal society to modern society. That implies the idea of a monolithic and homogeneous western culture, which has gradually nullified the Ethiopian social and cultural values. Even though the history of Aksumite civilization ontology had produced, by any standard,

the basic ingredients of civilisation, which could accurately be defined as a powerful, advanced and cultured society, which can transform the feudal society into modern society, the creation of modern Ethiopia as an emergent socio-political order was much more tortured, influenced by Europeanised and Westernised homogeneity (Kebede 2006). The transformation has created a modern society that is trapped in the development of westernised colonial consciousness. The newly-modern society was exposed for the invasion of the cognitive empire with its modernist concept of civilization and modernization that tragically turns to a trajectory of self-colonization.

### **Challenges of modernization**

The Italian occupation in Ethiopia is two-sided, on the one hand, it destroyed indigenous mythological values, and on the other hand, it enforced the alteration to modern/western world. However, the notion of modernisation for Ethiopian rulers was professed as a promise of innovation and development, and the transformation from feudal to modern society. Hence, all were geared towards the safeguarding of independence and the consolidation of Imperial power. In the process, two groups emerged with discordant presentiments and adverse interpretations of the concept of modernization. The nobility, ecclesiastical order and the traditional scholars (the Debteras) were in one group, and the emergent Western-educated elites were in the other group. The first group understood the notion of modernization as a means of westernisation that undermines the historical and traditional values, obliterating ontology, epistemology and traditional scholarship. Yet, the second group, initially called Japanisers and subsequently called westernisers, promoted modernisation as the only option to preserve independence, and as a precondition to transform the country to the development of the European standard. The latter group approached modernisation in the way proposed by Rostow – all societies have the potential to become advanced industrial society and all follow the same basic evolutionary path (Rostow 2000). Hence, at its inception, the quest for modernisation was logged in such a perplexed interpretation that it vandalised the traditional knowledge and education.

The two groups developed progressively-contrasting concepts and have grown in their own directions. The interest, the cognizant and the values of the two groups were in conflict and created epistemological fissures. The Western-educated elites were seriously provoked by Western modernisation. However, in the middle, Emperor



Minilek faced a dilemma – he was eager for modernisation, but also pressured by the disconsolate traditional leaders. One of Minileks' cabinet members, Bitweded Getachew Abate, criticised the tenacious situation in this way:

*'We are caught between our old traditions and the new civilisation. Since we still have a long way to go to attain that civilisation, what is best for us is to hurry back to our former traditions and keep our old warriors happy by reshuffling, bestowing decorations and arms, giving banquets regularly, cheering them up, letting them chant their war songs.'* (Zewde 2002:202)

Gebrehiwot Baykedagne, the most celebrated of the early 20th Century Ethiopian scholars, who had exposure to Western education and was the Private Secretary and Interpreter to Menilek, reflected his criticisms. He had published two groundbreaking works, 'Emperor Menilik and Ethiopia', published in 1912, and 'Government and People's Administration', published in 1924. The common subject reflected in both books is modernisation in Ethiopia. In the books he reflects on: social and technological retardation, the problems of the Ethiopian society, state and economy during the early 20th Century, and the shortcomings of economic dependency, and also delineates what was to become the theory of underdevelopment (Kebede 2006). After his visit to the colonised Eritrea and Sudan, in comparing these to Ethiopia, he writes:

*'If we look around our neighbouring countries, we see intelligent people developing them with diligence. In particular, if we look at the Sudan, which had been ravaged by the Dervishes, we realise how a desert can be transformed into a Garden of Eden when ruled by such intelligent people like the British.'* (Zewde, 2002:51)

Commenting on the above arguments for modernization was not only rhetoric, it was an act of creating a historic rift that positioned one group as resilient to the euro-centric moderniser, and characterised this group as backward and uncivilised. Hence, the interpretation of modernisation in the political, economic, social and intellectual history lost its epistemic realism of Ethiopia. The consequence of this colonial interpretation created dissention between the two groups. As such, the two groups reflections become constructed arguments:

Traditional Group	Westernised Group
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nobilities and traditional scholar contention:</li> <li>• The legacy of Ge'ez civilisation is not simply as a liturgical language in Coptic Church, but is a pre-Christian inscription that preserves indigenous knowledge since the time of Emperor Ezana, in 4<sup>th</sup> Century.</li> <li>• Traditional knowledge should not be forced by colonial subjectivity to play a catch-up role in modernisation process</li> <li>• Have no confidence in the concept of modernisation that came from colonial powers, rather perceived it as a means of violating history, culture and epistemic values</li> <li>• Claim critically, the looming of the Italian invasion forced reconsideration of the rejected concept of the reliance of Ethiopia's survival on rapid modernisation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Western educated scholars charged the other group as:</li> <li>• Resistant to change, fighting to stop the long-awaited modernisation, because of their ignorance of the modern world and the resentment over the loss of their traditional power,</li> <li>• Irrational, difficult to transcend, who are blocked the country from the benefits of modernisation in the name of tradition values and knowledge to keep the status quo</li> <li>• Characterised as imprudent, defiant and egocentric</li> <li>• Averse to analytical cognitive and rigid mind to others knowledge and philosophy</li> </ul>

Nonetheless, when Emperor Haile Selassie came to power, the concept of modernization continued passionately – his ambition for modern Education brought more western educated elites to the government system, thus, giving more strength to the group of Westernisers. He was diplomatically endeavoured to accommodate both groups at his discretion in the perusal of his visions of development, but he failed to incorporate the demanding Euro-North American-centric concept of modernization, with its own culture and languages, without obliterating the traditional knowledge. Hence, post 1941, one of the prominent western educated elite, Takla-Hawaryat, lost

confidence, and, in apprehension of the challenges of modernization, writes:

*'Sometimes, I ask myself, would it have been better if the civilised nations had colonised us for a short period of time?'* (Zewde, 2002:100)

Even though, Ethiopia survived physical colonialism, in this instance the country could be considered a good example that reflects how the epistemological power and the concept of coloniality colonises and resides in the heart, mind and body of humans through a rhetoric of modernization. The efforts to recreate Ethiopia in the resulting image of European modernization continued from regime to regime, from generation to generation, by drawing ideas of modernisation from the experiences of other countries. The dream for the creation of a modern Ethiopia turned to stimulating emulation of western modernisation. Since the mid nineteenth century, the search for modernization has followed different models of development from other developed nations. The first such model was imperial Russia, followed by Japan, and after the Second World War, followed by the United Kingdom and other Western states (Clapham 2006). However, the successive unitary governments could not last long, because internal opposition and repression mutually reinforced each other until they were eliminated by the 1974 Socialist Revolution. The revolution overtook the political power which begun with promise and good spirits and ended with dismal situations. The regime was trying to combine and adopt the then Eastern bloc ideology of Marxism and Nationalism which had failed to deliver meaningful political and economic reforms and development to Ethiopia (Zewde 2002). Hence, the Western epistemology institutionally emasculated and violated the validity of traditional knowledge and history, as well as social reality, continually, both in the time of Kings and in the time of socialist revolution.

Since 1991, Ethiopia again engages in emulation of a revised Marxism that was distinguished particularly by the observance of Stalin's theory to address the national question which geared towards a political system of Ethnic Federalism (Clapham 2006). Afresh, intellectual elites argue that Ethiopia wants stability and prosperity, as an independent nation that depend on the vision of its people. Ethiopia engaged persistently to bring structural transformation and adopt neoliberal paradigm, shortly shifting to the democratic developmental state model that is considered a complete set of thought. However, all efforts to modernise Ethiopia were challenged by the global colonial Eurocentric models of development that brings hegemonic structure

of knowledge and values, which creates entangled socio-economic problems with toxic political culture. As such, the philosophical constructs of modernity reflect the history, values, experiences and positions of west Europe (Habermas, 1993).

## **Did Ethiopia Avoid Colonialism**

From the mid 19th to the late 20th century, European colonialism was the most expansive externally-imposed form of globalisation that the African continent had experienced. Ethiopia is the only African country that has been able to survive physical colonialism. However, the main question here is, did Ethiopia avoid global coloniality and its rhetoric, its practices of civilization, modernisation, reformation, growth and development, and its constant external colonial pressures of capitalist accumulation on a world scale, as well as its coloniality of knowledge? The answers to these questions suggest that, despite its history of avoiding direct colonialism, Ethiopia, like any other African country, is still struggling with challenges of development. As such, the non-colonisation of Ethiopia doesn't mean that the country avoided the European colonial influences and metaphysical colonialism.

In conventional terms, Ethiopia, for millennia, particularly since the remarkable triumph at the Battle of Adwa, has preserved its territorial independence and national integrity. However, Euro-modernity with epistemic coloniality has influenced Ethiopian independence in various forms. Fundamentally, the external pressure, the European isolation paradigm and the concept of emulation in the absence of modern society, placed Ethiopian independence in jeopardy. The predominant factor was the idea that modernisation emulated mostly from the west, and was not generated natively from indigenous knowledge that created colonial consciousness. As Woldeyes (2017:10) argues, colonial consciousness is first generated and stipulated through violence on indigenous knowledge, hence, epistemological colonization is more forceful and more perpetual than its physical power. This is the point where Ethiopia's history of never having been colonised challenged versions of modern subjects produced by the Euro-modernity. Therefore, coloniality should not be confused with colonialism, because coloniality survived without colonisation, in post colonies, and continued long after colonialism in the minds, lives, languages, dreams, imaginations and epistemologies of modern subjects in Africa and the entire global South (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013).

The other critical factor is the agenda of transformation and revolution which

preoccupied the minds of intellectual elites. Unlike the traditional rationalisation of power as a divine gift, the power of elitedom is created through a process that produces ignorance of the values of the masses and emulates ideas that are foreign to local experiences (Woldeyes, 2017). The elites' modernity is introduced and practiced in a similar manner to its genealogy, that of colonial modernity where the masses live in unchanged dejection, while the elites exploit and speak on behalf of the peasants. As Woldeyes (2017:24) argues, this is a native colonialist model of modernization. Therefore, Ethiopia did not avoid global colonialism, rather, from the period of colonial governmentality to the current coloniality of markets and new scramble for Africa, Ethiopia shared with other African countries sufferings of development and difficulties that are deeply embedded within these overlapping epochs that were accompanied by epistemicides, usurpations, appropriations and distractions (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015).

Ethiopian independence is a result of patriotic sentiment and the bloody sacrifice of its traditional values and beliefs which created a common energy to defend their beloved country from colonial power. Conversely, the educated elites strong influence is an invention of a constitution of modern education curricula and modern bureaucratic system, which has been based on Western experiences, producing secularity and violating the cultural and traditional values gained through traditional education, so as to limit independence. The modernization process has, however, created self-transformation from the system of feudal kingdom to the systems of elitedom, by leading the country to a blind imitation or adaptation of westernised system of education and models of development, which helped replace Ethiopian independence through the system of coloniality. The system of Elitedom operates based on its globally-structured epistemic and systemic thinking, which is produced and maintained in line with a universal standard. The system creates a doomed society, that is, distended to an imaginary society in which everything is bad with expressions of extreme negativity to history and traditional values. The colonial universal standard is racist, violating and disregarding the native history, traditional views of knowledge, and debased native ontology, epistemology and scholarship.

Therefore, this is a time for analytical studies to move away from the colonial ways of thinking of reforms and development, and towards an approach that values Ethiopian independence. Developing the above arguments in terms of a decolonial turn within the academic and political discourse can convey epistemic issues and illuminate ontological questions arising from coloniality and its implications on

Ethiopian modernization. The concept of decoloniality promulgates a decolonial turn in adversary to the colonising turn that underpins Western thought (Maldonado-Torres, 2011). Thus, to counter the concept of Euro-modernity or coloniality, Ethiopia must embrace the concept of decoloniality, in a timely fashion, to articulate critically its philosophy of life, to value its history of never having been colonised, and to maintain its rich legacy of tradition and knowledge. In this context, in response to the question, 'Did Ethiopia avoid colonialism?', as posed by the study, one must conclude that Ethiopia was not able to avoid metaphysical colonization.

The findings of the study therefor assert that elites have a critical role and responsibility to recover indigenous values in the process of epistemological decolonisation. While all Ethiopian feudal Imperial rulers acted in good faith, and all socialist dictator rulers of Ethiopia adapted and emulated systems of education, government bureaucracy and different development programmes to modernise the country, all overlooked the rooted systemic issue of coloniality. The concept of modernity/coloniality increasingly meddles in the interpretation of modernisation, producing problems in new models of development, with consequences, side effects, pressures and difficulties across the globe.

## **Conclusion**

The study has shown that even though it seems like the challenges of development in modern Ethiopia become more provocative, Ethiopia must adopt a pragmatic philosophy that is based on Ethiopian realism in order to be able to articulate views and ideas that are relevant to the needs of Ethiopia. These facts should reflect a comprehensive and implicated study on the history of Ethiopian independence in relation to the challenges of modernisation, particularly in terms of the development that can acclimatise reflective reasoning. Many of the general challenges of development in Africa, particularly in Ethiopia, including poverty, conflict, and others, are not eccentric to Ethiopia as such, but are problems of coloniality entrenched within the global-system that demonstrates itself. Ethiopia does have a choice, as neither ostentatious Marxism, nor a developmental state, nor ethnic federalism, were effective solutions to the challenges of modernisation and development. It is important to consider a return to the source of its history, legacy and cultural heritages so as to glean pertinent knowledge and guidance. Decolonization of anything requires knowledge and understanding of its historical foundation and

formation. (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). As such, the study calls for the decolonising of knowledge and mind, the adopting of appropriate indigenous wisdom, epistemology and practices which are collectively beneficial to the advancement of the people's lives, and the valuing of what history has handed over, rather than the emulation of theories from elsewhere that tend to run unjustly, dictating the internal realities of the country.

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