

Book Review

Bahru Zewde (2002). A History of Modern Ethiopia (1855-1991), 2nd ed. Oxford: James Currey; Athens: Ohio University Press; Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press. xviii + 300 pp. ISBN 0821414402 12.95.

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A REVIEW

In accordance to Bahru, one of Ethiopia's eminent historians, the underlying principle and the inspiration for the preparation of the first edition of his book (1991), a History of Modern Ethiopia (1855-1974), was to provide solution for the jarring scarcity of general history of Ethiopia that could serve specialists and educators alike. Thus, he responded to quench the quest of historians and educators for comprehensive and preeminent history. Besides the author claims that the urgency was spared by the hurdle prompted by the great take off in Ethiopian historiography.

The original edition of this book was covering the period from 1855 to 1974 but in the second edition he extended it to 1991. This edition, which is the focus of the review, encompasses 74 illustrations re-collected from 33 diverse sources originally gathered by travelers, missionaries and individual researchers. The tenets of these illustrations meander on depicting battle fields, military leaders, war weapons, politicians and few urban centers.

These illustrations are supplemented with 8 economic, topographic and political maps. The book covers 6 chapters with a temporal span extending from 1855 to 1991. It begins with an introduction that elucidates about the geographical location (absolute and relative), the topographic setting, the genesis of the name Ethiopia, the dynastic pedigree, linguistic, ethnic and religious make up and administrative history of the pre-1855 Ethiopia and culminated with a brief description about the triumphant victory of the ethnic insurgence launched against the regime of Menigstu in May 1991.

The first chapter describes two themes: the internal structural chaos fashioned by polticus egoism of the princes and the process of inner 'north-south' link through the long distance trade which was further challenged by external menace.

The second chapter narrates about the reaction given by Tewodros II to the internal chaos triggered by the squabbling nobles and the foreign threat. It further elucidates about the resurgence of centralization process and commencement of the creation of modern state of Ethiopia as it was envisioned before the onset of the 'era of princes' with wider territorial extensions through Tewdros II first, continued with a new approach of Yohannis IV and finalized with the ultimate seal of Menilik II's extensive territorial aggrandizement.

In chapter three, Bahru mentioned about colonialist menace and its tragedian culmination at the Battle of Adwa. He also went on elucidating the post Adwa power equilibrium of the absolutist state and the institutionalization efforts in reaction to the rushing colonialist conspirator treaty.

Having this, Bahru tried to describe about the 'second Ethio-Italian war' whose concomitant effect made Ethiopia easy prey to the foreign domination of Britain and latter the US. The post restoration reconstruction effort coupled with popular resentments against the absolutist state of Hailesellasie and its legal, military and administrative measures taken to consolidate power and cripple the opposing is vividly expounded as prelude to forthcoming trendy upsurge.

Finally, his attention is preoccupied by a very analytical description about the popular upsurge of the 1974 and the rise of the military junta which had lost its power to the ethnic insurgent groups in May 1991. The last portion of the book is

backed with brief conclusion (pp. 270-274), glossary and transliteration key (pp. 275-280), and as well a 10 pages index, (pp. 281-300), which depicts places, institutions and series of historical phenomena.

Basically it is difficult to point out technical and methodological boo-boos from this eminent historian yet engulfing oneself in deeper intellectual scrutiny enables to have an academic revelation on some errors. In this regard, the reviewer argues against Bahru's periodization which took 1855 as a land mark for the inauguration of the modern history of Ethiopia. In this regard, the designation is anachronistic for a history of archaic feudal society couldn't be branded as modern merely because of the rise of a leader of that society with conception of modernization or westernization. In fact, a mismatch between the society and the leader can be inferred from the failure of the modernization programs and as well from the final words of Tewdros II. However, modern history has to do with the emergence of capitalist society yet Ethiopia was a feudal state which was later transformed in to 'soldiers' socialism' after the popular upsurge of the 1974.

In spite of the fact that boundaries demonstrate fluidity and dynamic nature, in all his maps Bahru illustrates Ethiopia and Eritrea as a single political unit even after the secession of the latter. Besides, the approach he pursues in narrating the historical developments of the country is loaded with much of the roads travelled by nationalists, which is most often obsessed with political history. This approach is believed to be didactic, less objective, dominated with a blend history and politics, glorification of war and cult of state power. Due to this nationalist historians commonly branded as mere press agents for the politicians, and recruiting officers for the army (Durant, Pleasure of Philosophy:206).

Bahru has hardly escaped the latter three criticism viz. blend of history and politics, glorification of war and cult of state power. In fact, he had made a profound leap towards synthesizing the *Enset* culture and *Teff* culture as single historical platform. He also accredited the existence of mosaic nationalities with multitude of linguistic and cultural manifestation (p. 6). Contrary to this, in his book the lion's share is dedicated in the veneration of kings whom he believed as protagonists of the history of the country. Thus, he gave little attention to the hitherto neglected issue of social history and ethno nationalism by regarding it as a deification of ethnicity. Indeed he wrote around six pages (pp.16-21) description about the "peripheral" states of *Kaffa*, *Janjaro*, *Jimma*, *Welayta*, *Wellega* *Konso* and *Gurage*. Thus, tensions between those who are condemning state nationalism as years of injustice and the hegemonic-nationalist's perspective of state building is not yet resolved in his historical platform. This pitfall calls for the re-writing of a comprehensive history of the country by decoding the sacred seals and the sacro sanct assumptions for transcending conventional history.