

# Ethiopian Development: The Politics of Emulation

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**ABSTRACT** *Since the mid-nineteenth century, Ethiopian rulers have sought to ‘develop’ by emulating models from more developed but ostensibly comparable states. The first such model, imperial Russia, was followed by Japan, and after the Second World War by the United Kingdom and other Western states. The 1974 revolution led the new military regime to turn to the Soviet Union, which provided the most devotedly followed of Ethiopia’s exemplars. Its overthrow in 1991 led not to a return to Western models, but to a revised Marxism distinguished especially by adherence to Stalin’s theory of the ‘national question’. None of these models has ‘worked’. Several of them, indeed, became discredited in their countries of origin not long after their adoption in Ethiopia. The search for an ‘Ethiopian road to development’ remains unfulfilled.*

**KEY WORDS:** Ethiopia, development

Halfway up the side of a mountain called Magdala in the Wollo region of northern Ethiopia, you can to this day see the rusting remains of an enormous cannon or mortar. This cannon has a name, Sebastopol, and it has been there since 1868, when it was cast on the orders of the emperor Tewodros, to guard his fortress capital against an invading British punitive expedition that had come to rescue a group of foreign hostages, including Her Majesty’s Consul, whom Tewodros had imprisoned. Thousands of men toiled to haul it up the mountain, but the task was too much for them, and they left it at the point where they could drag it no further. It was never fired – it was, indeed, militarily entirely useless – and the British force took Magdala with ease. The defeated Tewodros committed suicide in the ruins of his citadel, thus assuring himself a lasting status as Ethiopia’s first revolutionary hero. The treasures accumulated at Magdala were taken to Britain, where they are now the focus of a campaign to restore them to Ethiopia. Only the cannon remains, a classic piece of development archaeology.<sup>1</sup>

The name of the cannon is the giveaway. A decade after the Crimean war, when the guns of the great Russian fortress of Sebastopol had held at bay the British and French invaders, its name was invoked to protect another great Orthodox Christian empire against another punitive expedition, mounted by one of the same imperial powers that

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had attacked the original. It shows that Tewodros was more than another African leader confronting European imperialism, like Asantehene Kofi Karakari or Cetshwayo of Zululand in the following decade, even though he was militarily as unsuccessful as they were. He was the first Ethiopian ruler, perhaps the first Ethiopian, with a project of modernity, a conception at least of Ethiopia as a developed state, along the lines of states in Europe. The way in which he went about trying to achieve that modernity has a resonance in Ethiopian development thinking that continues to this day – as, sadly, does his failure.

### **Ethiopia and the Idea of Modernity**

Ethiopia is a peculiarity among African states. As the sole indigenous African state to survive through the colonial period, it is more akin to Thailand or Iran than to most of Africa, and this has given it a relationship to the common narrative of ‘development’ that sets it apart from the rest of the continent. For most of Africa, development is something brought in on the back of colonialism – an experience that, of course, carries much ambivalence of its own. For Ethiopians, a people seldom known for their modesty, the striking differences in levels of state capability between themselves and European powers – and later and still more ignominiously, between themselves and some other African states – were a source of reproach that called for strenuous efforts at rectification. For Ethiopians, as for the Japanese in the same period, this was conceived in terms of finding some model in the already developed world on which their own efforts could be based.

Ethiopia’s development trajectory can correspondingly be seen as a series of attempts by ‘modernising’ Ethiopians to identify the mechanisms of developmental success of countries perceived as having some similarity to their own. The idea was to draw from these countries’ experiences in order to re-create Ethiopia in the resulting image of modernity. This is what I have termed ‘the politics of emulation’. As can be seen from the fact that Ethiopia remains one of the poorest countries on earth, they had little success – in striking contrast to Japan – and the story of their repeated failures is inevitably dispiriting. It does, however, present a very vivid example of the ways in which ideas of development are applied in settings far beyond those for which they were originally created, and in the process shape – or deform – the lives of other peoples.

To start with a question: if you were an Ethiopian, and especially if you were an Ethiopian ruler, what would you look for as the key to the kind of development that you were trying to capture? The answer, in one word, is *power*. For one thing, highland Ethiopian society is deeply hierarchical, and carries embedded within it an intense awareness of power relations. For another, power was what modernity had given the European states that Ethiopian rulers envied; power was also seen as the means through which that modernity could be created. Most obviously, as in the case of Tewodros’ cannon, Ethiopian rulers craved military power, which could be used both for protection against outsiders and to impose central control over other rulers and peoples, both within the core zone of historic Ethiopia, and among neighbouring groups which a revived Ethiopian empire would, in the 40 years after Tewodros’ death, go on to conquer and annexe. More broadly, though, it was immediately evident that military power itself rested on a base provided by human knowledge and economic development that it would equally be necessary to appropriate.

The central paradox here is that if power was indeed the key to development, then Ethiopians should have been extraordinarily good at it, and Ethiopia should rapidly have emerged as a great African power house, rather than as a global synonym for

famine, war and destitution. Ethiopia is by a long way the oldest and most authoritative state that black Africa has produced. It has an authentic history of some 2,000 years, and has been able to maintain some (albeit varying) central control over a territory of hundreds of miles in extent, despite an extremely rugged topography and extremely limited technology. It also possesses – and has for centuries – what might be regarded as the key cultural attributes of modernity. Christianity has been the state religion since the fourth century AD, helping to promote a written language, respect for scholarship and learning, and at least intermittent relations with the Mediterranean world.

Most strikingly of all, Ethiopia's triumph as the sole African state able to preserve its independence against European colonial rule showed that it had been able to absorb and rapidly rectify the lessons of Tewodros' defeat. Less than 30 years later, in 1896, the emperor Menilek confronted an invading Italian army at the battle of Adwa, and defeated it decisively. Critical to this victory was his ability to put into the field an army of some 120,000 men, most of them armed with modern rifles (Rubenson, 1976; Marcus, 1975). This was a feat of military organisation and diplomatic dexterity that no other African state came close to matching.

Even in the modern era, the Ethiopian state has been remarkably effective. Regimes have collapsed, but the state itself has endured, and – as we will see – has been capable of implementing 'development policies' that strikingly demonstrate state power, even if they have been much less effective at producing 'development'. Unsurprisingly, then, given the country's long historical trajectory and the specific circumstances of its introduction to modernity, 'state power' models of varying kinds have carried the greatest appeal to Ethiopian conceptions of how development should be brought about, and it is in the inadequacies of state power as an instrument of development that much of the answer to the conundrum of Ethiopian failure is to be found.

### **The Search for Models**

The emperor Menilek had been able to achieve his victory at Adwa largely by combining the import of the instruments of modernity – guns – with an existing Ethiopian social capacity for large-scale organisation. Unlike the Japanese defeat of the Russian empire in the following decade, it was not the outcome of any more thoroughgoing process of internal modernisation. Menilek did, however, initiate several modernising projects. He founded Ethiopia's first Western-style school, formally established government ministries, brought in a number of European advisers, and authorised the construction of a railway line from the coast to Addis Ababa that was completed after his death. The most influential of these advisers, the Swiss engineer Alfred Ilg (1854–1916), was initially employed in a purely technical role, but eventually took on important diplomatic functions (Shinn & Ofcansky, 2004: 219). Menilek's diplomacy, unlike Tewodros', was extremely adept, and displayed an acute understanding of the colonial rivalries involved in the partition of Africa. But his response to advancing European power was pragmatic and instrumental, and it is difficult to discern any broader concept of a 'modern' Ethiopia with which he can be associated.

#### *Modernising the Empire*

The idea of a 'modern' Ethiopia was, however, extensively developed by a remarkable and important group of early twentieth century Ethiopian intellectuals, who have been studied

by the historian Bahru Zewde (2002), in his fascinating *Pioneers of Change in Ethiopia: The Reformist Intellectuals of the Early Twentieth Century*. In terms of their social origins, patronage links and career patterns, these intellectuals were, inevitably, heavily government-centred. Most of them had links with the imperial court and were sent abroad for education as protégés of the emperor or other leaders. The state was their obvious source of employment, and many became high officials. It was, moreover, only through the state that their developmental aspirations could be achieved. They were driven to a large extent by the cognitive dissonance between an inherited sense of cultural superiority and an acute awareness of Ethiopian ‘backwardness’, by contrast not only with the European states where by far the greater number of them had studied, but even with colonised African peoples whom they were accustomed to treat with scorn.

In contrast to African intellectuals in colonised areas of the continent, who readily treated colonialism as exploitation, their Ethiopian equivalents often regretted that Ethiopia had failed to gain the ‘benefits’ of colonialism. In the words of one of them, Takla-Hawariyat, writing in the 1940s:

sometimes I ask myself, would it have been better if the civilized nations had colonized us for a short period of time? The British had that opportunity twice [after ousting Tewodros in 1868 and the Italians in 1941]. But, because they were not prepared to help, they left the country without setting up anything. (Zewde, 2002: 100)

Colonialism, however, would not do as a historical model, and even though European ‘advisers’ were brought in to provide expertise on subjects ranging from international law to transport infrastructure to training the army, these were almost exclusively drawn from non-threatening states, such as Sweden, Belgium and Switzerland. When Ethiopia was eventually subjected, if only briefly, to colonial rule in 1936, this came in the peculiarly unappealing form of Italian fascism, imposed after a vicious war that included the use of poison gas. A few Ethiopian intellectuals, though very few, collaborated with the fascist regime. Far from seeking to recruit them as subaltern agents of an imperial civilising mission, the Italians killed as many of those educated Ethiopians as it could lay its hands on.

The Russian model that had inspired Tewodros disappeared with the Bolshevik revolution, for which at that time – in dramatic contrast to later attitudes – few if any Ethiopian intellectuals had any sympathy. During the two or three decades up to 1936, Japan emerged as the preferred paradigm – a non-European empire that had successfully absorbed the technologies of modernity. Perhaps more importantly from the perspective of Ethiopian leaders, Japan had defeated Russia in the war of 1905. Already in a book published in 1912, and designed to influence Menilek’s successor, Lij Iyasu, the pioneering Gebre-Heywat Baykedagn had argued that: ‘[I]f our Ethiopia accepts European mind, no one would dare attack her; if not, she will disintegrate and be enslaved. Hence, let us hope that Menilek’s heir would examine and follow the example of the Japanese government’ (Zewde, 2002: 110).

Emulators of development precedents often base their selection of historical model on their aspirations, rather than on feasibility. Like today’s development technocrats, they too readily assume that once-successful strategies can be transplanted, across time and space, to new contexts. Actual knowledge of Japan in Ethiopia was, in the early twentieth century, virtually non-existent. Nor was there any awareness of the specific elements of

Japanese culture that had created the foundation for that country's success, or any capacity to emulate either the technological or the organisational achievements of late nineteenth century Japan. What appealed, inevitably, was the level of state power that Japan had attained. This could be ascribed especially to the nineteenth century Meiji restoration, which appeared to mirror the re-establishment of effective imperial rule in Ethiopia. The 'lesson' of Japan was thus that a powerful emperor could create a united country, and that this would in turn promote the blessings of development and preserve the country's independence.

The most specific outcome of this 'Japanese period' was the adoption in 1931 of Ethiopia's first constitution, which was heavily derived from the Meiji constitution of 1889.<sup>2</sup> This was, in turn, designed as an instrument of centralisation under imperial control, with no more than token aspirations towards popular participation or the rule of law. Its principal author, Takla-Hawariyat Takla-Mariam, had spent 11 years in Europe, most of it in pre-revolutionary Russia, and had never visited Japan. His association with Russia, which he had loved, so far from helping him in his career, led to his brief imprisonment on suspicion of Bolshevism (Zewde, 2002: 57–64).

One of the perils of emulation is that no sooner have development strategists fixed upon a model to follow than that model itself turns out to be fatally flawed. In 1941, the year of Ethiopia's liberation from Italian occupation, Japan followed Tsarist Russia into the dustbin of potential paradigms, leaving Ethiopia once again in search of a development trajectory to follow. For the following three decades, through to the revolution that overthrew Ethiopia's last emperor, Haile Selassie, in 1974, there was no dominant paradigm for the country's economic and political development. The country's leaders relied, instead, on amalgamations of models, the elements drawn very largely from Western experience. Haile Selassie was himself a cautious and pragmatic ruler, and though he recognised 'modernity' both as a key element in the global system to which he had to adapt, and as a readymade instrument for entrenching his own power, he did not look to any particular state as a blueprint.

Politically, at this time, there was a bizarre adherence to a 'British' model of constitutional monarchy, predicated on a devolution of power from the emperor to elected bodies. This was most clearly exemplified by the Revised Constitution of 1955, which provided for an elected lower house of parliament and an upper house appointed by the emperor, who retained complete control over the executive branch of government. This showed no greater awareness of the dynamics of British development than was previously shown of Japan's. In practice, this model proved incompatible with the steady centralisation of power in the hands of the monarch, and the destruction of any alternative source of authority, in a manner more reminiscent of *ancien regime* France than of the historical process by which the British system of government came to be established between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was an approach that gave rise to a 'railway line' conception of development, seen as a movement along the track from where you are now, through to the end-point that the chosen model has eventually reached. Like others of this type, it made no allowance for junctions, much less for derailments, along the way.

As a lecturer in constitutional law at Haile Selassie I University in the mid-1960s, I had the task of preparing a 'Sourcebook of Ethiopian Constitutional Law', which demonstrated this progression, and sought to connect it into Ethiopian political history. I recall being asked by one of my Ethiopian students, 'In terms of British political development, where has Ethiopia reached now?' Just as for a later generation of Ethiopian

Marxist-Leninists looking to the Soviet Union for inspiration, the model defined the future: the direction in which the system was heading was assured, and only the speed at which it moved towards the terminus at the end of the track remained to be determined. Metaphors of human development were likewise characteristic of this era: Ethiopia was viewed as an 'infant constitutional monarchy', which would in time 'grow up', even though the broader political trajectory showed no sign of the processes by which this objective could be attained. Imperial Ethiopia, for example, tolerated no political parties – not even a single governing party – because these would represent a source of power independent of the throne. Thus did the Ethiopian version of the British exemplar undermine precisely the dynamic that had, in the earlier case, produced political change that Ethiopia ostensibly sought to emulate.

Economic development strategies were more eclectic, but basically little different. They too exemplified the need to demonstrate progress, without threatening the existing order. Ethiopia adopted a 'Five Year Plan' as early as 1957 to give an impression of economic purpose, but this was of an entirely indicative and aspirational kind. The five-year plan, indeed, is a classic example of the rhetoric of control, designed to give the impression that the state is in charge of things over which it actually has no power. In the case of Ethiopia, an overwhelmingly agricultural country, the plan was incapable of reforming the structure of landholding, in which the power of the state elite was based.

The sole exceptions occurred when purposive economic change could be aligned with state and elite interests, a classic example being that of the Awash Valley Authority. This explicitly emulated the Tennessee Valley Authority. The rhetoric of control was drawn in this case from the 'New Deal' United States, rather than (as with the five-year plan) from the Soviet Union. The Awash Valley Authority did indeed have a very significant economic impact: it served to appropriate the dry-season grazing areas of Afar and Kereyu pastoralists in the Awash basin. These lands were leased to multinational corporations – notably the Dutch HVA company for sugar, and the British firm Mitchell Cotts for cotton. The stated purpose was to provide substitutes for previously imported commodities, to generate state revenues, and also to benefit aristocrats with landholdings in the region.<sup>3</sup> The same went for another of the major 'development projects' of the imperial regime, the Chilalo Agricultural Development Unit (CADU), which was designed with Swedish aid to increase grain production in the Arsi highlands. It did this very successfully – but to the benefit of landowners, much more than of the peasants whom it was meant to help.<sup>4</sup>

There remain a number of devotees of the imperial order in Ethiopia who continue to believe that it represented a time of progress, cruelly cut short by the 1974 revolution, and that had it been able to survive the political crises of famine and the imperial succession, it would have set Ethiopia on the road to peaceful and democratic development. Certainly this was (outside Eritrea from the mid-1960s) a period of exceptional peace in Ethiopia, and of appreciable if uneven incorporation into the global economy. But its political base was not merely fragile but entirely unsustainable, and sooner or later its own internal national and class contradictions were bound to destroy it.

### *The Search for Revolutionary Alternatives*

It is at this point, however, that the politics of emulation reaches its most intense form, in the search for revolutionary alternatives to what was clearly a failing imperial order. This

was expressed in the wholesale conversion of a younger generation of Ethiopian intellectuals – from the mid-1960s onwards – to Marxism-Leninism as a development strategy, and came in the wake of an inchoate appeal to African nationalism at the time the attempted coup d'état of December 1960 had been swiftly suppressed. After the 1974 revolution, this revolutionary impulse led to a sustained and systematic attempt to recreate the triumphs of Soviet communism in the highlands of north-east Africa.

The students who provided the impetus for the revolution espoused different forms of communism, and the vicious and bloody conflicts between them continue to be played out in Ethiopian politics even today. The proponents of a 'Maoist' and rurally based development strategy, which could plausibly be presented as most appropriate to an overwhelmingly agrarian society such as Ethiopia's, lost out in the course of the 'red terror' of 1976–77 to a military regime for which the centralised and hierarchical Soviet model was evidently more attractive. The government was also desperate for Soviet arms and for superpower support at a time – the late 1970s – when the USSR was in the ascendant on the global stage, and the adherence of the revolutionary military regime led by Mengistu Haile-Mariam (and generally known as the *Derg*) could certainly be explained in straightforwardly instrumental terms. There were, nonetheless, considerable parallels between the Russian and Ethiopian cases that could be used to present the model as more than mere opportunism.

Both pre-1917 Russia and pre-1974 Ethiopia were decaying empires, in which the monarchy had ceased to be a viable motor for political and economic development, and in which one could plausibly argue that revolutionary upheaval was essential in order to exploit the evident potential of the country. Both, too, were Orthodox Christian monarchies, and one can argue for at least some element of functional similarity between the role of the Orthodox priesthood and that of the Party within a Leninist party state: both held that true knowledge belonged to an appropriately instructed elite, on which it conferred legitimate authority over the ignorant masses. And in just the same way that, in the imperial era, authority was conceived in official iconography as descending from above to an emperor whose titles included that of *Seyum Egziabher*, or Elect of God, so in the era of revolution it could be viewed as descending from the socialist trinity of Marx, Engels and Lenin to the anointed General Secretary of the Workers' Party of Ethiopia.

Russia and Ethiopia likewise shared the two substantive problems that the Russian revolution had sought to overcome, and that a correspondingly revolutionary Ethiopia could also be expected to surmount. The first was the 'peasant question', or the need to release the productive capacity of an exploited peasantry in order to kick-start the economic development of a backward agrarian society. 'Land to the tiller' had been the rallying cry of pre-revolutionary student protest, linking intellectuals to a countryside of which they actually knew little. The nationalisation of all land, followed by the establishment of state farms and agricultural producer cooperatives, was by far the most important measure introduced by the Ethiopian revolutionary regime. The second problem was the 'national question', or the association of government with a particular nationality, which had to be displaced by a form of nationalism that would transcend ethnic differences. Here again pre-revolutionary Russia exhibited striking parallels with Ethiopia, where Amharic-speaking Christian highlanders enjoyed a position analogous to that of 'great Russians'.

Ethiopian students of the late 1960s and early 1970s were moreover deeply versed in Marxist theory, if not in the realities of Soviet life and economic development. They

brought to their ideological debates a passion and commitment reminiscent of nineteenth century Russia. There was a genuine concern about abstruse issues of Marxist theory, and after the revolution vicious and very bloody conflicts broke out between rival movements. These were marked by elements of ethnic difference and straightforward power struggle, but they were cast in the language of Marxist theory, which was by no means entirely fraudulent: issues of 'Bonapartism' and class alliance really did matter to the participants in these conflicts and many dedicated lives were lost in support of one position or another. The language of socialism and revolution in Africa has become so tarnished – Marxism-Leninism in Benin was, for example, swiftly rechristened Laxism-Beninism – that a real revolution with a genuine development agenda comes as a surprise. But this was a revolution that Skocpol (1979) would readily have recognised, and, as for the French or the Russians, what was critical was the consolidation of state power. The revolutionary impetus was driven by the conviction that you could make over an old state in a new and effective form, and that by mobilising the fervour of classes newly liberated from centuries of exploitation it was possible to create a state that was disciplined, nationalist, united and capable of anything.

The formal creation of a vanguard party did not come until ten years after the revolution, amidst the 1984 famine that cruelly belied its pretensions to development; but although this was the last ruling Marxist-Leninist party in the world to be formed, it was nonetheless a serious operation, and the young cadres who were recruited to run the new party at the local level often showed impressive (if wrong-headed) levels of dedication. The real mobilisation phase of the revolution had occurred from early 1975 onwards, with the nationalisation of land, the despatch of the entire student body to mobilise and organise the countryside, and the establishment of an extraordinarily effective administrative structure of peasants' and urban dwellers' associations that linked the central government to ordinary Ethiopians in a way that had never previously existed. This, in turn, provided a mechanism for ensuring physical order, allocating land to peasants, establishing neighbourhood organisations, distributing rations, and, inevitably and increasingly, imposing increasingly onerous taxation and still more demanding military conscription.

Along with this came the apparatus of state farms, agricultural producers' cooperatives (though without any thoroughgoing collectivisation of agriculture), villagisation (the collection of previously scattered homesteads into compact villages), and the classic state-socialist belief in large-scale mechanisation as the key to agricultural success. There was even a 'virgin lands' scheme, following the great famine of 1984, when some 600,000 people were moved from the degraded and overpopulated highlands to supposedly fertile areas of western Ethiopia, where huge tracts of land were bulldozed in order to establish 'settlements', many of them built by conscripted students. I was given a tour of such a settlement in Gambela on the Sudanese border in 1987 by a local Party first secretary whose eyes were glowing with enthusiasm.

Since the collapse of the regime in 1991, documents have emerged that show Soviet advisers attached to the Office of the National Council for Central Planning warning their Ethiopian counterparts against too slavish an adoption of the Soviet model, of whose deficiencies they were by that time all too well aware (Henze, 1989). But these warnings do not appear to have had the slightest effect, not least because the idea of centralised state planning carried such an appeal to the party cadres who directed it. This was indeed a model deeply attuned to a state culture in which benefits flowed downwards from those who knew, to those who did not. You had only to walk into the offices of local-level

development officials, onto whose walls were plastered a mass of maps and charts and histograms and columns of statistics, to realise that these were people doing what they loved, with an absolute conviction that this was the way in which 'development' would inevitably be delivered.

It was Ethiopia's tragedy that the one development model that appeared most genuinely suited to an entrenched national political culture and the genius of the Ethiopian state, and which, much more than any other, was implemented with enormous dedication, was one that had massive in-built flaws. These flaws led not only to famine, but also to deeply debilitating civil wars. The reaction aroused by the misconceived attempt to impose a development model that came to be widely resented gave rise to rural and ethnically based opposition movements that eventually succeeded in overthrowing the regime in 1991. Even though the regime's collapse conveniently followed the demise of its international protector, the USSR, its failure was due not only or even mainly to global developments, but rather to an idea of 'development', both political and economic, which drove the state to a pre-eminence that was ultimately self-destructive.

One might have expected this brief and necessarily schematic survey of Ethiopian models of development to end with an account of Ethiopia's adoption of the liberal agendas of the present global hegemony. This, however, is not the case. The regime that took over in 1991 was itself steeped in the student Marxism of the 1960s and early 1970s, but in a rather different variant from that adopted by the *Derg*. In the mid-1980s, indeed, the current prime minister, Meles Zenawi, expressed an admiration for Albania (of all places) as the only authentic surviving socialist state; and though he was intelligent enough to drop this model very rapidly when faced by a changing global order and the improving prospects of military victory, and has since then officially adopted market liberalism as an economic ideology, his approach to politics is thoroughly Marxist.

The most noteworthy expression of the present Ethiopian government's immersion in Marxist ideology, again of Soviet origin, is the wholesale takeover of Stalin's theory of the national question as an approach to the problem of Ethiopia's ethnic diversity. The new Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), itself a title redolent of its origins in revolutionary socialism, has divided Ethiopia into regions defined by ethnicity, each of which formally retains a right of self-determination, up to and including secession. As with the previous regime's adherence to the USSR, one can certainly identify an element of self-interest in this apparently bizarre commitment: the ruling party, after all, derived from a regionally concentrated ethno-nationalist movement, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which sought to make common cause with similar movements against a ruthlessly centralising national government. This it promoted through the idea that only by allowing full regional self-government to the different 'nationalities' – all Ethiopian factions use this word, in preference to 'tribalism' or 'ethnicity' – would it be possible to overcome the entrenched legacy of highland Christian (or 'Amhara') hegemony, and thus create a united Ethiopia on the basis of equality between its different peoples.

This agenda has created great difficulties for the present government, notably by arousing a level of Oromo nationalism that is increasingly hard to control, and by threatening a regime whose leadership is drawn from a small and distant region, Tigray, which is highly dependent on the rest of Ethiopia. Most immediately, by linking ethnicity to territoriality, this approach to the nationality question has prompted a set of often violent conflicts over the 'ownership' or demarcation of the newly established territorial units, which range from full regions for the larger nationalities, through to district jurisdictions for the smaller ones.

More broadly, it raises the much more basic question of whether ethnically defined federal units are indeed compatible with national unity and identity, or whether they are a means of entrenching perceptions of difference that ultimately can be satisfied only by separate statehood.

One *leitmotiv* of this article has been the way in which different developmental models have been adopted in Ethiopia just as they were on the point of becoming discredited in the states from which they were originally drawn, and of none has this been more evident than for models derived from the former Soviet Union. Indeed, it has been said of the nationalities policy in the former USSR that it had life only after death: while the CPSU remained in control it counted for nothing; but as soon as the Party collapsed, the legacy of the nationalities policy facilitated the country's fragmentation into 15 sovereign states. The policy's detractors have raised exactly the same criticism of its application to Ethiopia, where the EPRDF government has in practice allowed no effective regional devolution, but has nonetheless fostered a level of ethnic nationalism that increases the likelihood that Ethiopia will, eventually, fragment into its separate ethnic parts. Even though this outcome is (in my personal judgement) unlikely, the present dispensation has in-built sources of instability, which indicate that Ethiopia's long search for an appropriate development model has by no means reached its end.

## **Conclusion**

So what can we make of this overview of Ethiopia's 140-year quest for a workable development model? The first conclusion must be that ideas do indeed matter, and can have peculiar and unexpected effects. 'Development' is necessarily an imported idea, and imposes a search for models through which it can be domesticated, and which can be made to tie in with some plausible domestic trajectory. The appeal of such models lies in the assurance that there have, in fact, been cases when development (or modernity) has been transplanted from one society to another. One cannot look at Japan, or indeed at a number of other states, especially in Asia, and claim that development is a non-transferable and specifically Western concept.

But in Ethiopia's case at least, and doubtless in others, this has proved to be a deeply problematic process. One source of difficulty undoubtedly lies in common misunderstandings about what makes development work. Ethiopian attempts to derive lessons from the historical experiences of earlier developers has usually taken the form of a belief in specific organisational fixes – a constitution, a five-year plan, a vanguard single party – as mechanisms through which the promised transformation can be achieved. In addition, the elements of the model that have most readily been seized on have invariably been those that conformed most closely to the political needs and culture of those who were attempting to bring the transformation about, and that increased their own power and safeguarded their own interests in the process.

What has most evidently separated Ethiopia's unsuccessful modernisers from their far more successful counterparts in a number of other historically independent Third World states has been that these needs and cultures have run counter to the processes of development that their instigators were trying to foster. Whether there is any 'Ethiopian road to development', through which this peculiar heritage can be harnessed to the achievement of universal processes of desirable social change, remains uncertain. One can only conclude that, if so, no Ethiopian government has yet managed to find it.

## Notes

1. A replica of this remarkable piece of home-made artillery stands in Tewodros Square in Addis Ababa, named after the emperor who had it cast; the original was considered too heavy, and its resting place too inaccessible, to remove it.
2. See the comparison of the two texts in Paul and Clapham (1967).
3. For an overview of Ethiopian economic development in this period, see Bekele (1995).
4. A process analysed at the time by Ståhl (1974).

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