

ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY IN THE SHADOW OF THE DERG, 1974-1991

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This paper explores aspects of the relationship between the Addis Ababa University and the state after the fall of Emperor Haile Sellassie. It deals with the conditions given for free expression among students during the time of the military regime, 1974-1991, the regime's use of the students for bringing the revolution to the countryside, the students' opposition to military rule, the deadly conflicts on the civilian left as well as the killings of unknown numbers of intellectuals and students by the state.

The destructive relationship between African states and universities has made students pay a heavy price for their struggle for free expression.² It is also commonly acknowledged that the capacity for independent thinking and expression have not been encouraged within African universities.³ Indeed, persecution has often been the reward for speaking out in favour of civil and political rights. The struggle for “university autonomy“ and “academic freedom” has a longstanding history in the development of universities worldwide. When legitimate methods of voicing concern on public issues were scarce, staff and, in particular, students of African universities have taken cover under “academic freedom”, because they in reality were denied freedom of expression and assembly.⁴ Over the past three decades, institutes of higher education all over Africa have been important, although exceedingly painful, practice grounds for the development of a democratic political culture. Crises and closures of higher institutions of learning have been rampant on a continent where only about 5 percent of the relevant age group has been enrolled, as against nearly 60 percent in the western world. Ethiopian enrolment is considerably lower than the African average.⁵

The development of student protest in Ethiopia preceded that of many other African countries after the liberation. The student movement became a dominant factor in the fall of Haile Selassie's regime in 1974 and in the political direction taken by the military dictatorship that took over from the imperial polity.⁶ The students had contributed significantly to creating whatever political consciousness existed when the crisis came in February 1974 that led to the demise of the imperial regime. What can be called the “intellectuals” or the “civilian left” ,of the teachers and trade unions having their roots in the student movement at home and abroad, drove the revolution forward.

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² Balsvik 1998.

³ Ade Ajayi, Lameck Goma and Ampah Jonson , 1996.

⁴ *Africa Watch*, April 1991.

⁵ World Bank. 2000. Higher Education....Statistical tables.

⁶ Randi Rønning Balsvik, *Haile Selassie's Students: Intellectual and Social Background to Revolution 1952-1977*, Michigan State University Press 1985. The following is drawn from the research for this book as well as from the article by the same author: “An Important Root of the Ethiopian Revolution: The Student Movement” in Abebe Zegeye & Siegfried Pausewang (eds.), *Ethiopia in Change: Peasantry, Nationalism and Democracy*, British Academic Press 1994.

In the autumn of 1974, a military junta, the *Derg*, established itself. The university was a troubled place, with the disruption of most regular activities throughout the academic year 1973-74, as well as during the autumn of 1974.⁷ From the first day of the massive demonstrations that followed February 1974, the students stopped attending classes and were at the forefront of forces that ended the imperial order. There existed neither the trust nor the patience for the idea that the system could transform and reform itself. Political suppression under Haile Sellassie had prevented the development of leadership within civil society and a political debate about the future of Ethiopia. Repression had also secured that only the really true believers of Marxist- Leninism- Mao tse Tungs's thoughts gained the hegemony among students, there was no place for doubtful reflections. Only the military had the power and organization to take over the reins of the state.

A number of sources from 1974 illustrate the situation within the university, the demands for reinstatement of student unions and paper, *Struggle*, and the views of student activists on university autonomy and the political direction of the state.⁸ The government was admonished to declare a national emergency with regard to the famine-stricken areas, and grant equal status to all religions.⁹ The "progressive" sections of the military were seen as co-partners in the struggle for the "immediate establishment of a provisional people's government".¹⁰

In September 1974 students were again allowed to form their union and publish what was to become the last issue of *Struggle*.¹¹ It is significant that the editorial heading was "Power to the Peoples" (not just "people"), indicating that the question of nationalities had not been forgotten. In the discourse that took place during the autumn of 1974, students were to struggle in co-operation with the "left wing" of the military to form a "Provisional Democratic Government" that would eventually lead to a "Democratic Republic". Political parties were to be formed and the "heroic Ethiopian masses" were admonished to "send the Lion to the Zoo", to "throw the crown into the museum and eliminate the blue-blooded blood suckers!!" The *Derg* government had good reasons to believe that student rhetoric could serve a useful purpose in their attempts to legitimize their own seizure of power.

The zāmācā

The government created the *zāmācā*, *the development through cooperation campaign*, unique in the African context, as a programme in which every student would be required to take part, in order to implement the changes to be brought about by the revolution. In order to obtain legitimacy, the military regime had to take into consideration the political demands that had been raised, particularly in the student movement, over the last ten to fifteen years. It had to deliver development, driven by the demands of the civilian left. The government also wanted students out of the urban areas due to their ability to create spectacular demonstrations and situations of crises.

⁷ Haile Selassie I University (hereafter HSIU) From the President To: University Community, 20 December 1973. (IES Library, Manuscript Collection)

⁸ HSIU From: The President To: The University Community, 13 March 1974, IES Library Manuscript Collection 2395/05;

⁹ HSIU To: The Prime Minister's Office from the Executive of USUAA, 23 April 1974, *ibid.*

¹⁰ HSIU To: The Student Body From: Executive Committee of USUAA Congress, *ibid.* 2395/05/84.

¹¹ *Struggle* 26 September 1974 (HSIU/USUAA)

In spite of the government announcing time and again their intention of drafting a new constitution that would give Ethiopia a federal structure of autonomous regions,¹² nationalize landed property of the aristocracy without compensation,¹³ oppositional agitation did not subside.¹⁴ The students did not want a military dictatorship, nor did the leadership of the labour movement, nor the teachers. It was looked upon as a dishonourable replacement of the imperial regime. Their desire, however unrealistic, was for the military to act as intermediaries prior to a democratically elected “people’s government”. A great struggle took place between the university community at large and the government.¹⁵ Students were told that their role was to create the conditions considered to be a prerequisite before civilian and democratic rule could be installed.¹⁶

Large student demonstrations in Addis Ababa and the Agricultural College in Alemaya on October 11 1974 demanded laws about land redistribution as a prerequisite for any participation in the development campaign.¹⁷ Scholarship students had come from abroad in the summer of 1974 (EPRP), and in early 1975 (Meison) The publication of papers from both of these groups appeared before the start of the campaign. (*Democracia, The Voice of the Masses*) The formation of embryo political parties, particularly among students and former students, like the EPRP (Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party) and MEISON (All-Ethiopian Socialist Movement) became a factor in the development of events. Strong pressure from thousands of young people waiting to go out on the *zämäčä* hastened the promulgation of very radical land redistribution laws, which took place in March 1975, just a few months after the students had departed. The historian Bahru Zewde has characterized these laws as “one of the most radical land reform proclamations that any regime has ever issued”.¹⁸

The participants¹⁹ were both women and men. Approximately six thousand university students and teachers, and nearly fifty thousand secondary school students from all over the country, were sent to 437 places in the countryside to build schools and clinics, latrines and wells with the local people. They were also to bring literacy and knowledge of hygiene to remote places. For the first time, literacy material was prepared in five languages, demonstrating the initial concern of the new regime with the “question of nationalities”, which had proven to be so explosive when it was first raised by student activists in 1969.²⁰ The students were also to organize peasant associations and handle the redistribution of land, and in addition they were to aid the formation of women’s and youth associations. In short, their task was the huge one of bringing the revolution to the countryside, of emancipating the peasant who had previously had to prostrate himself and kiss the feet of his landlord while presenting him with half of his family’s agricultural produce.

¹² *Ethiopian Herald*, 18, 21 September 1974.

¹³ *Ethiopian Herald*, 24 September 1974: Editorial: Land to the Tiller.

¹⁴ *Ethiopian Herald*, 19 September 1974: Military Council Gives Warning to People Opposing the Change.

¹⁵ *Ethiopian Herald*, 29 September 1974: Editorial: Education first!, and An Open Letter to our University Students by Assefa Tiruneh.

¹⁶ *Ethiopian Herald*, 6 October 1974: Yacob Wolde-Mariam: Speaking Man to Man; *Ethiopian Herald*, 13 October 1974. Editorial : United we stand, and 15 October 1974. Yared Hailemariam. The student Ruling class in HSIU.

¹⁷ Andargachew 1993:73.

¹⁸ Bahru op.cit.:242.

¹⁹ *Ethiopian Herald*, 6 November 1974.

²⁰ Balsvik 1985.

The report,²¹ written after the campaign, contains more about the intentions than the achievements. It demonstrates an initial, very strong optimism and a very high level of ambition as to what changes student intervention could obtain in the field.²²

The students went out on the mission half consenting enthusiastically and half feeling that they were being forced, both by the military and by circumstances. The mass rally and parade on December 22, organized by the government, the participants were fired with emotion, shouting “Viva Mengistu.” As events unfolded, the perception of having been forced to join increased. The regime had threatened in no uncertain terms to cut off those who refrained from joining the campaign from any further education or employment in Ethiopia.

A ten-point policy statement announced that there was to be equality between peoples, languages and religions. There was to be no Amhara nor Christian supremacy. Islam was to be recognized officially. The right to own land was to be restricted to those who worked the land. The programme upset a hierarchy that was deeply rooted in the people’s mentalities.²³ However, only when the proclamations concerning the redistribution of rural land in March 1975, and the same for urban land a few months later, did students feel that they were embarking on the process of profound change that was longed for. The assignment of campaign participants was directed toward the formation of peasant associations in the countryside and urban administrative neighbourhood councils in the towns.²⁴

The task was formidable, and the trust in the students likewise. The tension in the countryside, the zeal of the campaign students and the resistance of the landowners, supported by many of the local police and administrators who had also invested in land, led to life-threatening situations. Students had obtained a lot, but the activists were not willing to give the military regime a chance. Students had contributed to the atmosphere of emergency and immediacy where there was little time for reflections nor debate (had it been allowed) on the steps to take in the course of the revolution. Free expression as experienced in the early part of the revolutionary process had soon come to a stop.

In the manuscript section of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies there is a collection of clandestine papers, written mostly in Amharic, often undated, by *zämäča* campaign participants. The analysis of social and economic conditions in the country is a central focus, together with the demand for democratic elections and a peoples’ government, and an avalanche of attacks on the military, “fascist” government, whose practice was said to be so different from its revolutionary proclamations.

The content of one of the few dated issues of the *Voice of the Zemach* (Hidar 14, 1968 E.C.), contains an uncompromising quest for democracy, attacks the *Derg*’s policy in Eritrea, asks the government to stop the “fascist” measures against the people of Eritrea and instead find a democratic way to let the people assert their right to self-determination. Eleven demands are presented to the government, such as respecting free peasant associations, destroying reactionary landlords, arming the rural population, disarming the landlords, a countrywide organization for campaigners, releasing campaigners from prison, announcing the names of the dead students and paying compensation to their families, electing campaign leaders democratically, and allowing

²¹ The Development Through Co-operation Campaign’s Summary Report 1967/68 E.C. Sene 30th 1968, 112 pages IES, Addis Ababa University.

²² Institute of Development Research, IDR, HSIU: *Information Bulletin*, November 1974: Edget Behebret Zemacha.

²³ *Ibid.*: 113.

²⁴ *Addis Zemen* Nehasse 8, 1967.

workers' and teachers' associations to be heard. As so often, the students saw themselves as the spokesmen and advocates of the "suffering masses" and continued their policy of confrontation and relentless impatience.

Things often got out of hand. It is not known how many died. Most sources speak of unknown numbers.²⁵ One estimate says that 116 students lost their lives during the campaign, the "first martyrs of the revolution".²⁶ Amnesty International states that between two and three thousand students were killed during the campaign.²⁷

The campaign pamphlets also reflect the existence of a division in the perceptions of the government, student activists and peasants as to what land reform was all about. Would redistribution lead to private ownership or state ownership with use-rights. The government became particularly alarmed when students encouraged peasants to hoard their grain, eat to their own satisfaction and wait for better prices. A split developed among the campaign participants, one similar to the division that developed within the vanguard of the intelligentsia, between those who chose to work with the government and supported its reluctance to press revolutionary issues in the field, and those who did not want to compromise on any of their principles. The EPRP had a lot of support among intellectuals and students and party representatives infiltrated *zämäčä* students in their localities, encouraging them to leave the service in order to undermine the military government. Indeed, the campaign was instrumental in spreading support for the EPRP all over the country. In the autumn of 1975, many students left the service and went to work for the further expansion of the EPRP.

Large numbers of students became deserters, because they were disappointed, frustrated, embittered and degraded, sometimes tortured and beaten. Hundreds fled to neighbouring countries.²⁸ They had a perception of having been stabbed in the back by the *Derg*, that *Derg* policy had made their mission intolerable. The clandestine papers offer a strong defence of the reasons why students left the stations and their "miserable conditions."

Not all the students left, however, perhaps as many as half continued their work. Their attitudes are not revealed in any clandestine papers. Those who left were mostly from the university and schools in Addis Ababa. Those who remained were mostly campaigners from provincial secondary schools. They were more inclined to support *Derg* policy and were also often older and more mature than their counterparts from the secondary schools in Addis Ababa, because there had also been recruitment from those who went to night classes. There was, however, considerable variety in the local conditions, and in relationships between students and the locals. The conflicts have overshadowed the fact that many students, even in the south (in Illubabor, for instance, where the landlords were mostly absentee and the conflict level low), worked under fairly peaceful conditions and experienced their own contribution as meaningful, an accomplishment they look back on with pride.²⁹

What did the campaign accomplish? The numbers are impressive. The report says that between five and six million rural labourers were enrolled in 19,314 associations; 65,500 tribunals and 55,000 defence committees had been set up; a literacy campaign had been conducted in many languages; 4.5 million literacy books had been published

²⁵ Markakis and Nega 1978: 151.

²⁶ Lefort 1983:100.

²⁷ *Amnesty International*, March 1977 (Index Afr. 25/01/77).

²⁸ Samuel Tassew: *The Legal Aspect of the Ethiopian Student Movement: 1960-1978*, BA Dissertation, Faculty of Law, July 1992: 37.

²⁹ My notes of conversations, May 2005.

in the Amariñña, Tigriñña, Oromiffa, Wolaytiñña and Somaliñña languages, and almost 800,000 people had registered for literacy classes. A total of 206 clinics and 158 schools were built, 750 health assistants trained, 500,000 vaccines prepared and 500,000 head of cattle inoculated.³⁰

Among the great achievements of the *zemecha* was a kind of shock injection to the common people's mentality as to what kind of life and treatment they as human beings had the right to expect. Working the land and speaking Oromiffa were no longer factors that would diminish the human dignity of an individual. Lefort, who has written extensively about the campaign, concludes that the Ethiopian countryside changed more in a few months than in hundreds of years previously, and that this happened with unique speed and intensity, while Christopher Clapham holds that it is doubtful the agrarian reforms could have happened without the student *zämäčä*.³¹ The students had been instrumental in the formation of thousands of peasant associations, youth and women's associations. Even though the local resistance to women's associations was sometimes so strong that their survival was threatened when the students left,³² a seed of inevitability was sown. The fact that female students in both secondary and tertiary learning institutions participated in the campaign side by side with their male counterparts, sharing their conditions and tasks, has resulted in a great push towards freeing young female students from the strict rules, norms and expectations of their families. It has been noted that young women obtained a new freedom of movement.³³

Many who experienced the campaign maintain, in retrospect, that the students went out full of enthusiasm and put their hearts and souls into what they did. More often than not, however, the experience ended in a sense of sorrow, despair and defeat, and in traumatic memories that the participants want to forget. So many "comrades" died for their ideals concerning how to attain a better future for Ethiopia. Participation, even from the same school, serving in the same area and experiencing more or less the same events, has provoked very different retrospective reactions. Some tend to say that they threw away two years of their lives on something resembling collective madness, whilst others point to a personal growth in independence and the acquisition of indispensable knowledge concerning the realities of their own country.³⁴

The Red Terror

Mengistu Haile Mariam's dictatorship killed thousands of intellectuals, students and schoolchildren in the process of wiping out civilian opposition, in particular in 1977 and 1978. Thousands were imprisoned, tortured or fled the country.³⁵ The number of lives that were lost is highly uncertain and will not be dealt with here. What happened has been labelled "the Ethiopian Holocaust".³⁶ The Addis Ababa University does not seem to have any documentation nor the names of students and staff killed during the *Derg* regime as a whole. In May 2005 a meeting at the University, chaired by Professor Gebru Mersha, discussed the erection of a Never More memorial monument to those

³⁰ Lefort 1983:100, and Report from the Development Through Co-operation Campaign... op.cit..

³¹ Clapham 1989.

³² Marina and David Ottaway 1978:169.

³³ Notes from conversations, Gebru Mersha, May 2005.

³⁴ Senait Seyoum: "Mon experience de la "zemetcha"", in Kling and Molnier 1997.

³⁵ The front page of *Ethiopian Review*, February 1992 (Los Angeles) calls this extermination "The Ethiopian Holocaust".

³⁶ *Ethiopian Herald*, 13.5.05, Professor Kifle Abraham, President of the Ethiopian International Institute of Peace and Development: From Genocide to Constitutionalism.

slaughtered during the post-revolutionary years.³⁷ Bahru Zewde and Yeraswork Admassie has recently published a book, *Martyrs of Confrontational Politics (EC 1998)*

How did this spiral of violence start? There has been a tendency to blame the new party, EPRP, for this.³⁸ Students returning from the campaign agitated against the government, and in particular went into the town councils to reach the new youth associations in their agitation for a civilian government. There was a sharp rise in politicizing among students at all levels in the educational system. A kind of civil war developed between different politically active factions of the civilian left, demonstrating that they had the capacity to kill one another over political disagreements. At the root of this could be found conflict and even hatred between groups of students that had returned from abroad and who held different views on the policy of land reform.³⁹ Amnesty International viewed the level of political violence as high, and refers to EPRP “death squads” having assassinated up to 50 government supporters by March 1977.⁴⁰ The government labelled the EPRP as “counterrevolutionaries” who represented White Terror. “We shall beat back White Terror with Red Terror” was Mengistu’s cry, according to Dawit Wolde Giorgis in his book *Red Tears*.

The EPRP view of who started this spiral of violence is that the Red Terror was the climax in a process that erupted after the government declared a war of annihilation against all opposition of “counter revolutionaries” in September 1976.⁴¹ A newsletter, *Fight Back*, signed by Ethiopian student organizations in Europe, USA, the Middle East and East Africa, as well as by the World Wide Ethiopian Women’s Study Group, contains horrible descriptions of the persecution and execution of students and members of the EPRP, and reports of students fleeing the violence of the regime.⁴² During 1977 MEISON also became too troublesome for the dictatorship; its members withdrew from government service and went underground.

The re-opening of the university in the autumn of 1976

Addis Ababa University re-opened in the autumn of 1976, after two years of closure due to the *zämäčä*. Many students continued to recruit EPRP members, both inside and outside the university, in spite of warnings about the annihilation of all opposition.⁴³ The uncompromising treatment of the opposition contributed to the de-politicization of the university. The Red Terror campaign turned so violently against educated young people for their resistance to military rule that those who survived either went into exile, hid in the countryside or joined guerrilla movements. The pressure to keep silent also came from the families of the students. .

The specific experiences of the students also demonstrate that those who rule by the gun do not permit anything that may remotely be called free expression. During the second half of the 1990s there were court cases against those who had committed atrocities under the former regime. A systematic study of the evidence, which has not been undertaken here, would provide a description of how the university was affected during the time of the worst persecutions. The Minister of Education, Genet Zewde, gave evidence that is representative of unknown numbers, about how, as a student in

³⁷ Personal notes, conversations Mulumebet Zenebe and Gebru Mersha, May 2005.

³⁸ Ottaway op. cit.: 146, Clapham op. cit.: 53.

³⁹ Andargachew 1993: 151.

⁴⁰ *Amnesty International*, Index Afr.25/01/77, March 1977, Colin Legum 1975/76: B 197.

⁴¹ Kiflu op. cit. : 271, *Amnesty International*, Afr. 25/01/77, 14 December 1977.

⁴² *Fight Back*, November 1976, IES Library, Manuscript Collection, 2395/03.

⁴³ My notes April/May 2002: Conversations with Alemu Geda.

July 1977, she was arrested at the university and imprisoned for more than six years without trial. She was tortured and accused of being a member of the EPRP and a CIA spy.⁴⁴

After the Red Terror came to an end in 1978 persecution and punishment were still directed towards young, educated people who were suspected of supporting the resistance and the Oromo, Tigray and Eritrean liberation movements. As it was believed that the Oromo Liberation Front was supported by Protestant religious churches such as the Mullu Wengel, and in particular Mekane Yesos, active students in Protestant movements also had every reason to fear sudden and brutal arrest.⁴⁵ Important aspect of the times was the agitation against the Christian religion. There were instances where priests were commanded to burn their Bibles.⁴⁶

Calm efficiency

For many years there was calm at the university. The regime appointed people they could trust as President and Vice-Presidents, who were members of the Workers' Party of Ethiopia, following its creation in 1984. Fisseha Haile's doctoral dissertation on Addis Ababa University underlines the fact that the government had people in its service who understood the important role of the university and defended the institution against complaints of excessive opposition to the government. Fisseha speaks of "enabling linkages" between the government and the university. Nevertheless, by his own account, the best achievement during the *Derg* years of Duri Muhammed, the University President at that time, was "keeping the ship floating".⁴⁷ After the university's re-opening in 1976 there were unprecedented shortages of financial resources, as well as a great shortage of teachers. Some teachers were in prison and many had left the country, mostly for the United States; in addition, the university had lost most of its links with other, supportive universities. In 1982, 60% of the academic staff had only a first degree.⁴⁸ In 1978, University President Duri Muhammed went to institutions of higher education in the Soviet Union, East Germany and Yugoslavia to obtain agreements on co-operation, and to recruit teachers.⁴⁹

The university faculties were allowed to elect their own department heads and representatives to the Faculty Council. Curriculum details were mostly left alone, with one important exception: as was the case in all schools and workplaces in the country, there were compulsory classes for both staff and students in the Marxist-Leninist thinking to which the state had declared its adherence.⁵⁰ A twelve-page *Declaration of the Provisional Military Government of Ethiopia – the Philosophy and Direction of the New Regime: Ethiopia Tikdem* formed the new official guidelines for the university's teaching, as for all other educational institutions in the country.⁵¹

⁴⁴ *Ethiopian Register* (Los Angeles) May 1997:11.

⁴⁵ *Amnesty International Newsletter*, Ethiopia August 1979, June 1980 (Reverend Gudina Tumsa of the Mekane Yesos Church arrested and "disappeared", accused of supporting the OLF), March 1986, July 1989.

⁴⁶ Dawit 1989:121.

⁴⁷ Fisseha Haile, *A study of Institutionalality: Addis Ababa University 1961-1981*. Doctor of Education Degree, Indiana University, May 1984:54.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*:87.

⁴⁹ Addis Ababa University: Deans' Council, Minutes of meeting 31 May 1978. Collection: IES, WMMH.

⁵⁰ Personal notes, 25 April 2002: Conversation with Professor Haile Gabriel Dagne on the *Derg* period of the university.

⁵¹ *Declaration of the Provisional Military Government of Ethiopia*, HSIU Department of Government Affairs, 20 December 1974. Archived files from the University President's Office (UPO) in IES

The archived files from the University President's Office at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies department at Wolde Meskel Memorial House contain only a few accounts of the difficulties of university life after the revolution, and hardly anything on the Red Terror. However, they reveal the fact that faculty members were intrigued by the question of how to meet the challenges of teaching when the university re-opened and the students returned after the *zemecha*. There were discussions on how to teach and what to teach under the new conditions. How could the revolution and the overwhelming experiences of students during the *zemecha* be taken into account and reflected in the teaching? Judging from this, the power of the students had increased: they were not expected to be passive consumers of whatever the university might offer. Then there were the well-known problems of making up for all the disturbances and closures of the university, this time connected to the 1974 spring term, during the revolutionary process.⁵² During the spring term of 1977, before a suppressive silence descended on the institution, the university was once again faced with the problem of students withdrawing from their studies in order to protest at the government's repression and imprisonment of fellow students. In view of government threats, demanding that the normal activities of the university should be resumed, it is revealing to see how many people supported the cause of student solidarity. Just a few representative examples of overall student attendance are given here: In the Medical School, 16 out of 76 students showed up for classes towards the end of February 1977; in the Faculty of Technology, 10 out of 250 did so; in the Science Faculty, 54 out of 400 attended classes; in the Faculty of Education, 150 out of 600 students had formally withdrawn, while 15 came to classes.⁵³ Thus, fewer than 10% of the students were willing to resume classes at the height of the Red Terror, in the ongoing struggle with the *Derg* government.

Needless to say, students had no freedom of assembly and no press. They were permitted to set up a branch of the government's youth organization, and later on a branch of the Workers' Party of Ethiopia, which had an office on campus. These opportunities were ignored to a great extent. We hear of heated student opposition to the teaching of history. Members of academic staff in the History Department were accused of being anti-Marxist, of not teaching the history of the masses as this related to the Ethiopian people. There was a period, in 1977-78, of considerable underground ethnic secessionist activism from which the University and in particular the History Department, did not escape. Students interfered, created chaos and "dictated" to a number of teachers. A lecture on feudalism might be mistaken for praise of that hated social order. The representation of the Oromo in Ethiopian history caused bitterness and alarm. It became very difficult to teach history without this being used or perceived as a contribution to the political debate. This caused a lot of tension among the staff as well.⁵⁴ In May 1979, government directives in the name of a new proletarian culture, presumably inspired by the Chinese Cultural Revolution, called for and initiated the

Wolde Meskel House (IESWMMH)

⁵² Addis Ababa University, Faculty of Education: Minutes, Deans' meeting on the action to be taken to accommodate returning *zemecha* students, 26 November 1975. Collection of Department of IES, WMMH.

⁵³ Addis Ababa University: Minutes, Deans' Council, meeting on student attendance.

⁵⁴ Addis Ababa University: Letter to Academic Vice-President Abiy Kifle from Aleme Eshete (Dr.), senior researcher IES, 21 October 1983 (20 pages). Collection IES/WMMH.

burning of “thousands of Ethiopian books”. Intervention by the Institute of Ethiopian Studies was able to stop this.⁵⁵

To a considerable extent it may be said that disciplinary learning was strengthened during these years of calm, and student enrolment expanded steadily. There were five thousand students in 1976 and eleven thousand by 1980. Students came from all parts of Ethiopia, to a greater extent than before. Under the *Derg*, a new quota system provided more admission places for students from schools in rural areas. Thus, there was great competition to be admitted to university. In 1980, sixty thousand students sat the ESLC (Ethiopian School Leaving Certificate) examination; only four thousand were admitted to the university, and one thousand to other institutions of higher education.⁵⁶ Compared to universities in other African countries that were experiencing troublesome unrest, due to student protests and violent governmental repression (this was particularly the case in neighbouring Kenya, for example), Addis Ababa University appeared to be functioning well as an institution,⁵⁷ despite a chronic shortage of study materials. The war in Eritrea had devoured half of the state budget⁵⁸ and lack of foreign currency prevented the purchase of books, journals and other kinds of equipment, a situation more or less similar to that found in most African universities.

One effect of the revolution was a heavy brain drain, a situation that remains chronic to this day. New teachers were recruited, mostly from Eastern Europe, and young Ethiopians with only a bachelor degree were recruited to teach. The university started its graduate school around 1980, in a few disciplines only. It had to continue to send their most promising graduates to pursue their research in universities abroad. The problem was that only about half returned. Thus, Ethiopia lost the cream of its crop of university graduates.

Literacy and resettlement

The military showed a greater willingness than the imperial regime to make use of the students in developing projects, particularly to raise the level of literacy. The literacy campaigns have been judged to be “one of the regime’s most impressive achievements”.⁵⁹ After the two-year closure of the university in which the large-scale *zämäčča* had taken place, there was a requirement that all students who had sat the twelfth-grade examination were to teach a course of approximately three months’ duration in the literacy campaign. This participation was a prerequisite for entering university. Looking back, former participants seem to have appreciated the experience of this teaching effort as happy and rewarding. The literacy campaigns are one positive aspect of an otherwise tragic relationship between government and students during the Mengistu regime. The government was given the annual UNESCO Literacy Award in 1980.

After the great starvation disaster in northern Ethiopia in 1984, the government moved some six hundred thousand people from the exhausted soil of the Tigray, Wollo and Shoan highlands to various lowland areas, some as far as approximately one thousand kilometres to the south, to settle in a tropical and humid climate among people with a different language and culture. Several international agencies supported such a

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Fisseha 1984:120.

⁵⁷ Conversations from time to time in the late 1980s with Dr. philos. Tertit von Hanno Aasland in the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

⁵⁸ Clapham, op. cit.: 249.

⁵⁹ Clapham op. cit.: 97.

scheme. The state also wanted to use the resettlement projects to further its socialist policy of creating producers' co-operatives, which had otherwise met with stubborn resistance among rural labourers. This resettlement has been labelled "perhaps the most cruel chapter of the entire famine".⁶⁰

In the course of approximately one year, overcrowded lorries brought exhausted, depressed and weak people to the south and west. Students and academic staff, cooks, gardeners, messengers and sweepers – the entire university community in Addis Ababa – were all commanded by the government to go and aid the great "resettlement" of the northerners. This was to a large extent against the will of the university community, where many questioned the wisdom of the resettlement project, because it was forced, not voluntary, but the leaders of the university were both members⁶¹ and instruments of the new, government-initiated Workers' Party of Ethiopia,⁶² and thus in no position to refuse. It was a tremendous effort. Former participants remember the intense speeches by Mengistu, in which he used to say "everything is possible" and admonish students that they had to "contribute to the development of the country".

On the whole, both the villagization and the resettlement schemes were failures in revolutionary social engineering terms, since people tended to move back to where they considered they belonged, in spite of state efforts to prevent this. The initially very high death rates in the new areas, the repressive co-operative system (in spite of considerable government aid to help establish this) and the enmity of the indigenous people whose resources were diminished because of the newcomers all contributed to a high percentage of deserters.⁶³

When I visited Ethiopia in 1984, ten years after the revolution, I found that the university, as well as society in general, was permeated with fear in a way that I did not experience either under the rule of the Emperor or at the end of the century, under the Meles Zenawi regime. The ears and eyes of the government were believed to be everywhere. It was a well-known fact that even the university had informers among both staff and students; in fact this was always the case, no matter what the regime.

Before the time of the *Derg*, the atmosphere in the classrooms, the mingling on the way to and from classes and the queues at the cafeteria had been friendly. There had been a strong sense, then, of 'them' (the political establishment) and 'us' (the students). Now, students frequently did not know each other and did not speak to each other, and dared not express themselves in class. When completely out of earshot of any other Ethiopian, individuals would release a stream of violent criticism of the regime's perceived ridiculous and absurd ideological dogmatism and ruthless brutality.⁶⁴ This sort of communication also took place between trusted friends. However, it has been noted that the experience of the 1986 *zemecha*, when students had to sleep together approximately ten to a tent, forged a new sense of togetherness and the will to challenge authority. Indeed, the telling of jokes and stories and the recital of poetry was, as it had

⁶⁰ Dawit 1989.

⁶¹ My notes from a conversation with Agaredech Jemaneh 16 May 2003, and Michael Daniel Ambatchew: *Roses Die*, Commercial Printing Enterprise, Addis Ababa 2003, a story with the Gublak Camp as a setting.

⁶² Conversation in June 1996 with Professor Arregai, former member of the Institute of Development Research, then Visiting Professor at the Agricultural University of Norway. My notes from Addis Ababa, Autumn 1984. Clapham op. cit.:191-1994

⁶³ Alula Pankhurst, "When the Centre Relocates the Periphery: Resettlement During the Derg", *Ethiopia in Broader Perspective Papers of the XIIIth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, Volume II Kyoto December 1997.

⁶⁴ Notes, November 1984, conversations.

always been, a way of expressing criticism. (I experienced a particular form of resistance on my visit in 1984. When I walked about I was often approached by young people walking in small groups who asked me about my religion and professed that they were Christians.) On some occasions the need for expression among students became so strong that they marched on the campus at Sidist Kilo during the night, to shout out their stand on specific issues.⁶⁵ Students knew that outside the walls, in the town, there were people hungry for their message.⁶⁶

The happy demonstration

The Mengistu regime took no account of the perestroika politics in the USSR. However, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the apparent victory of market liberalism on the world stage, some signs of a change of direction had to be announced, particularly since the guerrilla army from the Tigray People's Liberation Front and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front were together approaching the seat of power in Addis Ababa.

In March 1990, Mengistu announced in a speech that private initiative also had its place in the Ethiopian economy; in particular, he promised to discontinue the hated quotas within agricultural production that had had to be delivered to the state. Although the land belonged to the state and could not (and still cannot) be sold on the free market, the produce of the land was acknowledged to belong to the farmer by rights, and the use of the land could be inherited within the farmer's family.⁶⁷

At the university it was felt that the pressure had been eased. The students went out on a jubilant demonstration in the main streets that lasted for five hours, celebrating the change in policy.⁶⁸ It was rare indeed to see so much youthful energy and joy displayed in favour of a policy of the hated government. Demonstrations were a kind of street theatre (widely used during the times of the Emperor) in a society barren of any expressive voice, and thus a supportive demonstration was a golden opportunity for the government.

In March 1991, when the guerrilla army from the north approached Addis Ababa, Mengistu appealed in a number of speeches for action and preparation for resistance on the part of the students.⁶⁹ Large numbers of students went to camps to receive military training, not only in Addis Ababa. However, no resistance took place when the opposition forces marched into Addis Ababa, since President Mengistu fled the country.⁷⁰

Concluding Remarks

In the process of modernizing Ethiopia the educated younger generation has paid a heavy price. During the time of the Derg, 1974-91, the conditions for developing a political culture of dialogue and openness in Addis Ababa University were discouraging due to brutal repression. Opposition was interpreted as insurrection and still considered

⁶⁵ Colin Legum, *Africa Contemporary*...op. cit. 1987/89: B 301.

⁶⁶ Ragnhild Balsvik, Report from a visiting student of Addis Ababa University 5.1-7.7 1990. Personal notes, 6.1. 1990, conversation with Professor Eshetu Chole, 25.04.2002, conversation with Professor Haile Gabriel Dagne.

⁶⁷ Stefan Brüne: "Economic Policies under Review", in A. Zegeye op. cit.:

⁶⁸ Ragnhild Balsvik, Report...op. cit.

⁶⁹ *Ethiopian Herald*, 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 March 1991.

⁷⁰ The *Ethiopian Herald*, 21 June 1991, reports that 700 students were stopped at the border town with Kenya, Moyale, and returned. Dimitros Birku: *Intellect Versus Brutality: a retrospective view of students' movement*, Kenya Human Rights Movement 2002.

to be against the cosmological order, disturbing deep cultural strands of reverence for authority.

The military presented ideological slogans such as “Ethiopia First”,⁷¹ and “Scientific Socialism”, and engaged in revolutionary law-making. The student voice had been heard and students were sent out into the country to make an enormous effort to redistribute land, to organize people and to teach them to read. However, the students did not accept military rule. In the process of opposition, educated activists killed each other and horrendous numbers of young people were decimated by the state.. The outcome was that the university became de-politicised and was kept going efficiently in an atmosphere of discouraging fear.

The guerrilla army that ousted Mengistu Haile Mariam and fought its way into power in 1991 also had its ideological roots in the student culture of thinking under the Emperor. Indeed, its leader, Meles Zenawi, had been a student protester himself towards the end of the Emperor’s rule. The Derg had seen its political mission linked to the redistribution of land. The new regime addressed the second great question raised by the student movement: the question of how to grant justice to the large number of oppressed ethnic groups. The regime of Mengistu early set up an Institute of Nationalities.⁷² The change of regime in 1991 announced a lot of promising freedoms of organization and expression. Yet, there were profound ambiguities and uncertainties as to where the limits of expression and action were placed.⁷³In the university the story of student quest for expression repeated itself.

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⁷¹ *Ethiopian Herald*, 31 October and 1 November 1974, where the concept is elaborated on extensively.

⁷² Louise Aalen, *Ethnic Federalism in a Dominant Party State: The Ethiopian Experience 1991-2000*, Christian Michelsen Institute, Bergen 2002 and Pausewang, Tronvoll, Aalen op. cit.

⁷³ Kiflu, *The Generation*, op. cit.:396-399 and *Ethiopian Register*, December 1997. Letter of Ato Kabsay Berhe and Ato Tesfay Atsbeha to the Special Public Prosecutor of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 06.09.1997 with the heading: Can one accuse a tyrant in Ethiopia?

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