POLITICS & INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS | REVIEW ARTICLE

A history of modern Ethiopia: Review

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Abstract: This paper seeks to review works that have been conducted on general history of modern Ethiopia in the last decade of twentieth century. In particular, the review focused on the latest contribution to a series of general histories of Ethiopia by Bahru Zewde, Harold G. Marcus and Teshale Tibe, respectively. In this review, the reviewers attempt to discuss the sources and methods used by them in reconstructing general history of modern Ethiopia. The authors also assessed the core arguments, critique, strong and weakness side of the three works. The thesis, antithesis and synthesis of the works are also briefly elucidated in this review. Last but not the least, the review identified that the works lack comprehensiveness and did not really represent the general history of all nations, nationalities and peoples of the countries and calls for re-writing of general history of Ethiopia from 1990s to present.

Subjects: History; Modern History 1750-1945; Political History

Keywords: A history; Modern; Ethiopian; Review

1. Introduction

The origins of Ethiopian historiography traced back to the ancient kingdom of Aksum, which has its roots in the heritages of inscriptions and manuscripts written in either the Ethiopian Ge’ez script or Greek alphabet. Royal Chronicles and accounts of foreign travelers also provide significant roles to

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Although Ethiopia is a multilingual and multicultural country, it constitutes more than eighty nations. Its history can be entirely subsumed under the banner of state ideological project and reserve little room for the majorities. In such hegemonic historiographical approaches, church and the state tradition dominated Ethiopian history from ancient to present. Therefore, there is no comprehensive study has been carried out on Ethiopian history, which represents the history of the of the country equally. It is from this background that the authors tried to review three books written on modern Ethiopian history whether the works are really inclusive or not. In our review, we found that the works still excluding much of its southern and western peripheries. What are inclusive are only the titles of the books. Therefore, new general history of Ethiopia needs to be written that seeks to integrate the history of all nations of the countries without privileging ones and prohibiting others.
the development of Ethiopian historiography. Although chronicles had their own weaknesses, they were the only available source especially for the medieval period (yimam, 2009).1

In the seventeenth century however, Ethiopian history was produced by a German historian called Hiob Ludolf (1624–1704). After Ludolf, native Ethiopian intellectuals like Gabra-Hiwot Baykadagn, Blatten Geta Hiruy Walda Seillasie, Afwarq Gabra Iyyasus, Alaoa Tayya Gabra-Mariam, Takla Tsadq Makuria and others began to break a new ground in the early 20th century by producing different works on the history of Ethiopia (Zewde, 2012).2

But modern Ethiopian historiography originated in the 1960s with the founding of what is now Addis Ababa University, Department of History and attempts to create a history appropriate to the country. Nevertheless, up to 1974 what was called Ethiopian history was the history of the Semitic north that used Kebre Negest (glory of the kings) to legitimize themselves to the legend of Queen Sheba and King Solomon of Israel. In such hegemonic historiographical approaches, the state proactively intervened in regulating the way Ethiopian history was written. Under its totalized discourse, the state reconstructs the memory of its past as total knowledge, truth, legitimacy and national identity for thousands of years stretching back to Aksumite kingdom (Kebre Negest, 14th c).3

In such specific historiographical framework, the ruling classes (mainly the Amharic and Tigrinya speaking Semitic groups constituted hegemonic center by the name of “Great Tradition”). While other groups such as Cushitic and Omotic groups are either marginalized or left out of Ethiopia’s history. In this trend, those thinkers who attempt to revise the state-authorized history were quickly marginalized (Toggia, 2004).4

Nevertheless, from the 1970s onwards the “Great Tradition” has received much criticism as a legitimating tool of the centralist regime. Counter- historiographies soon emerged in the form of Somali studies, Eritrean Studies and Oromo studies, addressing the histories of peoples usually ignored by the “Great Tradition”. But up to 1990s old models continued to impact Ethiopian historiography. Some outsiders and insiders historians also reinforced the hegemonic historiography privileging Semitic contributions and largely overlooking the Cushitic and Omotic ones. They also followed the footsteps of the old models of historical writing which gives priority to political line of the ruling class of the Semitic groups than social, economic and cultural aspects of overall nations and nationalities of the country (Marzagora, 2017).5

For that reason, up to 1991 southern Ethiopian historiographies, peripheral areas, small traditional polities, non-Christian religions such as Islam and Waageffanna (believe in one supreme God) have been left out of Ethiopia’s history, which generally has been the history of the Semitic groups (Amhara, Tigre and Agaw). These meta-narratives produce a lens, which is blind to the contributions of non-Semitic groups to the Ethiopian historiography (Yusuf, 2009).6 Those who give blind lens to southern Ethiopian historiography argued that limitation of written sources, linguistic and others as hindering factors for the exclusion of the southern Ethiopian historiography. But this argument did not hold water because, it is possible to write the history of non-literate society based on oral sources.

Generally, due to the aforesaid impacts, Ethiopia lacks inclusive history that assessed overall parts of the country equally. Hence, absence of general history becomes the problems for historians, students of higher institutions and general readers for so long. Post 1990s however, witnessed the emergence of professional historians who attempt to write inclusive history of Ethiopia. In this context, the appearance of Bahru Zewde’s book A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855–1974, Harold G. Marcus A History of Ethiopia and Teshale Tibebe The Making of Modern Ethiopia 1896–1974 provides significant contributions to modern Ethiopian historiography. These works are selected due to the fact that the works are the latest among various works produced on general histories of Ethiopia by historians. Review parts of the three works are given below, respectively (Zewde, 1991).7
2. Part I

2.1. Bahru Zewde, *a history of modern Ethiopia, 1855-1974*. London: Oxford university press, 1991

Bahru Zewde is a professor of history at Addis Ababa University of Ethiopia and one of the present day Ethiopia's leading historians. His book entitled *A History of Modern Ethiopia* (1855–1974) is the first general history of modern Ethiopia. He wrote his book to provide a solution for the scarcity of general history of modern Ethiopia that could serve the historians, students and general readers alike using the wide varieties of sources available after 1960s. The book provides two themes: the role of monarchy and international relations in the work of unifications and the administrative and economic modernization of the country.

The original edition of this book, which is the focus of this review, cover the period from 1855 to 1974, but in the second edition, he extended the time line to 1991. Though the second edition was produced to fill what the first edition lacked, no more change is visible on the inclusiveness of the work. What is added is the description of popular upsurge of 1974 and the rise of military Junta. That is why the reviewer focussed on the first edition.

The most attractive part of this book is the author's use of chronology and numerous photos and maps with good quality. Moreover, list of Illustration, acronyms, preface, glossary, transliteration, index, introduction, conclusions and notes are clearly incorporated in the book. The index of the book is specially written in an attractive manner. An additional attraction of this book is the author's usage of various sources including traveler's accounts, missionaries and theses of students from different field of studies and archives.

Although Bahru attempt to provide lucidly written general history of modern Ethiopia from 1855 to 1974, in his book the lion's share is dedicated in the veneration of kings whom he believed as protagonist of history of the country. He pursues in narrating the historical developments of the country by elucidating the political history of the monarchy, glorification of war and faction of state power. For him emperors and political history are only part of the Ethiopian story, and he did not prefer to focus on economic and social developments.

Moreover, though he set out to provide a modern history of Ethiopia, the result is not as such. Shift in thematic focus from political history to economic and shift in geographical focus from Semitic north to Cushitic and Omotic south are less visible. Still he follows the footsteps of the centralist approaches who give priority to political history of the Semitic north than social, economic and cultural aspects of the society of the country. He gave little attention to the southern Ethiopian historiography. Undeniably, he wrote around five pages description about the southern and southwestern states like Jimma, Kafa, Yarm, Wallaga, Gurage, Konso and Walayta. These shortcomings and other pitfalls call for the re-writing of comprehensive history of modern Ethiopia.

3. Part 2

3.1. Harold G. Marcus, *a history of Ethiopia*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1994

Harold G. Marcus (1994) is one of North American leading historians of modern Ethiopia. His book covers from prehistoric times to the present. The attractive part of this book is the author’s use of photographs, maps, index, glossary and bibliography.

When compared with the work of Bahru and Teshale, Marcus work covers the period from ancient to present. While the works of Bahru and Teshale are limited to modern Ethiopian history. Marcus also attempted to consider political, economic and cultural factors that shaped the evolution of modern Ethiopia.
Although Marcus work starts with prehistoric times, more than half of his book emphasizes on the post 1855 Ethiopian history and more similar with the work of Bahru. Especially, from chapter four to chapter twelve the two works emphasize on the role of the three successive emperors: Tewodros II, Yohannes IV and Menelik II to unify and create modern Ethiopian empire state. However, the work of Marcus has some omission as compared to Bahru. For instance, in chapter five Marcus narrates the reign of emperor Tewodros II and Yohannes IV. But there is no discussion of Yohannes and Islam while Bahru briefly discusses the policy of Yohannes IV towards Islam. Despite the long coverage of the study, Marcus book has only fourteen chapters and 262 pages. With this regard, it is better to say survey of Ethiopian history rather than saying a history of Ethiopia.

Moreover, Marcus does not clearly tell us the purpose for which the book was written whether it was intended to serve as general history of Ethiopia or to fill the major gaps in the existing historiography.

For Marcus again Ethiopia does not go beyond the Semitic groups (Amhara, Tigre and Agawa) and undermines other ethnic groups. Hence, should a book called “A History of Ethiopia” not deal with the stories of various peoples who find themselves within political confines of the country? Do not the Oromo, Walayta, Kafa, Gurage, among others have histories that are as ancient as that of the Semitic? Hence, writing inclusive national history of Ethiopia is the best medicine for national unity of the country.

Another shortcoming of the book is that the author stated as the battle of Shimbura Kure took place in 1928 but in 1929(p. 32) He also added that the son and successor of Libna Dengel was Galawedos but Galadewos (p.34, 39). He also said that emperor Tewodros II rule until 1858 but 1868.

By and large, the author ignored to use any BA or MA theses that are indispensable sources on history of modern Ethiopia. In place of conclusion, the author also offers policy recommendations. In spite of the above mentioned impediments however, Marcus has written a clear description of long history of Ethiopia.

4. Part III

4.1. Teshale Tibebu, the making of modern Ethiopia 1896-1974. Lawrenceville: The Red Sea Press Inc., 1995

Another book written on history of modern Ethiopia is Teshale Tibebu’s (1995) The Making of Modern Ethiopia 1896–1974. Teshale was born in Dabra Marqos in Gojjam and educated at Addis Ababa University and Binghamton University where he received his PhD.

The book cover the period from 1896 to 1974. That means from the battle of Adwa to the end of Haile Sillasie regime. The central idea of the book discusses social history of Ethiopia and its historical transformation based on four key concepts such as Aksumite paradigm, tabot Christianity, Geber system and Ge’ez civilization.

The author’s use of Amharic terms and concepts for the reconstruction of social history of Ethiopia is an attractive part of this book. The book also consists of list of Acronyms, preface, introduction, and table of contents, notes, bibliography and index. However, glossary of local terms, Archives, Illustration, Photos, Maps and transliteration were left out of this book. Moreover, there is no division for bibliography and its index is not properly written.

Moreover, although the author sets out to provide a general social history of modern Ethiopia, the result is not as such inclusive. He gave more attention to the social history of Semitic North by ignoring the southern peoples and Muslim society of Ethiopia. The author claimed that cultural, linguistic and religious limitation as factors that hindered him not to write much about the peoples of southern Ethiopia. Hence, the book is more ambitious than what it actually delivers.
Furthermore, Teshale has designed to end his study with 1974 however; he discussed the post 1974 developments as “unmaking” of modern Ethiopia in his epilogue. Here, it seems that the author used the word “unmaking” to disparage the Derg who was not from Solomonic line as the Derg demolishes modern Ethiopia built by his predecessors. He also used pejorative references and cultural prejudices throughout his book such as “barbarians”(p. 15) “pagan”(p. 15) to refer to Waqeffata, “infidel”(p. 17) “uncivilized”(p. 17) to refer to non-Amharic speakers, “Galla” (p. 18) to refer to the Oromo.

Some of Teshale’s expression also looks like exaggeration when he said “for the barbarians and infidels, the road to civilization passed through tabot Christian assimilation.”(p. 12). However, as long as history is the pursuit of truth, historians would be wise on the issues that prejudices and provoke conflict during historical reconstruction. Despite of the critics and other lapse mentioned above, the book is an important social history of Ethiopia and contributes significant input for the readers and other researchers who are interested in studying comprehensive social history of modern Ethiopia.

5. Conclusion
In conclusion, this review article analyzes three works produced on general history of modern Ethiopia by Bahru Zewde, Harold G. Marcus and Teshale Tibebe, respectively. The authors want to review three works to know whether the works are really inclusive and represent the history of all nations, nationalities and peoples of the country as the as indicated in the topic or not. Based on the review made, the authors found that the works did not really assess the history of the Cushitic and Omotic ones as part of Ethiopian history. That means lack of inclusiveness is the common mistakes of the three works. Still, the three works are more focused on the Semitic groups and fail to consider that diverse peoples of southern Ethiopia have distinct history from that of the Semitic north.

Moreover, the authors discovered that the works not only contains flaws but also lacks to include historical events after 1990s. Although post 1990 witnessed the emergence of ethno nationalist historians with post-modernist approaches of historical writing, most of them were busy with ethnocentric history and ignored national history of the country. Hence, post 1990s historiography of Ethiopia has for the most part remained quiet. It was from these backgrounds that the authors call for re-writing of new general history of Ethiopia including post 1990s historical events with new interpretations and arguments.

Therefore, new general history of Ethiopia would have to be constructed, which seeks to integrate the histories of different peoples of the country without privileging any of them or marginalizing any ethnic groups. To do this, collaboration of historians, anthropologists, linguistics, economics and other field of studies are needed to work together and re-write the true history of the country.

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Notes
1. Baye Yimam, “Five Decades of Ethiopian Studies” Journal of Ethiopian Studies Vol.42, No.1 (2009).
2. Bahru Zewde, Evolution of Professional Historiography in Ethiopia, Published by FRIEDRIC EBBERTSTIFTUNG, Addis Ababa, 2012.
3. Kebre Negest (the glory of kings) is the 14th century epic account written in Ge’ez. According to this document, it was the son of king Solomon of Israel and the Queen Sheba Menelik I, who carried he ark of covenant to Ethiopia and founded a new dynastic line. Menelik I was hence, the true heir of Christianity and Ethiopians were God’s new chosen people. Since then, Ethiopian Emperor up to 20th century claimed Solomonic descent.
4. In this discussion I define “Great Tradition” as school in which the views of Amhara/ Tigres as the natural
leader of Millennia old state of Ethiopia. See also Pietro Toggia, “History Writing as a state ideological Project in Ethiopia” Research article, African Identities, Vol.6, No.4 (2004),pp.319–343. Kutztown University, Pennsylvania, United States.

5. Sara Marzagora, “ History in the twentieth Century Ethiopia: The Great Tradition and the Counter-Histories of national failure” Journal of African Studies, Cambridge University Press(2017)

6. Semir Yusuf, “The Politics of Historying: a Post modern Commentary on Bahru Zewde’s History of Modern Ethiopia” African Journal of Political science and International Relations, Vol.3 (9), pp.380–385 (2009), Addis Ababa University.

7. Bahru Zewde . A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855–1974. Athens: Ohio University Press, (1991), Harold G. Marcus, A History of Ethiopia. Berkeley: Los Angeles and London: University of California Press (1994) and Teshale Tibebu, The Making of Modern Ethiopia, 1896-1974. The Red Sea Press, Inc(1995).

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