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The politics of historying: A postmodern commentary on Bahru Zewde's history of modern Ethiopia

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This short commentary poses a timely challenge to positivist historiography both at the theoretical and the practical levels. Theoretically, it challenges, but only implicitly, many of the assumptions of modernist, objectivist historiography in a number of ways. Perhaps more interestingly and directly, it faces up to the intellectual difficulties of some of the discourses about the history(ies) of Ethiopia. This it does by debunking a rightist nationalist discourse in Ethiopian historiography, indirectly leaving a call for doing the same with regards to the ethnonationalist one, as well as for even developing further both the theoretical assumptions and the scope of the discussion on Ethiopianist historiography. The paradigmatic affiliation gravitates towards post-modernism and the analytical tool used is what is termed as "hi/storying", referring to the notable simultaneousness and inseparability of the processes of "telling" the hi/story and making it. All this is demonstrated just by directly and briefly assessing one renowned book on Ethiopia authored by a "doyen" of modern Ethiopian history.

Key words: hi/storying, hi/story-telling/making, essentialism, nationalist history, hi/story of the present.

¹ The significance of such a work should be very clear from the outset. Among other things, the effort to resolve the long-standing and historic, though at times dormant, chasm between Ethiopianist nationalism and its apparent, ethnicity-invoking, opponents seems at least to have largely got stalled ever since its advent in the 1960s. The crisis, in my view, has been fed further, among other things, by the mutual tendency of these contending forces to reify, rigidify and glorify their respective nationalisms while tenaciously engaged in demonizing similar attempts (intellectually) and efforts of depriving the chances of doing the same (practically), by their respective enemies. These "my-nation-at-all-costs" mentalities and the strategies they choose to follow seem to be not only analytically untenable/problematic (mainly because they apply double standards and are modernist, objectivist ontologically) but also dangerous on the ground (since they usually result and have often resulted, in nothing more than mutual neutralization practically).

Therefore, it is my belief that if nations and nationalisms (and the attendant stories thereof) are not duly reclaimed in some ways, we are likely to witness neither the reconfiguration (which most ethnonationalisms in Ethiopia generally demand), nor the 'nationalization' (which Ethiopianist nationalists require) of the Ethiopian "nation"-state in the years ahead. And one starting point of reclaim could be to engage these phenomena in critical analyses of the sort which questions some of their very fundamentals and shakes them to the core, laying bare the fact that they mainly are arbitrary human creations. This revivifies the hope of their reformulations (not their annihilation, as some nationalists from both camps might think), in ways that contribute a great deal towards their peaceful co-existence. This should be the final aim of such writings. And this is what postmodernism, whose limits need to be acknowledged and redressed in similar writings to come, can offer us. While the (a sort of) Ethiopianist version is the focus of this paper, that of ethnic nationalisms can be found in some other book reviews of mine [see, for example, Semir 2010, (forthcoming)].

Every (hi) story of the nation, the “motherland”, is (hi) story of the present. The historian narrates the past from the political perspective (general or otherwise) he/she currently subscribes to, as well as cages all his/her ideas in concepts he/she now knows. In other words, the historian is telling us the story of something which now exists with a language which now subsists. This story is necessarily exclusive, as the intention behind it is specific. It is also usually (largely) one-sided, as it should conform to a particular political view. But above all, it shows how the past is not left for itself to talk. The historian talks for it, instead. Finally, such a (hi) story is teleological. It assumes that there are strict chains of causes and effects in the “long- running” past, that there is an essential continuity, a sort of predeterminedness, in the course of “our uninterruptedly and magnificently stretched” history. There is no place for chance. The task, therefore, which historians are conferred with is two-fold: it is so much a task of (hi) story telling as it is, at once, of creating one. The discursive process of accomplishing these tasks can be referred to as (hi) *storying*, viz. (hi) story telling and (hi) story making all at once. In other words, “*historying*”² implicitly argues that in the very “telling” of the “hi/story”, there is its making, that is, through discourse.

Much of Ethiopian historiography has lingered to be perhaps a best example to demonstrate all this. Ethiopia has long remained to be a country on whose behalf historians boast of an extensive, uninterrupted, and “untainted” history (Teshale, 1996). Historical narrations are conducted by strikingly following the above framework of *storying*. Everything is highly political, full of categorizations and distinctions, castigations and eulogies, and flashbacks of the present view, in the latter’s search for historical recourse. Bahru Zewde’s *A History of Modern Ethiopia* can stand out as a remarkable illustration of this, as centrist and moderate as it seems and confirmed; appreciably centrist³, but trenchantly nationalist.

The (hi) story presented by Bahru Zewde is that of the

² This word, my own creation, can be useful as a corrective concept for the English language’s modernist fixation. “Hi/story-telling” in English refers to the process of narrating the past, while “hi/story making” is that of effecting incidents that are worth-telling later. The two are presumably distinct. “Historying” rather assumes that the “telling” is not quite separate from, nor less vital than, the making, since the former itself involves the latter. What is important is not what happened *regardless* of the narrative, but how that narrative is patched up to give us a coherent sense and perspective of/about the “past”.

³ This commentary should in no ways be seen to have given a blind eye to the admirably constructive twist given to Ethiopian historiography by Professor Bahru Zewde. His writings cannot be lined up along with those of the (politically) extreme right-wing writers on the subject. His has been a distinguished fairness and “seriousness” in the “narration of the past”. In fact, his illustrious book has been chosen to be the subject of this commentary primarily *because* it is moderate. This piece should simply be taken as a call for the need to transcend, but chiefly as a gesture to the possibility of doing so, *even* the apparent centre-right, just like the centre-left, in Ethiopian historiography.

present-day Ethiopia. He is the mediator. He mediates between *the past* and *the history* of that past. The transition from *the past* to the *process of history telling* is never automatic. There always stands the (hi) story teller -- the man/ the woman - between the two. The (hi) story teller here is Bahru. He narrates for us the conditions of the different places of today’s Ethiopia in history, locating them within the Ethiopian mansion. “The southern, the northern, the eastern... part of the country”. He supposedly shows how related Ethiopians were to one another from antique times until now. He claims that although the two were not under one state-system, the peoples of the “north” and that of the “south” were not isolated from one another, but rather were inter-related, *inter alia*, through trade.

To show, first, the unity of the different peoples of Ethiopia by demonstrating their interactions in olden times is at best risking a tautology. The people-to-people interaction was by no means limited to the present-day boundary of Ethiopia. In fact, the “Ethiopians” interactions with the so-called “others” were sometimes enjoying utmost intimacy. In the book in question itself, Bahru (p.

24) makes a mention of the trade links between *Wallaga* and Sudan, and between “southern Ethiopia” and the “coast of Somalia” in the late 19th century. But since what was needed to be born out was the historical unity of all “Ethiopians”, what is loomed large is the interaction only between those peoples today accommodated under a single state. Bahru deliberately sorts out some ants from a highly interactive, vast colony; gives the selected ants the name “X”; distinguishes them from “other” ants; and finally “proves” to us that the “Xians” have been interactive throughout their history and that therefore they have been one.⁴

Further, Bahru shies away from the abounding dissimilar traits amongst the peoples of later-day Ethiopia; ignores the subjective criteria of identification; and de-emphasizes the wars waged between the same peoples⁵. But this is no blemish on the part of the author. That is how nationalist history should be written. Such a narration is nothing but a discursive construction within which certain preferred representations of “the nation’s past” are

⁴ Some of my assertions in this paper might enthrall either some ethnic nationalists or few external powers, simply because I follow a thoroughly deconstructionist path *vis-à-vis* Ethiopianist body of knowledge, their foe. Such critiques like the ones against the “unity of Ethiopians”, “foreign aggression” and “colonialism”, Menelikan “expansion” and Eritrean scholarship may be included here. If my criticality towards all these indeed just gratifies these groups, then, sadly (I would say), they haven’t understood the full repercussions of the postmodern attack. Above all, just as their Ethiopianist counterpart, ethnic nationalists, for instance, boast of discourses which are utter metanarratives. Therefore, they are no less suspects than the former. It only takes writing about/thinking of these narratives as their proponents put them in words to debunk them.

⁵ One can ponder throughout the book that after drawing the imaginary boundary line between “Ethiopians” and “others”, the wars between those categorized under the former are portrayed as “civil war”, in contrast to the “transboundary” ones. Through interpretations, any arbitrary incident can come into line to form a coherent body of knowledge.

organized with the aim of naturalizing a specific time-space politics. It exists as a mode of interpreting national space - an interpretation which is by itself a site of cultural contestation between memories and counter-memories. Nationalist memories are always selective. What is remembered indeed may be less important than what is left out. In the end, then, nationalist discourse involves not only collective memory but also collective forgetfulness (Allan and Andrew, 1999; Calhoun, 1997).

That "Ethiopia" has a very long history is almost a *cliché*. For Bahru, that its history amounts to three thousand years is only a convention (p. 7). According to him, this is doing injustice to the rather uncountable past Ethiopia can be proud of. He invokes (p. 7) the *Hadar* hominid, the fossils in the *Omo Valley*, the Neolithic sites of *Malka Qunture*, the cave paintings all over the "north", the "south" and the "east" and so on to successfully immerse Ethiopia into a mysterious prehistoric antiquity. Thanks to the well-determined chains of events (which we will come to later), so goes the logic, we have reached from that timeless time to where we are today.

While reading critically into a nationalist (hi) story, one discovers that those places, events, and situations are all conglomerated to justify the longevity of an entity. Whether the country itself existed at that time, whether the people thought themselves to be part of it is irrelevant. The project we present before those discursively resurrected fossils and relics is: "in the process of recursively heaping up handy incidents from "our" past, we have identified your historic place in this intense quest for crafting and stabilizing a robust identity. You can never set off anywhere else, nor remain neutral. You are we". Reincarnated, relics form our phantasmagorical homelands--our centers of gravity.

The other point of concern is essentialism. Among other things, land is categorically essentialized. "Our" land, "Ethiopian" territory vs. "their" land, "foreign" land. Today's territorial representation of the imaginary notion of "Ethiopia" is taken to be essentially "Ethiopian". It is inherently and timelessly, backward and forward, so. Anything that happened as far back as some centuries ago outside the current territorial limit of Ethiopia is "external"; anything that fell inside it is narrated as having occurred "internal" to the state.⁶ Whenever a "foreign" country has taken over in the past a land which is now deemed to be Ethiopian, it is recounted now as having been "aggression", "occupation"... Conversely, when a monarch who has ruled the then Abyssinia marches in different directions, towards those regions not under his control, the country has been nothing but "expanding", "extending" (p. 270), "unified", "pushed" (p. 60). The monarch is discursively but implicitly legitimized. Ethiopia seems to have been relatively permanent in name, not in territory. It has gone on "expanding" for centuries, but it has been still named "Ethiopia", and the lands it newly

controlled immediately became the "sacred" lands. In fact, had Menelik expanded further than he did as he had wished ("there was an expansive potentiality for Ethiopia", p.113), Ethiopia would have still been the same in name, and "its" newly acquired land also inherently "Ethiopian". What gives it an essence except discourse?

Ethiopia, for Bahru, has that maternal ability of mysteriously assembling its lost children. Even after Eritrea became an Italian "colony", "a number of Eritreans, often moved by the *magnetic pull of the motherland*, came to Ethiopia" (p. 107). The obvious question worth-asking yet again is: what essential thread bonds Ethiopia with Eritrea-both as imaginatively rendered communities? What "natural" umbilical cord joins the two in a mother-daughter relationship? If that is Abyssinia's former control of the region, then what on earth would disqualify Abyssinia from claiming Yemen, or Italy from claiming Ethiopia, or Turks/Egyptians and Italians from claiming Eritrea....Or does the time or type of control matters? No doubt, distinctions are made since the same helps to justify one type of control and reject another. Map-(re) making, just like map- (re) reading, inheres in the very process of history-(re) telling.

A corollary to the above is the creation of powerful concepts which emerge from essentialization of things which serve as instruments of creating "truths", and, alternatively, of "falsehoods" and abominations. "Colonization" is distinguished from "expansion"; "independence" and "liberation", from "secession"; "massacre" from "defense" and, accordingly, "aggressors", "brutal killers", and "colonialists", on the one hand, and "heroes", "patriots" and "resistance fighters", on the other, are created. Here are two interesting things about nationalist narrative: first, one and the same act (of killing, for example) is sanctioned or blackmailed depending on the view of the historian; secondly, discourse creates what it speaks about: "heroes" and "heroines", the "aggressors" and the "aggrieved upon". After the Egyptian *foreign occupants* left Harar, deliberates Bahru, Menelik solely *extended* his authority (pp. 20, 63). This is how facts are concocted. This is an instance where historians become history makers themselves.

Ethiopian history is accorded a "core", a nucleus, an essential element which makes it what it is (p. 270). History began from it, and has continued largely because of it. It serves as the natural perspective which any thing else is seen from. History is narrated in the light of, and in relation to, it. There is almost nothing which has happened independent of it and is, at the same time, worth mentioning. This core is today's north, then Abyssinia. It is the starting point of history, and its end. It is predominantly present in the whole history of Ethiopia, either explicitly or as a ghost. Since it is the one which essentially and largely makes Ethiopia, the need to narrate the history of the "south" is simply to "complete the story" (p. 16). Amidst this meta narativist historical "description", the "other" half of the country is granted just an episodic glance. The country's map follows the Abyssinian per-

⁶ All these distinctions and those to come have heavily informed Bahru's narrations throughout the book.

spective. The south is so from the vantage point of the "core", especially Gonderine politics (pp. 11ff). What happened to it and what it had made happened, its glories and agonies, are the focal points. "Axum came into being. It was attacked. It declined. Finally, it was eclipsed."⁷ Its move "downwards" was "expansion" (fp. 61). Its overrunning by "Italy", "Egypt", "Europe"... was "aggression" and "colonization"⁸. It defines "Ethiopia", and the signification, "Ethiopia, formerly Abyssinia" reflects nothing but this.

However, "cultural cores", as I see them, are mainly created and sustained through discourse. Their "defining" facet which makes them what they "obviously are" is the discursive imagination about them rather than the reality which ensues from that imagination. The discourse is aimed at feeding the current political view of any party which invokes these "cores" as it suits it. Simply put, cultural cores are not substances "out there" to be discovered by anyone who searches for the "truth". They are rather imaginary ideas that actually help construct the "truth" itself. It is doubtful whether a single, constant, apolitical and objective "cultural core" did exist/has existed; instead the production of "cultural/ national core" is a discursive phenomenon used to justify a nationalist undertaking, which renders the former a fluid and multiple, and, above all, a politically-loaded concept to be determined by the nationalist move of the time.

Historiography sometimes requires "apt" naming of places and placing of names. Bahru uses them while dealing with the struggle between the so-called "north" and the so-called "south". Every time, for instance, the forces led by Menilik fight with those led by the different kings to the south, the battle is depicted as that between "Shoa" and "Arsi", "Shoa" and "Harar", "Shoa" and "Kaffa", etc, and never as between "Ethiopia" and "Arsi", and so on. This might seem astounding given that Bahru considers Abyssinia or the north in general as representing Ethiopia, at least in the past. But the paradox wanes away with closer investigation. His choice of such terms as "Shoa" and "Arsi" is based on the preconceived idea that the war was a kind of "civil war", between two "brothers", or between two regions destined to come under one "home". Whether Arsi, Harar... were part of Ethiopia during that time is irrelevant for Bahru. He is adept enough to conceive the "old Ethiopia" (that is, Abyssinia) just as a region within it when the former notion stands to compro-

⁷ What were the political, social, cultural... conditions of those construed as the "enemies" of Axum during that time? What was their nature independent of Axum? Who was an enemy to whom? Which is our reference point?

⁸ The common debate regarding when to call a subjugation "colonialism" is irrelevant here. My focus now is the politics in this distinguisher. After associating colonialism with "foreigners" and expansion with "internal co-fellows", the former will be castigated far more scathingly as compared to the latter which is now seen from an "internal" perspective-- "it is just our own matter!"-- regardless of the intensity of its throes which are sometimes difficult to be distinguished from the effects of colonialism. See below.

mise his project of national unification. (Just imagine if he could say, "Ethiopia subjugated Kaffa"! That would seem a bit injudicious! And for Bahru, conceptual inconsistency is better than political impolicy). But when that same "north" fights with a "foreign aggressor", for example, the region will be relegated to its former name, "Ethiopia", and the war will be depicted as one between Ethiopia and that foreign country. Finally, when and after Shoa defeats and controls Harar..., it will, once again, no more retain its former name, Shoa. Now Shoa does not rule over these "regions". The case is simply that "Ethiopia" has expanded, its "frontiers pushed" (p. 60).

Even a mere glance at the titles of the chapters of the book would exhibit an instance where politics/power never leaves historical knowledge alone. "Unification and Independence", "The Italian Occupation", "From Liberation to...". These are exquisite instances of creating realities through discourse. The created realities will then be imbibed by the readers/students of the book, until they are well-disseminated, and set out to create a consensus, a "standard" version of Ethiopian history, and, ultimately, turn out to be "common sense". All who accept this version will be self-responsible to some of the practical paraphernalia of this "common sense" knowledge. The society will add it upon one another among its members. "Like the old generations did, we should shed our blood for the sake of an inch of the motherland...!" Fences are erected; the "we" and/vs. "they" compartmentalization is mentally and physically reified. Anyone who questions any of the basic assumptions may face some "worthy" chastisement for his/her "betrayal".

One might get struck by the politics involved in the terms "independence", "liberation" and "occupation". In Ethiopia, the "internal" oppression some strata of the society were subjected to was heinous enough to at least be compared to the plight other peoples in Africa suffered under slavery and "colonialism". "...the class basis of exploitation and oppression", Bahru writes, "was as important as the ethnic one" (p. 91). Even a blunter account is that the *gabbar* system was "a far worse evil than slavery" (p. 92).⁹ Albeit meagre, the "colonial" masters in the same country gave to some hitherto subjugated sections of the society some rights (not philanthropically, to be sure!). Nevertheless, this is tantamount to no good at all since the term "independence" and "liberation" are deliberately construed to reflect those of the country. In a way, history provides "our brothers" in power, however brutal, the sympathy they need, and the colonizers, however munificent (where and when they were), the incomprehension they detest.

In any nationalist writing, you are liberated only when your country is so. If you are rejoicing under a "foreign" rule, you should be ashamed of that since you are either

⁹ Here is again another statement by the author: "Menilik's expansion of Ethiopia's frontiers...only...accentuated the predatory tendencies of the ruling class and the soldiery" (p. 93). But still, the "expansion" was different from the "occupation"!

swindled by these “white guys” or you are a collaborator against “your own brothers”. But in both cases, you deserve the worst retribution for your desertion. Therefore, both statements are true: “you are free and independent only if your country is so however much you might suffer under your monarchs, since they are at least yours”. Over again, “you are under abject repression and shame if you are under occupation, no matter what you get out of that, either in group or individually”. What is fascinating here is that the people are made to join hands with the ruling few in times of both their (the latter’s) rejoice and distress. The exultation of my rulers is mine, too, just as their sorrow is. My personal or even group interest comes next, if at all it deserves to.

Historians are not just makers of an old “past”, but also of a new “past” to be recorded later by their fellow historians. Let me buttress this with an example. The “Ethiopians” of old socially constructed “Ethiopia”, not excluding its territorial extent. They also created the notion of “independence” based on that spatial imagination. Then they *did* that “independence”. Afterwards, the historians (re-created and) communicated to us this “momentous” incident. After some circulation of this discourse, it goes on to impetuously seize the minds and hearts of the people at large. Finally, we are told, Ethiopia’s independence has an impact on the “psychology of the people” and that Adwa gives us national pride (p. 84). Through such discourses, Bahru is transmitting knowledge much as he is impacting our psychology and pride (or he is recommending to that effect). Indeed, nationalist discourse sometimes exemplifies a self-fulfilling prophecy *par excellence*. And historians usually play witty games by playing their own roles of boosting and disseminating nationalism masquerading as “disinterested” academicians.

Another instance of history making on the part of Bahru would be his sorting out of major themes from the vast history he narrates. Let’s be reminded again that all the narrations have been presented from a certain perspective in order to create a certain reality at present and in the future by showing its ghost in the past. The whole game is mainly narrative. But that makes not the whole thing. Some discursive constructions are selected to appear to be dominant in the whole historical process. By doing this, historians present before us the whole summarized picture in their minds so that we can easily set it in ours, too. For Bahru, the two major themes which dominated Ethiopian history in the 19th century were “unification” and “repulse of foreign incursion” (p. 85). From whatever one can tell of what happened, only the two and only in these particular wordings have been earmarked. While the decision to make these notions lead all other “themes” of Ethiopian history is pretty lucid (by utilizing them, Bahru can cut short “Ethiopia’s quest for *internal cohesion* and *external sovereignty*--two ideas celebrated by the author), the wordings are also no less important. Both “unification” and “foreign aggression” can

be, as seen elsewhere, terribly deconstructed if examined with a critical insight. But for one who wholeheartedly esteems the whole notion of nationalism, the latter provides him/her with a new logic to stand on and make bold claims.

Absolving oneself from politics while studying history is itself politics. The difference from admitting it is that the former is much more political than the latter. Bahru is well-known for blaming some history writers for not being academic historians (“like him”?) (See, for instance, Bahru, 2000). He usually makes them appear to be politicians, their eyes on their political end and history in their hands. In this book, too, he reprimands those who wrote an “Eritrean” history from an Eritrean nationalist perspective. He laments that, “...a new history was written for Eritrea and...the world believed it” (p. 258). His version of history, so is the implicit argument, was the “true” version, but, alas, Eritreans took the wrong track of fabricating history instead of merely being loyal to the “true” and “real” history authored by the Ethiopianists (but see footnote no. 4.).

These few reflections raised so far reveal how much history is relevant for the present. Since it is written for the present’s sake, “national” history is very near to us. Even more, the history which we use for the present’s sake is also wished to be the base for the future. This is how, in my view, *we tend to think and live at present the future in the past*. This can summarize Bahru’s *A History of Modern Ethiopia*: with some (willfully or not) preconceived ideas in mind, he narrated Ethiopia’s history, with the aim of creating/sustaining the “Ethiopia” he imagined, now and for ever. Whether he has succeeded/will succeed depends on how successfully his stories have survived/will survive the onslaughts of the counter-discourses produced by other (hi) story tellers. In the end, “Ethiopia”, both as an idea and reality, remains largely to be at the mercy of contending stories.

Note

*This commentary was first written in 2007 and is presented here without any major modification. I would like to thank all those who submitted their comments on it.

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